



In small dosages

Higher temperatures have contributed towards the trend for low-dosé Champagnes, while dry harvests have boosted the rosé boom, writes **Giles Fallowfield**



TWO YEARS ago at the end of 2007 the major issue the Champenois were trying to address was how to cope with escalating demand for their wine. All the talk then was about where the suitable land exists to plant new vineyards, the long-term solution to meeting this expanding demand while increasing yields to try to keep pace with consumers' voracious thirst for Champagne in the short term.

You won't hear much talk about the new vineyard sites in Champagne today – although that process continues quietly, out of the media spotlight – the current major issue is whether demand for Champagne will recover quickly enough to avoid very high stock levels depressing prices. And the short-term answer to that question is a resounding no.

Even after they have played with reducing yields and building up the individual reserves of the growers to close on the maximum allowed – 8,000kgs/ha – stocks at 1,344 million bottles to the end of July 2009 represent nearly four and a half years' supply at a consumption level of 300 million bottles a year, and no one expects that to be achieved in 2009. Stocks won't be reduced to the three-to-three-and-a-half-years' supply the Champenois are more comfortable with for a quite a while.

And when consumption does get back above 300m bottles a year, as it surely will, the Champenois know that even with yields at around 14,200kgs/ha – and that's still 1,300kgs/ha below the maximum currently allowed up until the 2011 harvest – they can make over 400m bottles of Champagne now that the area of active vineyard has grown above 33,000 hectares. The CIVC estimates that 33,450ha were in production for the 2009 harvest, the first time it has been above 33,000ha. What's more there are a further 785ha due to come on stream between 2010 and 2013 (see Table 1) at which point the current Champagne appellation will be less than 1,000 hectares from its current physical maximum of 35,208 hectares, some of which lies under buildings and roads and therefore can't realistically ever be vineyard.

In the absence of a couple of consecutive disastrously low crops – 2003 and 1997 were the last two occasions yields dropped below 10,900kgs/ha – Champagne's ability to produce enough wine to meet demand is unlikely to be an issue until well into the next decade. There is 7,800kgs/ha held in reserve

currently, which amounts to more than half a harvest, so even a yield as low as the 4,360kgs/ha produced in 1981 could be raised to nearly 12,000kgs/ha and as the active vineyard area has risen over 9,500 hectares since 1981 (only 1978 at 3,860kgs/ha is lower since 1970) that would result in production of over 340m bottles.

So with production volume issues taking a back seat in the short term, perhaps we should turn our attention more towards stylistic changes in Champagne, especially given the observable effect that global warming has had on Champagne's vineyards over the past decade or so. The Champagne region is gradually getting warmer and as it does so the ripeness and sugar levels achieved during the harvest are rising and acidity is falling. This is documented by the individual houses who keep detailed records and by the CIVC too. Over the past 20 years the average degree of alcohol has risen by 0.8 degrees celsius while total average acidity has dropped by 2g/l. The harvest has started on average 14 days earlier – picking has been mainly complete before the start of October in recent years.

Quality has also been improved, the CIVC suggests, due to the average age of the vines rising by 10 years, more careful selection of grapes and juice, plus the use of a larger proportion of the first pressing and *vins de réserve* in blending non-vintage cuvées which still account for the vast majority (over 80%) of production.

Many, including Louis Roederer's chef de cave Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, view this move towards higher ripeness levels as a beneficial trend for Champagne, that both reduces the need for chaptalisation (to get alcohol levels up to the necessary 11-11.5% prior to the secondary fermentation in bottle which takes it to 12.5% alcohol by volume) and also affects the likely dosage levels needed to produce non-vintage Champagne, the style that continues to account for around 80% of production in the region. "At Roederer we have reduced the dosage levels by 1-2 grams per litre over the past two decades," notes Lecaillon.

There is an observable trend towards generally lower dosage levels (outside the declining doux, demi-sec, sec and "extra-dry" sectors, all on the sweet side but listed in declining order of sweetness) and the increase in production of extra brut or non-dosé styles of Champagne continues to ▶

TABLE 1: NEW PLANTINGS WITHIN THE CURRENT CHAMPAGNE APPELLATION, PLANNED AND COMPLETED (1999-2013)

1999-2000, 305 hectares which came on stream in 2003
 2000-2001, 311 hectares which came on stream in 2004
 2001-2002, 363 hectares which came on stream in 2005
 2002-2003, 357 hectares which came on stream in 2006
 2003-2004, 359 hectares due to come on stream in 2007
 2004-2005, 351 hectares due to come on stream in 2008 (351 confirmed)
TOTAL OVER SIX YEARS: 2,046 HECTARES

Permission has been sought to plant a further
 350 hectares in 2005-2006, only 310 authorised and due to come on stream in 2009
 350 hectares in 2006-2007, only 280 authorised and due to come on stream in 2010
 310 hectares in 2007-2008, only 280 authorised and due to come on stream in 2011
 175 hectares in 2008-2009, only 125 authorised and due to come on stream in 2012
 150 hectares in 2009-2010, only 100 authorised and due to come on stream in 2013
785 hectares are due to come on stream in the four harvests between 2010 and 2013

Source: CIVC

TABLE 2: ACTUAL AVERAGE YIELD ACHIEVED IN THE APPELLATION OVER 13 HARVESTS (1997-2009*)

Actual average yield in kilos per hectare	
1997	9,402
1998	12,926
1999	12,989
2000	12,576
2001	10,938
2002	11,972
2003	8,251
2004	13,958
2005	12,880
2006	12,997
2007	14,243
2008	14,228
2009	Around 14,000*

Source: Compiled by Giles Fallowfield using CIVC statistics
 *my early estimate for average yield in 2009 based on straw poll of producers

THE LOWER-DOSAGE TREND GOT STARTED BEFORE THE CHANGING CLIMATE BEGAN TO RECOGNISABLY AFFECT THE HARVEST. ALTHOUGH IT'S CERTAINLY EASIER TO MAKE CHAMPAGNE WITH LOWER DOSAGE LEVELS NOW

gather momentum. More producers, large, medium and small; houses, cooperatives and growers alike – but especially the third group which in terms of numbers if not volume production is by far the largest in the appellation – are looking more closely at the general level of dosage they use in their wines with a view to reducing it. For both marketing purposes and what might be described more as philosophical/winemaking reasons all three groups are also actively considering making or indeed have already made a non-dosé or brut zéro style.

Speaking to Jérôme Philipon, managing director of Bollinger, shortly after the 2009 harvest, he confirmed that they too had seen this change brought about by warmer weather. "Average temperature for Bollinger in 2009 was quite a bit higher at 10.3 °C, significantly above the 25-year average of

9.5°C, while the average acidity level in 2009 at 6.9grams/litre was considerably lower than the 25-year average of 8.6g/l. Ripeness levels in the 0.5 acre Clos St-Jacques – the ungrafted vineyard in Aÿ next to the winery – that goes into production of Vieilles Vignes Françaises, reached an all-time record of 12.8 °C," says Philipon.

However, he is not so sure that growing interest in extra-brut or zero-dosage styles has come about just as a result of global warming. "Sure, Gilles Descourtes our vineyard manager has a chart that shows the changing climate over the past 15 years," says Philipon. "But the lower-dosage trend got started before the changing climate began to recognisably affect the harvest. Although," he agrees, "it's certainly easier to make Champagne with lower dosage levels now, as our friends at Ayala (owned by the Bollinger group) are demonstrating pretty well."

One of the factors leading to higher ripeness and potential alcohol levels is that the growers aren't in such a hurry to pick the grapes. "We saw it in our own presses at Bollinger this year with very little activity in the first few days the presses were open." His explanation for this is the better weather during the harvest itself. "We had almost no rain this year during the whole of September and it was a similar picture in 2008. As a result the weather was easier to cope with, disease was hardly a problem and more growers were encouraged to take the gamble and wait before picking [for a higher degree of ripeness] rather than start of the first day it was possible in any given cru."

As for dosage levels generally at Bollinger they haven't really changed over the past 15 years, says Philipon. "For special cuvée they are in the range between 7 to 9g/l, going down to 7 as the wine ages over the months it awaits disgorgement. Perhaps the level didn't go as low as 7g/l 10 years ago but we've always been a low-dosage house at Bollinger, ahead of the trend." Given the work at sister house Ayala just down the road in Aÿ where they make three different no-dosage cuvées, it's not a surprise to hear that Bollinger too has experimented. "But," says Philipon "we think with a little dosage the wine develops better and it suits the Bollinger style."

Today barely a month goes past without a quality producer introducing an "extra brut" (0-6g/l dosage) or zero-dosage style of ▶

TABLE 3: ACTUAL AND MAXIMUM YIELDS OVER THE PAST 12 HARVESTS 1997-2008 PLUS 1982 AND 1983 THE TWO PREVIOUS MAXIMUM YIELDS (KILOS/HECTARE)

Year	Hectares in production	Maximum permitted yield	Average 'qualitative reserve' kilos/hectare put into reserve	Actual average yield kilos/hectare average yield could produce***	Number of bottles actual
1982	23,588	14,300	1,300	14,071	287,660,312
1983	23,903	15,200	4,000	15,006	310,838,821
1997	30,547	10,000	Nothing	9,402	248,867,418
1998	30,370	13,000	2,600	12,926	340,176,776
1999	30,255	13,000	1,000	12,989	340,553,667
2000	30,400	12,600	1,600	12,577	331,406,797
2001	30,504	11,000	Nothing	10,990	290,616,081
2002	30,892	12,000	600	11,967	320,479,010
2003	31,233	11,400	Nothing	8,256	223,384,711
2004	31,570	14,000	2,000	13,990	382,726,503
2005	31,924	13,000	1,500	12,992	359,402,555
2006	32,341	13,000	Nothing	12,997	364,236,461
2007	32,716	15,500*	3,100	14,243	403,775,915
2008	32,946	15,500*	3,100	14,228	406,216,316

*the real yield is 12,400kg/ha but growers can pick another 3,100kg/ha up to an actual maximum of 15,500kg/ha depending on the stock held in their "reserve individuelle" not rising above 8,000 kg/ha

***in certain years production may be boosted by taking wine out of the reserves to add to that year's harvest but these figures in column 6 are based on the actual average yield without that extra volume added

Champagne, Duval-Leroy and Philipponnat are two such houses that spring to mind. The latter in particular, where a non-dosé style was introduced in April this year, has reduced the general level of dosage in its wines to 8g/l or lower under Charles Philipponnat's stewardship. It's not by any means the only thing he's done – he has also built up the amount of *vins de reserve* used in blending the non-vintage cuvée and increased the use of oak for storing it – however there is now a mineral purity about the wines in the range which has given them another dimension. The fact that this is a direction many of the best and most adventurous producers are travelling in, Jacquesson is another good example, makes it more likely to be a long-term trend.

We don't, however, see that much of this wine in the UK outside of the restaurant market, and that coupled with the fact it can all be classified as brut Champagne which may by law have a dosage of anything from 0-15g/l, makes it difficult to detect a growth trend in the shipment statistics to the UK. According to the CIVC export figures for 2008 there were 63,325 bottles of brut nature Champagne exported in total plus another 145,516 of extra brut styles and of these just 4,770 and 20,219 bottles respectively came to the UK (compared with 32m bottles of brut).

ONE TREND THAT RIPER, HEALTHIER, VIRTUALLY DISEASE-FREE FRUIT COULD HELP ACCELERATE IS THE GROWTH IN PRODUCTION OF ROSÉ, WHICH DURING THE SALES BOOM OVER MOST OF THIS PAST DECADE APPEARED ONLY TO BE HELD BACK BY A LACK OF QUALITY RED WINE PRODUCTION FOR BLENDING

Champagne has just had two harvests on the trot where there has been almost no rain during picking in September and the crop has been brought into the press houses in an almost miraculously healthy condition compared even with the fairly recent past. And one trend that riper, healthier, virtually disease-free fruit could help accelerate is the growth in production of rosé, which during the sales boom over most of this past decade appeared only to be held back by a lack of quality red wine production for blending.

There has been significant growth in rosé Champagne production, but it is very hard to get a figure for this. However, a good indicator is the fact that the two largest brands in Champagne, Moët & Chandon and Veuve Clicquot, have both fairly recently invested in specific Burgundy-like winemaking facilities for the production of good-quality red wine, the blending component necessary for the production of the vast majority of pink Champagne, and that augurs well for the future. And if the current economic woes help bring the very high prices charged for non-vintage rosé styles down a little that will only help restore the consistent +20% growth in this sector seen in the UK between 2001 and 2006. Rosé export shipments in the first half of 2009 have certainly been more resilient than prestige cuvées which have dropped by two-thirds. In the UK in first half of 2009 rosé shipments were only down 13.4%. **db**