

sweetness and light

The global economy has seen champagne houses put premiumisation on hold and concentrate instead on non-vintage. With sugar levels the key, **Giles Fallowfield** heads to the region to find out what the various houses are doing with their dosage

After some 15 years of continuous growth during which champagne sales in the UK market have blossomed, recession has bought with it not only a marked slowdown but also a change of emphasis. In the on-trade, apart from a really tiny top-end niche, prestige cuvée sales have all but dried up, the rise and rise of rosé has been halted – possibly only temporarily, and partly as a reaction against high prices – and the spotlight has once more returned to the non-vintage segment, which even at the height of the boom never accounted for less than four-fifths of the total market.

Aware that we are unlikely to emerge from the current period of austerity quickly, the houses are concentrating their efforts around non-vintage cuvées, although as reserve wines are now playing an increasingly important part in their production, perhaps we should all adopt Rémi Krug's preferred 'multi-vintage' moniker for this category.

HOTCHPOTCH HARVEST

Whatever we call it, it's the fastest evolving sector of the market, not least because champagnes without a vintage tag may be sold just 15 months from the January following the harvest. We are already seeing

some wines released that are based on the excellent 2008 harvest that took place just as the depth of the worldwide financial crisis became clear.

Within this large non-vintage sector, which embraces everything from bone-dry non-dosé to ultra-sweet 'doux' champagne, there is certainly plenty of room for different

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styles to emerge. And while activity seems to be very much concentrated at the dry end of the market, currently there are signs of renewed interest in sweeter styles.

Benoit Gouez, Moët & Chandon's head winemaker, sees trends in both directions. 'Technological improvements [like the company's new presses] make it possible for us to go for more purity of flavour and fresher, brighter styles, allowing us to reduce dosage levels,' he says.

Stylistically, Gouez believes this will lead to the production of 'more elegant, fresher, less heavy champagnes' and this is a direction he wants to go in, certainly for mature champagne markets such as the UK. He does admit, though, that

there is a place for demi-sec and even doux styles for developing markets and young consumers who haven't been raised on crisp, dry drinks.

Asked if he thinks the Champenois have neglected to explore sweeter styles of rosé champagne (sweet pink styles, after all, are driving the rapid growth in the UK rosé table wine market), Gouez says Moët is already doing just that with Nectar Impérial Rosé in the US (a 45g/litre demi-sec) and

hints at more to come. 'The challenge is to deliver a wine that tastes rich without leaving a sweet palate. You have to develop a specific base blend that's more on the harsh bitter side, not just add more sugar to the regular non-vintage base.'

Dominique Demarville, cellar master at Veuve Clicquot, is focusing his attention not on extending the range but on improving the non-vintage offering, just as he did in a previous life with Mumm's Cordon Rouge. Demarville intends to set about achieving this by 'declaring fewer vintages than we did in the past and ageing the reserve wines a bit further to add complexity. The challenge is to keep freshness and add complexity and structure to Yellow Label.' >>





If Becks becomes a fan of extra brut, perhaps the category will take off

This tacit admission that something needed to be done to raise the quality of Clicquot's flagship wine to produce something more in line with the image the brand still retains will perhaps appease those who have felt the consistency and quality of Yellow Label have not been up to scratch in recent times. Demarville's success at Mumm suggests he is capable of achieving this task.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

This goes some way to explaining why Clicquot and Demarville were quick to say they wouldn't be making any vintage champagne from the 2009 harvest, despite the generally accepted view it was a fine 'vintage quality' harvest. Clicquot vintage will move from the current 2002 to 2004 and then jump to 2008, while La Grande Dame jumps from 1998 to 2004, and then to 2006. As Cyril Brun from Demarville's winemaking team explains 'Yellow Label is the priority, so if making vintage or Grande Dame interferes with that we won't do it.'

While dosage levels have come down in Moët's Brut Impérial to 9g/litre and down to just 5.5g/l in the newly-released

Grand Vintage 2002, says Gouez, neither Moët nor Clicquot have gone the whole hog and released a non-dosé, non-vintage style. Nor, despite an apparent recent taste for innovation, have Taittinger, or Pernod Ricard brands Perrier-Jouët and Mumm, though again such wines may just be awaiting the light of day.

At arch-innovators Pommery (currently at least 10 different non-vintage cuvées under the brand umbrella) you might expect such a development. Not least because, as managing director Paul Bamberger is quick to point out, it was at Pommery that the first brut champagne style was created back in 1874. But while

Bamberger confirms that they do indeed make an extra brut style of Pommery Pop and also that prestige cuvée Louise has a low dosage, they 'don't communicate on that'. For Bamberger, the number of people who appreciate non-dosé champagne is very limited.

'The market for extra brut and non-dosé hasn't grown very much because the crisis of the past two years has hindered its development, but many houses have these wines in their cellars,' says Louis-Charles Pluot, marketing director at the Reims (CRVC) co-operative where the Champagne de Castelnau brand is produced.

Instead of going in this direction, they have, as general manager Pascal Prudhomme explains, extended their non-vintage range by introducing a lighter, younger, fresher style in their blanc de noirs last year, partly as a contrast to their rich, developed, extra-aged non-vintage brut style.

At Duval-Leroy in Vertus at the southern end of the Côte des Blancs they have slashed the dosage levels in many of their wines, especially those sold under the Authentis banner. The single vineyard Clos des Bouveries has 6-7gms/l, depending on the vintage, which helps give this overtly rich wine a streak of chalky minerality.

A couple of years ago they introduced an extra brut 1997 vintage style, and though this sold mainly in the French market (where restaurants are more accepting of

the extra brut style), this wine has evolved into an all-Chardonnay non-vintage extra brut (4.9g/l dosage) and this is newly available in the UK market.

The trend towards such non-dosé and extra brut styles remains a strong one and while it may, as some people have suggested, be producer led, dosage levels in general are coming down. Every recent trip to Champagne has unearthed a new raft of such cuvées, and some that have been around for quite a while, like that made by the quality-driven Mailly co-operative.

As Mailly's winemaker Hervé Dantan explains, while this wine has a tiny amount of residual sugar, it actually has no dosage at all. It's a 75/25 blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay like most of their range, based on several good vintages: 2005, 2004 and 2003. 'We don't want it to be too sharp,' he says. Very clean and beautifully defined, with a long, pure fruit character on the finish, it demonstrates well the idea that the best non-dosé styles need both top quality grapes (like those from Mailly Grand Cru) and time to develop.

BRUT APPROVAL

François Roland-Billecart says: 'Many people [seem] to want to have wine like the edge of a knife. For us, with the 2004 vintage, making it in an extra brut style wasn't very difficult to do. The wine invited this approach. It's only a small niche and not necessarily widely popular, but we need to supply customers wanting this taste.' The new non-vintage extra brut style of Billecart-Salmon will be available in the UK before Christmas.

A visit to Cattier in Chigny-les-Roses to look at the Armand de Brignac range provided further confirmation of the all-embracing nature of the lower dosage trend, as well as the discovery that Cattier is about to release its own non-dosé style named Brut Absolu.

The Armand de Brignac wines may owe much of their success to endorsement by hip hop stars like Jay-Z and Beyoncé, both recent visitors to the winery, but the Brut Gold is also made in an extra brut style with just 6gm/l dosage and deserves to be judged as a serious wine. George Clooney and David Beckham are also alleged to be fans. Now if Becks starts telling everyone he's a fan of extra brut champagne, perhaps the category really will take off. 🍾