



CHAMPAGNE'S dating game

Krug's announcement that it will provide disgorgement date information has reignited the debate. About time, asserts **Giles Fallowfield**, arguing that more transparency will only enhance Champagne's image and guide consumers

NOTHING MUCH happens in Champagne for most of August – unless of course you count the harvest starting early. But this year it was different. A flurry of quirky stories has emerged from Reims and beyond.

One of these, or two if you include the potential legal dispute with Bollinger over their respective “unique” bottle shapes, came direct from Bruno Paillard. In a press release entitled: “Dégorgement: the Confusion of Dates”, Paillard it seems has taken umbrage at various brands within the major groups jumping on the “disgorgement date” bandwagon. The house to earn his ire this time was Krug.

“Krug has announced that they would now inform the consumer of each bottle’s disgorgement date through a code accessible via smartphone. Tremendous!”

Has anyone noticed that each bottle of Bruno Paillard has had this information on the label for nearly 30 years?

At last the fact that Champagne evolves after disgorgement is recognised,” said Paillard sarcastically. “But has anyone noticed that each bottle of Bruno Paillard Champagne has had this information on the label for nearly 30 years, and [Paillard] was for 20 years the only house to do so?”

He also gives credit to Philipponnat, Lanson, a few small growers and Charles Heidsieck, for a similarly enlightened policy – though he fails to mention a personal interest in the first two as the main shareholder in the BCC group that owns these two brands.

Paillard’s long-held stance on disgorgement dates is something that deserves more recognition and applause.

It was courageous for Paillard and Philippe Baijot to adopt this approach across the entire Lanson range, including Black Label non-vintage, soon after they bought the brand. Lanson is a good example of a style that really benefits from long post-disgorgement ageing. By doing so, Paillard has surely influenced the decision at Moët & Chandon to introduce a disgorgement date on its next vintage release, of which more, later.

CELLAR GUESSWORK

A decade ago when writing about the benefits of disgorgement dates on bottles, a quick search in the cellar turned up only one. Yes you’ve guessed it, Bruno Paillard’s prestige cuvée Nec Plus Ultra 1990 bearing the legend on the label:

“après 8 années de vieillissement, cette bouteille a été degorgée en Mars 1999”. The next best thing was several bottles of the sublime Charles Heidsieck Mis en Cave Champagnes each bearing the date the wines were bottled (the year after the base harvest). Mis en Cave still represents the only serious attempt by a major house to tell customers the age of their non-vintage Champagne. Although this innovative approach was

scrapped by the previous owner of the brand, RemyCointreau, there is talk of new owner EPI possibly bringing it back.

In the same cellar today, things have changed quite dramatically with perhaps 10% of the champagnes now having the disgorgement date on the label and some giving blend, dosage, harvest and reserve information. This includes numerous growers’ wines, though certainly not all houses: Philipponnat, Jacquesson, Charles Heidsieck and Moutard, the Beaumont des Crayères co-operative and the odd bottle from a bigger player like Lanson. There are also a couple of bottles of vintage Ruinart lurking somewhere that have joined this forward-thinking club.

Feature findings

- ▶ The crucial process of disgorgement involves freezing the neck of the Champagne bottle to remove the plug of lees that has settled in the inverted bottle.
- ▶ The length of time a bottle is aged or rested after disgorgement influences the character of the Champagne.
- ▶ For non-vintage Champagnes, which make up the vast majority of the market, a disgorgement date is one of the few clues as to how long the wine has been aged, which can vary from 15 months to seven years.
- ▶ More houses are heeding the increasing demand to put disgorgement dates, blend vintages and percentages on labels to provide much-needed transparency for consumers.
- ▶ But those resistant to the move cite various reasons against: it doesn’t mean much to drinkers, it will be seen as sell-by date and it is too complicated – a labelling nightmare for a production process involving blends of multiple vintages, with multiple disgorgements.

Chef de cave Frédéric Panaiotis says they started putting disgorgement dates on their vintage Champagne with the 2004 released in 2009.

Just as it was discovered Panaiotis does with his own personal Champagne cellar, nearly every bottle here that doesn’t bear a disgorgement date gets a handwritten label for when it was cellared – a mis en cave system to help decide when they should be consumed. And that is what it’s all about: trying to drink a valued bottle at or near its peak of expression.

The disgorgement date is only one tool that will help shape that decision, but it is

champagne: disgorgement



an important one. The producer and the year the wine comes from, assuming it is vintage Champagne, will also influence picking the best time to drink it. However, if it is a non-vintage Champagne, or “sans année” as the

NV accounts for nearly 90% of production – that’s a lot of bottles where the consumer is left guessing what is inside

Champenois more romantically describe it, there is usually no help at all on the label to let you know the age of the wine.

With the non-vintage sector of the market accounting for nearly 90% of Champagne production, that’s a large

majority of bottles where the consumer is left guessing what’s inside.

In the table wine market, where just about every bottle has a vintage on it, you can immediately see whether it is young, old or middle-aged. But a non-vintage

Champagne might be aged for 15 months from the January after the base harvest before it is sold (the minimum legal requirement), or it may be matured for six or seven years or more.

You could be supping Champagne today entirely made from the 2010 harvest – most of the cheap fizz consumed this Christmas will be – or it may come from a blend of harvests going back to 2003 or older. The

current Gosset Grande Réserve Brut, for example, comes mainly from the base year of 2005, but also has 2004 and 2003 fruit in the blend.

Granted, some don’t care. Chill it close to freezing, open it with an explosive pop

and plug it for the quick lift fizz gives. At the bottom end of the market, where people are just buying the name “Champagne”, you could argue this doesn’t matter. Any amount of ageing won’t turn poorly made Champagne into something worth drinking.

FOR CONNOISSEURS

But for those that take more than a passing interest in what Champagne – a fine wine that you pay a hefty purchase price for – tastes like, surely more information is needed to help you enjoy it in its prime. The time it has spent in bottle will have a major impact on how it tastes and whether you like it. And that doesn’t mean it has to be old or with several years of post-disgorgement ageing. The date of disgorgement, some information about the harvest base and age of the blend will help those seeking youthful freshness, just as well as aiding those who are interested in following a wine’s development. As Paillard says: “I’ve had a lot of positive feedback at tastings I have conducted round the world. It is rewarding helping people discover the magnificent ageing capacity of Champagne after it is disgorged and demonstrates the importance of giving consumers this date on the label.” He also notes that revealing such information effectively ensures that producers give their wines some resting time after disgorgement before they are shipped, good for both consumers and the image of the Champagne region as a whole.



For grower-producers aiming for the highest standards, such as the members of the 19-strong Terres et Vins group, giving such information is standard, along with blend information – the base

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year and the percentage of grape varieties used – the amount of reserve wine included, and often a bottling date. These producers, who include among their number Benoît Tarlant, Alexandre Chartogne-Taillet and Raphael Bérèche, also believe in a largely non-interventionist approach, with few

filtering or chaptalising their wines, preferring natural yeasts over commercially produced strains, adding little or no sugar in dosage and using low amounts of sulphur. They all eschew chemical fertilisers and insecticides too.

While it is much more difficult for the bigger houses to adopt such radical production measures, giving information about the makeup of their wines is a far more practical proposition. With their vintage releases it should be a no-brainer. The idea that it will confuse consumers and that some might see it as a best-before date doesn't really wash, and suggests that the Champenois don't think much of the intelligence of their customer.

Consumers not really interested in wine are unlikely to scrutinise the small print on the label in any case. Yet some respectable producers still trot out this tired argument.

Dating Ruinart and Clicquot

Frédéric Panaiotis, Ruinart's chef de cave says: "I wanted to introduce disgorgement dates at Ruinart when I first came here [from Veuve Clicquot] five years ago, but only for Dom Ruinart and the vintage wines, it's too complicated to manage for the non-vintage. We started with the back label of the vintage 2004. We only have two different back labels for vintage and it's released in two batches so it's easier to do. Dom Ruinart is released in four batches with 25 different back labels, so it's very difficult to manage, but soon we are going to give both the month and year of disgorgement."

Veuve Clicquot is also moving in this direction and plans to go further, eventually putting the date of disgorgement even on its non-vintage Yellow Label, or at supplying the date on its website or through a QR code on the bottle. Cyril Brun from the winemaking team at Clicquot says at present they give the date of disgorgement and the dosage, but only for the Cave Privée range (re-releases of older vintages). But he confirms: "We are currently working on extending this step by step to the rest of the range."

champagne: disgorgement

Laurent-Perrier's special 200th birthday disgorgement

Laurent-Perrier launched a limited release prestige cuvée in London last month to celebrate the Champagne house's bicentenary, writes Patrick Schmitt.

Called Grand Siècle Les Reserves, the multi-vintage blend has been bottled in magnums and Jeroboams only, and incorporates wines from the 1990, 1993 and 1995 harvests.

Poured for the first time at the Claridge's Hotel at an intimate event with longstanding customers and "friends" of Laurent-Perrier, including celebrity gardener Alan Titchmarsh, the new prestige cuvée is on allocation, although production figures aren't being disclosed.

Despite the ripe nature of the 1990 vintage and the age of the base wines, the Champagne has a surprisingly youthful and fresh character, partly due to the fact the blend was disgorged just three months ago, according to David Hesketh MW, managing director of Laurent-Perrier UK.

"We wanted to demonstrate the lightness and freshness of Laurent-Perrier, even with our older Champagnes," he explained when speaking to *the drinks business* at the launch event, which ran from the time of 1812 hrs to 2012 hrs to commemorate 200 years since the house's foundation in 1812.

The Jeroboams (but not the magnums) will be sold exclusively in Selfridges in the UK, and will, in a first for the Champagne house, be disgorged to order.



GETTING THE HOUSES IN ORDER

However, if the major houses really want to preserve and even enhance the good name of the appellation, it is really the non-vintage sector where this information is most urgently needed and where its release could help drive out the traders that damage Champagne's image damage by releasing their wares 15 months and a day after they are bottled. That fact alone makes it more likely to happen as market leader Moët & Chandon is not alone in wanting to shrink, if not eliminate, this cut-price sector.

While Baijot and Paillard have demonstrated such a move is possible by introducing it on Lanson's back labels, it is arguably the winemakers at LVMH who are driving this trend, as Benoît Gouez at Moët & Chandon, Frédéric Panaïotis at Ruinart, Dominic Demarville at Veuve

For quality producers, a disgorgement date for non-vintage blends will help set them apart from the also-rans

Clicquot, and now Krug all want to introduce disgorgement dates on their labels, certainly for vintages (see box, page 28). And it seems the marketing and management teams at these houses can now see the PR advantages of doing so.

Benoît Gouez started to give the Moët Grand Vintage more post-disgorgement age before release from the 2002 vintage, just as Richard Geoffroy has with recent releases of Dom Pérignon, so this process will also become part of the vintage story. The first release of the 2004 vintage this autumn was disgorged back in August 2011, while the rosé 2004 was disgorged in February 2012 as Gouez is looking to

preserve more freshness in the pink style. Grand Vintage 2004 will be released in three batches at roughly six-month intervals with each batch carrying its disgorgement date on the bottle.

Moët's re-released vintage wines, currently on the very fine but underrated 1992, already give much more detail about the exact blend by variety, plus the dosage level so perhaps this will become a regular feature.

It is understandable that Bruno Paillard is irritated by the publicity Krug has received by giving disgorgement dates on its grand cuvée and vintage wines, though ironically it's the only LVMH

brand where the winemaking team, Eric Lebel and Olivier Krug, don't view it as beneficial. Despite the house's recent QR code initiative, Krug is on record saying both he and Lebel attach little importance to disgorgement dates, and he doesn't think Krug drinkers do either.

But having a disgorgement date on vintage Champagne should surely become the norm. For quality producers, doing this for their non-vintage blends and including harvest base details will help set them apart from the also-rans.

If this is partly Paillard's legacy, he is to be applauded. db