

Out with the old

Because Champagne houses can charge a significant premium for rosé, many are sidelining vintage, as they don't see the same returns from it.
Giles Fallowfield reports



VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE, that is Champagne made entirely from one harvest, accounts only for a very small percentage of the wine made in France's most northerly vineyard. Overall in 2007, vintage Champagne – any style of Champagne from brut nature to doux with the year of the harvest printed on the label – represented less than 7% of worldwide exports.

The real vintage market is smaller still as purists would argue that only the driest brut nature, extra brut and brut styles are really involved in what we might call the "fine wine sector" of the Champagne market. These three styles of vintage only muster 3.11 million bottles of shipments between them to all countries outside France, that's barely 2% of total exports. It isn't spread evenly across all markets either. The UK is where much of this Champagne sells, accounting for nearly a third in 2007, some 891,000 bottles.

The USA is the only other significant player in the "vintage" market, but as exports there generally slowed in 2007, shipments of such wines fell back to 483,596 from 523,260 the previous year. The one additional country that (just) imported more than 200,000 bottles in 2007 was Italy. Japan, where, we are told by the Champenois, interest in Champagne as "wine" and genuine knowledge about it is at a higher level than almost anywhere else outside France, imported just under 190,000 bottles of vintage Champagne, representing 2.06% of shipments there. The Japanese consumer, who buys proportionately more rosé and prestige cuvée Champagne than any other – they accounted for 11.75% and 18.76% of shipments there respectively in 2007 – hasn't really seen the point of vintage, it appears. ▶

Lost category

It generally seems to be true that vintage Champagne, certainly from a marketing perspective, is in danger of becoming a lost category for the major brands. The Champenois have been so successful at selling Champagne generically, making it the drink of celebration, that many consumers don't understand it is also a wine capable of reaching heights of complexity and intensity in its vintage mode. Unfortunately, just at the point where the logic of putting the emphasis behind a real campaign to explain and promote vintage Champagne to consumers was reached, along came an easier option to support in the shape of rosé.

Faced with the problem of paying for increasingly expensive grapes and thus needing to shift the emphasis away from the lowest profit non-vintage sector that last year still accounted for 80% (79.98%) of export shipments, the time was ripe to properly tackle the issue of explaining what vintage Champagne is all about and persuading consumers to take it seriously as a wine. However, the pink fizz bandwagon arrived and it looked like a far easier way forward to profitability and the Champenois have again put off addressing the vintage issue.

From the short-term financial point of view this is perhaps an understandable decision. Rosé Champagne has lots of things going for it. Prejudices against pink wine have clearly dissipated as the growing popularity of rosé table

THE PINK FIZZ BANDWAGON ARRIVED AND IT LOOKED LIKE A FAR EASIER WAY FORWARD TO PROFITABILITY



wine shows. There is an obvious point of difference to emphasise in the colour, something even the least educated consumer can understand.

Importantly you don't have to age the wine for a minimum of three years after it is bottled before release, thus avoiding tying up large amounts of capital in ageing stocks. In fact, if you emphasise your desire to produce a fresh and fruity style you can even make selling the wine after very little ageing a virtue. And finally – and for some producers this may have been the clincher – you can sell the wine at a massive premium to its white brother even though it only costs a little more money to make.

Speaking at the launch of its own non-vintage rosé in London last month, Stephen Leroux, the marketing director at Bollinger, confirmed this analysis. "Champagne sales have been developed by marketing and as a consequence it is now divided into two sectors: non-vintage and prestige. The vintage category, which has shrunk as a result, falls somewhere in between." Rosé, even non-vintage rosé, is increasingly being positioned in the wider prestige sector.

Pink power

"Basic non-vintage rosé, but not ours," says Leroux, "can be sold after just 15 months ageing and you still get a very good return while the much more expensive prices of the prestige cuvées make the extra ageing needed easily bearable."

If you think this analysis is overly cynical, look at the prices now being charged for non-vintage rosé Champagne. We are seeing non-vintage rosé selling in the UK market at a higher price level than vintage at some famous houses, particularly proud of their vintage wines. At Majestic, the new list price (from May 6, 2008) for a single bottle of Laurent-Perrier non-vintage rosé is £90; yes, that is 90. Laurent-Perrier's 1999 vintage is priced at £57. Admittedly, as you have to buy a minimum of 12 bottles at Majestic you'd be pretty mad not to take advantage of the 33.3% discount if you buy two bottles of these wines, but that brings the prices down respectively to £59.99 and £37.99, there's still a £22 difference in favour of the vintage.

Veuve Clicquot Vintage Réserve from the widely declared and generally top class 2002 vintage: £55.50 (£36.99). Veuve Clicquot NV Rosé: £58.50 (£38.99). I know there is only £2 difference in favour of the vintage this time but for a house rightly proud of the quality of its vintage wines this differential is even harder to believe. This isn't an LVMH phenomenon, Perrier-Jouët 1998 vintage is £40.49 (£26.99) while its NV Blason Rosé is £44.99 (£29.99) and Taittinger vintage 2002 is only £1 more expensive than Taittinger Rosé NV (£55.50/£36.99 vs £54/£35.99).

It isn't just Majestic that is increasingly pricing in this way in the UK off trade either. There's a £20 difference between Laurent-Perrier NV Rosé and LP's 1999

Vintage Champagne: shipments to the UK market

Year	Total imports	Vintage brut imports	% of total imports	Vintage rosé imports	Vintage prestige cuvée imports
2004	34,952,691	657,903	1.88	40,291	495,669
2005	36,376,944	764,891	2.1	41,392	518,938
2006	36,789,527	807,407	2.19	51,052	509,392
2007	38,957,205	890,624	2.29	53,039	620,002

Source: CIVC



was flat last year," says Rosin, "but importantly there were no price promotions so it was more profitable business.

Veuve Clicquot Vintage Reserve, which he reveals is a bigger brand in the on-trade than Moët vintage with sales in this sector accounting for about 30% of volume against Moët's 20%, "saw 7% growth in volumes, but we did do some promotions in supermarkets".

Roisin agrees that the vintage sector is being squeezed, especially in the on-trade. "People either want a glass of non-vintage, or those with money go up to a prestige cuvée. While rosé is an easy concept because consumers can see the difference with their eyes, they don't have to taste it." Despite this he says, "Vintage remains a focus at Moët because of the 'wine values' it helps give the brand, rather than the luxury lifestyle element. We haven't relied on the lifestyle cues for Dom Pérignon either. We continually try to draw attention to its wine values with tastings and releases of the older oenothèque vintages."

While it has certainly made a vintage in 2002, which, having

recently tasted it freshly disgorged and without any dosage, will probably put '99 and '00 in the shade, the next vintage from Moët will be the 2003 to be released in the UK later in the autumn. As Moët chef de cave Georges Blanck accurately predicted back at the launch of the 1999: "Moët will probably be one of the few houses to declare 2003 a vintage year". Only Bollinger among the major houses has so far, and it didn't make its usual slow-developing, long-lived style or call it Grande Année – and it's all been sold already.

Moët's commitment

That Moët made the decision to make a vintage from the super-ripe and low acid 2003 harvest shows the company's commitment to the vintage category. It could very easily have followed other houses that didn't know how to handle the earliest harvest in Champagne following the warmest summer on record and said it needed all the juice for its non-vintage production.

As the current chef de cave Benoît Gouez (he joined the

winemaking team at Moët in 1998 taking over from Blanck in mid/late 2005) said in Epernay at the launch in April (2008), it was a very brave decision by Moët which employed some new winemaking techniques that may become increasingly important in Champagne if warmer summers and rising average temperatures become the norm leading to riper grapes with a lower acidity.

The problem was that after frost and hail had devastated large tracts of the vineyard and reduced average yields to just 7,500kg/ha, the hot dry summer saw the crop ripen extra quickly. "It wasn't the usual 100 days after flowering, more like 80. When it became clear the harvest would start in mid-August (the earliest since 1822) no one was prepared and we had to organise everything in just one week. When we started to press there were problems, the skins were very fragile and the juice was pink not white. We had the highest sugar levels and lowest acids since 1959," says Gouez.

"The juices started to ferment on their own, there was no chance to

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rack and ferment clear juice. Most people were adding sulphur to try and stop this fermentation; we did the opposite. We postponed adding sulphur and managed to use less at a later stage. The press houses were calling the CIVC and asking if this was OK. We did this with all our grapes, not just those destined for use in the vintage, but it was a big risk."

Not enough people in the trade and fewer consumers realise that Moët & Chandon is serious about making vintage Champagne and often makes long-lived wine of the highest quality. Anyone who has had the good fortune to taste vintages such as those from the sixties ('61, '62, '64, '66 and '69) cannot fail to be impressed by the sheer quality of the wines. With 2003 evoking memories of the ripest years in Champagne we were given the chance to contrast and compare the new wine with the 1990, 1976 and finally 1959. If 2003 develops in the same vein as these rich, ripe, and in the case of the '59, low acid years, the risk of making a vintage in '03 will have been well worth taking. **db**