

TWO DAYS IN CHAMPAGNE

It's the luxury drink par excellence: whether to make a show, celebrate a deal or seal a romance, it's the one French wine for which there is no real substitute. The photographer Colin Hampden-White embarked on a whirlwind tour to photograph the key players in contemporary champagne: over the next few pages we present his photography and reflections on his trip



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Arriving in Reims is particularly un-awe inspiring. Its architecture is neither grand nor picturesque so luckily we were to visit historic Taittinger first thing the following morning. It isn't the external architecture which is the star of the show at Taittinger - it is the cellars. Dating back to the 4th century, it boasts Roman cellars which at one time belonged to the Benedictine monks of the abbey of St Nicaise. Its miles of tunnels and cellars are very deep and perfect for the slow ageing process involved in making this great champagne.

Taittinger is very much a family business, run by **Pierre Emanuel Taittinger**, his son Clovis and daughter Vitalie. Having photographed Pierre Emanuel and Vitalie, we settled down with a bottle of their prestige cuvée Comtes de Champagne 1998. What a wonderful wine, aged for at least ten years, it's easy to drink despite being made to last. It's smooth and creamy with plenty of depth. Sweetness from honey notes underlying a small amount of brioche, topped off with light floral flavours.

From the cellars in the centre of Reims we travelled south to the tiny village of Le Mesnil sur Oger. It's an unassuming place as is the building we visited but appearances deceive. This is the home of Salon, known to extreme connoisseurs as perhaps the greatest luxury champagne in the world.

There we met **Didier Depond**, the MD, who is a quiet and understated man, very warm and welcoming. Didier showed us around Salon which, in complete contrast to Taittinger, is very small. They only produce champagne in the very best vintages, of which there have only been 33 since 1921.

I photographed Didier standing in the middle of his circular tasting table with a fabulous modern chandelier above him reflecting off the ceiling like little bubbles. Then he cracked open a bottle of their current vintage - 1999



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- which is full of power balanced with finesse. This wine is still so young it's not really ready yet with its high acidity and tannins but plenty of fruit to balance. Made with 100% chardonnay from the neighbouring vineyards, this is one to lay down: Salon insiders say the 1976 and 1985 are drinking very well now.

Jacques Selosse was a complete contrast. Unique in Champagne, Jacques is a grower who produces an oxidative-style wine using only his own grapes. Although his beautiful home is now a luxury hotel, his winery is very simple with a tiny production in comparison to the likes of Taittinger and Veuve Clicquot. We tasted his VO (Version Originale) and his 1999 vintage. Extremely rich with tons of brioche and caramel, the fruit is very oxidative - almost sherryish - but the acidity manages to balance out these huge flavours giving the wine finesse and poise.

What can one really say about Krug that hasn't already been written? It never fails to impress; such complexity from a non-vintage champagne is remarkable. And the vintage versions, although very different and more opulent still have

01. Looking through the vineyards to Avize

02. The 1997 vintage in Salon's cellar in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger

03. Grapes left on the vine after the harvest



01. Cuis village church near Epernay
02. Pierre Emmanuel & Vitale Taittinger, Taittinger
03. Didier Depond, Salon
04. Dominique Demarville, Veuve Clicquot
05. Frédéric Panaïotis, Ruinart
06. Olivier Krug, Krug
07. Frédéric Rouzaud, Roederer
08. Michel Fauconnet, Laurent Perrier
09. Hubert de Billy, Pol Roger
10. Richard Geoffroy, Dom Pérignon

that typical Krug style. **Olivier Krug** arrived with Eric Lebel the cellar master, and, almost as importantly, a bottle. Olivier described their special family tradition: when a new member of the Krug clan is born, the father dips his finger into a glass of Krug and touches it to the baby's lips so that Krug is the first thing the new-born tastes. Apparently, this is how the winemaking skills are passed down through the family generations (the family still makes the wine, although the brand is owned by LVMH). It certainly makes babies happy.

Our next appointment was on the south side of town with **Dominique Demarville** at Veuve Clicquot. Having photographed him at Mme Clicquot's desk, we settled down to another fine tasting ranging from the very drinkable NV to the current excellent vintage 2002, which will last and last. It's so fresh, with plenty of acidity balanced by a depth and complexity which, although a little hidden at the moment, will certainly show in time, in true Veuve style. These are champagnes that taste fresh and simple initially, and need years to show their true colours.

The next morning on this grand tour, we arrived at Ruinart, another venerable maison, to see **Frédéric Panaïotis**. He's only been cellar master for a few years and is a breath of fresh air. Young, relaxed and not at all camera-shy, I photographed him in the main dining room which has just been refurbished.

The ceiling lights form a halo and the vaulted shape of the room reflects the cellars below. Tasting the variations of Ruinart is always such a pleasure because they are so diverse - from the very quaffable Blanc de Blancs and fruity, balanced rosé to the complexity of the Dom Ruinart 1998, another all-chardonnay champagne.

Later, we visited **Louis Roederer**, another legendary name and photographed Frédéric Rouzaud, the MD, in his home. Rouzaud makes not only Roederer but its super-luxury brand Cristal and is the man who caused a brouha in the wider world when he appeared to disapprove of rappers endorsing the super-premium drink in 2006. (The ultimate result was Jay-Z distancing himself from the brand and being associated with the launch of another champagne, Arnand de Brignac's 'Ace of Spades').

Rouzaud's house is a complete contrast to the plain exteriors of much of Reims. Sitting behind a very tall wall surrounded by beautiful gardens the house oozes elegance without a hint of pretentiousness. Exquisite dining rooms and numerous sitting rooms lead off a central square marble hallway. The portrait I took was on the steps of the house with the lens wrapped in the iconic orange cellophane of Cristal (which prevents UV contamination of the wine).

Early next morning, we met with Michel Fauconnet at Laurent Perrier. Laurent Perrier is set amongst extensive gardens in Tours-sur-Marne and for the last twenty years they have shown a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Photographed in the gardens, **Michel Fauconnet** talked about the 2011 vintage: although the flowering came so early, suggesting an early harvest, this was followed by a poor July and August, but the sun shone enough to ripen the grapes, the harvest was successful and the vintage looks to be good.

The next day we made a trip to Pol Roger in Epernay. Once there, we were ushered into a little piece of Britain. A small "snug" living room filled with all things British including a bust of Sir Winston Churchill on the mantelpiece. Churchill was a famed Pol drinker and has the company's prestige cuvée named after him. Director **Hubert de Billy**, like Sir Winston, is larger than life but has an incredibly jolly demeanour. Whilst we photographed him he talked about his wines and especially about his 2002 rosé of which he is deservedly proud. It has very good fruit and with no dosage (the sugar added at disgorging when the cork is inserted), it is a very fresh and racy wine which has been made to last a very long time.

For our final meeting we returned to Champagne to visit **Richard Geoffroy** at uber-brand Dom Pérignon. Geoffroy had returned that same morning from the Formula 1 racing in Abu Dhabi to be photographed by us.

We met him at the church in Hautvillers where Dom Pérignon himself is buried. Photographed in front of the altar, hands clasped in reverence, Richard Geoffroy described the differences between the regular, but still fabulous vintage champagne with the oenothèque version. The current oenothèque vintage is the 1996: it is incredibly deep and rich, waves of flavours hit your palate from brioche, caramel, and digestive biscuits to floral notes and honey. (We made up for our flying visit by tasting the wine again the next day at Farr Vintners' tasting at Vintners Hall, London.)

All in all it was an amazing trip even if Reims and Epernay are modest as places to visit, it just means that one focuses on the stars of the show, the wonderful wines and the fascinating people who make them.

Colin Hampden-White's portraits of the Greatest Winemakers in Champagne will be exhibited at The Rebecca Hossack Gallery, from the 16th - 28th of April 2012 r-h-g.co.uk



CHAMPAGNE



The Connoisseur's View: Why Krug is King

by Howard Ripley

"Bring anything you like as long as it starts with K and ends with G." So I was instructed before a dinner at which only the best would do, and it was up to me to bring champagne. So why is Krug considered to be the best among many fine champagne houses? To help answer this question I was invited to Krug on a cold winter morning. In contrast to the many splendid champagne houses in Reims, the Krug headquarters is an unprepossessing building that does not prepare you for the splendours inside. I was invited to a special tasting by Margareth Henriquez, the president of Krug. We were joined at the tasting by Eric Lebel, the chef de cave.

The wines to be tasted were Krug Grande Cuvée, Krug 1996, Krug Clos du Mesnil 1996, Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1996 and Krug 1998. The wines were very different yet all had some things in common. First was a core of firm acidity, the backbone of Krug. All had a very fine mousse and were wonderfully fresh. All were richly aromatic with multi-faceted flavours that danced across the palate, suggesting perhaps grilled nuts for a moment, then a touch of honey followed by toasted brioche or dark red fruits. The sensations went on and on. All had an impression of size and volume yet were so elegant that the aromas and flavours seemed to be balanced on the point of the finest needle. Finally, a long finish that lasted minutes rather than seconds. The wines could be enjoyed on two levels; immediate pleasure certainly, but they also repaid contemplation when so much more was revealed. They are not showy wines but really quite cerebral.

The two wines closest in style were the Krug Grande Cuvée and the Krug 1996. Among wine snobs it is common to look upon the Grande Cuvée as a sort of entry level Krug, a mere non-vintage wine. This is a great error.

So how do Krug achieve such outstanding quality? Apart from insisting on only the best for every small decision that has to be made during the whole process, there are several key factors that (in my opinion) elevate Krug above their competitors.

Of utmost importance is the raw material. As their own vineyards provide just 40% of their needs, the remaining 60% have to be bought in. The source of their grapes is not a few very large vineyards but dozens of tiny plots, some no larger than a large garden. Each terroir being subtly different, this brings great complexity to the final blend. The growers keep the yields low and the contracts with Krug often go back many generations. Several growers told me that it is considered an honour to supply Krug with grapes. It should be noted that Krug buy only grapes, never wine. Every parcel bought is kept separate. Many Champagne houses mix the many lots bought in large tanks. Not so at Krug. Amazingly, the grapes from each plot of land from each grower are fermented separately.

The wines are fermented in old 205 litre oak casks. Krug is the only great Champagne house that still ferments all its wines in oak. The casks are old because the aim is not to add

tannins but to allow a slow interaction between the must and the tiny amount of oxygen that the casks allow through. This method ensures a long, slow evolution of the wine and contributes enormously to its legendary longevity. A further contribution to longevity is that the malolactic fermentation – which makes young wines easier to drink – is never induced. In March the growers come and taste their wines at Krug. It is quite possible to find from one grower for example, that one wine is fine and fruity, one more structured while the third is over-ripe. This last wine will be rejected by Krug and sold elsewhere.

The most difficult task of all is the assemblage, or blending of the different wines, especially for the Grande Cuvée. For a vintage Champagne, those casks whose characteristics best represent the unique character of the year will be set aside. But for the Grande Cuvée where consistency is paramount, Krug can call upon its amazing array of reserve wines which are stored in stainless steel. For the assemblage, Olivier Krug and a tasting committee of seven spend five months with as many as 1000 tastings, 7 wines at each tasting. They will have as many as 7000 tasting notes. These are all reviewed by Eric Lebel who will then suggest certain blending combinations to the committee until that special Krug character, taste and quality is achieved.

Krug use about 15-20% Pinot Meunier in their blends. Some find this surprising as it is often considered to be an inferior variety. It was explained to me by Eric Lebel and Margareth Henriquez that "the character of Pinot Meunier is the most variable of the three grape varieties. It is not so much Pinot Meunier per se that we seek but a little touch of spice or fruitiness or je ne sais quoi that a certain grower in a certain village can produce," explained Margareth. It also acts to enhance and enrich the other two varieties so that the final blend is a more complex, exciting and harmonious wine.

They have a similar attitude to grand and premier cru rated villages. The tasting committee never discusses the benefits of adding a little more grand cru village wine, preferring to suggest perhaps a little more Chardonnay from a certain grower in Trépail for its extra elegance and finesse or a little more Pinot Meunier from a grower in Sainte Gemme whose Pinot Meunier has, say, an extra charm, fruitiness or spiciness.

As Olivier Krug told me, "there are no short cuts to quality and at Krug every tiny detail is carefully considered, and has only one aim which is to make the best possible Champagne in that totally unique Krug style".

Those of us who have worked closely with wine over the years know that to serve Krug to your guests is an act of great generosity. To be served Krug is an honour and a compliment to your connoisseurship.

Howard Ripley, now retired, was the founder of Howard Ripley Wines, a preeminent specialist in high-quality Burgundy wines in the UK.

