

Something

a global thirst for Champagne
ushers in refashioned cuvées

By LYN FARMER

Seven years into the new millennium, Champagne has never been more popular. Exports to the United States are up twelve percent over last year, according to the CIVC, the quasi-governmental organization of Champagne producers. And it's not just us; there's a whole new world of Champagne drinkers out there, and together we are sending the market reeling. While some producers are said to be employing techniques designed for mass appeal — and mass production — at the expense of Champagne's distinctiveness and quality, most are doing everything possible to maintain their high standards, while simultaneously meeting demand and creating it. To grow the category within a limited geographic area means experimenting with new ideas, including some very old ones that fell out of favor and are now "new" again, like using oak to ferment or age Champagne. Whether these strategies will have a numbing effect and make Champagnes taste more alike rather than more distinctive remains to be seen.

Champagne's commercial growth has producers asking themselves whether they want to be all things to all drinkers or stay the course and cater to an established clientele. And taste aside, what about a brand's image? As with all products, luxury or otherwise, image affects the variety of our choices, the prices we pay and the ease of access we enjoy. We want a good deal, but do we really want to go to a discount store to buy Champagne? And should it be marketed as a luxury product or a bulk product like orange juice or beer? Is Champagne still romantic, or is it becoming a workaday wine with fizz?

Part and parcel of the identity issues facing today's Champagne are the roles of sugar and oak. How much sugar is too much? And how much oak, and what kind and for what purpose — does it mask flaws or add complexity? These are hotly debated questions among the *Champenois*.

The question of just what Champagne should be, whether status symbol or ordinary drink or something in between, is not easily answered.

"Each new generation constantly brings with it new consumers, either the young or the affluent, who, for the first time in their lives, have access to the Champagne market," says Bollinger's president Ghislaine de Montgolfier. "Generally speaking, new consumers are impressed by the great brands [*grandes marques*] of Champagne and prefer to keep drinking these excellent wines, rather than try unknown names."

Yet the CIVC's Daniel Lorson says, "We may have reached a level where consumers begin to balk. This is not just my feeling, but that of the producers as well. We may have reached a maximum. With supply limited and demand growing, what can the producers do?"


For decades, houses large and small have been trying to convince the public that Champagne is not just a special occasion wine. It appears that they have succeeded along the lines of "Be careful what you wish for." "We have some new markets in Russia and Asia, but we do not have enough wine to satisfy them," observes Louis Roederer *chef de caves* Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon.

"We sell Bollinger Special Cuvée [a non-vintage wine] in a hundred different countries across the globe," Montgolfier notes, "and we've noticed that certain countries, such as Japan, the U.S. and Italy, buy a higher proportion of our prestige *cuvées*." New countries enter at the non-vintage end of the market, and established consumers move up a level or two.

As Lorson notes, "The market for premium *cuvées* has never been better, even for bottles costing 500 euros [\$750] or more." To meet demand at the prestige end of the market with an agricultural product that takes time to mature requires forward-thinking producers. Carrying the concept of high-end Champagne to new heights is Clos d'Ambonnay, the latest release from Krug, and a pinot noir companion to the house's

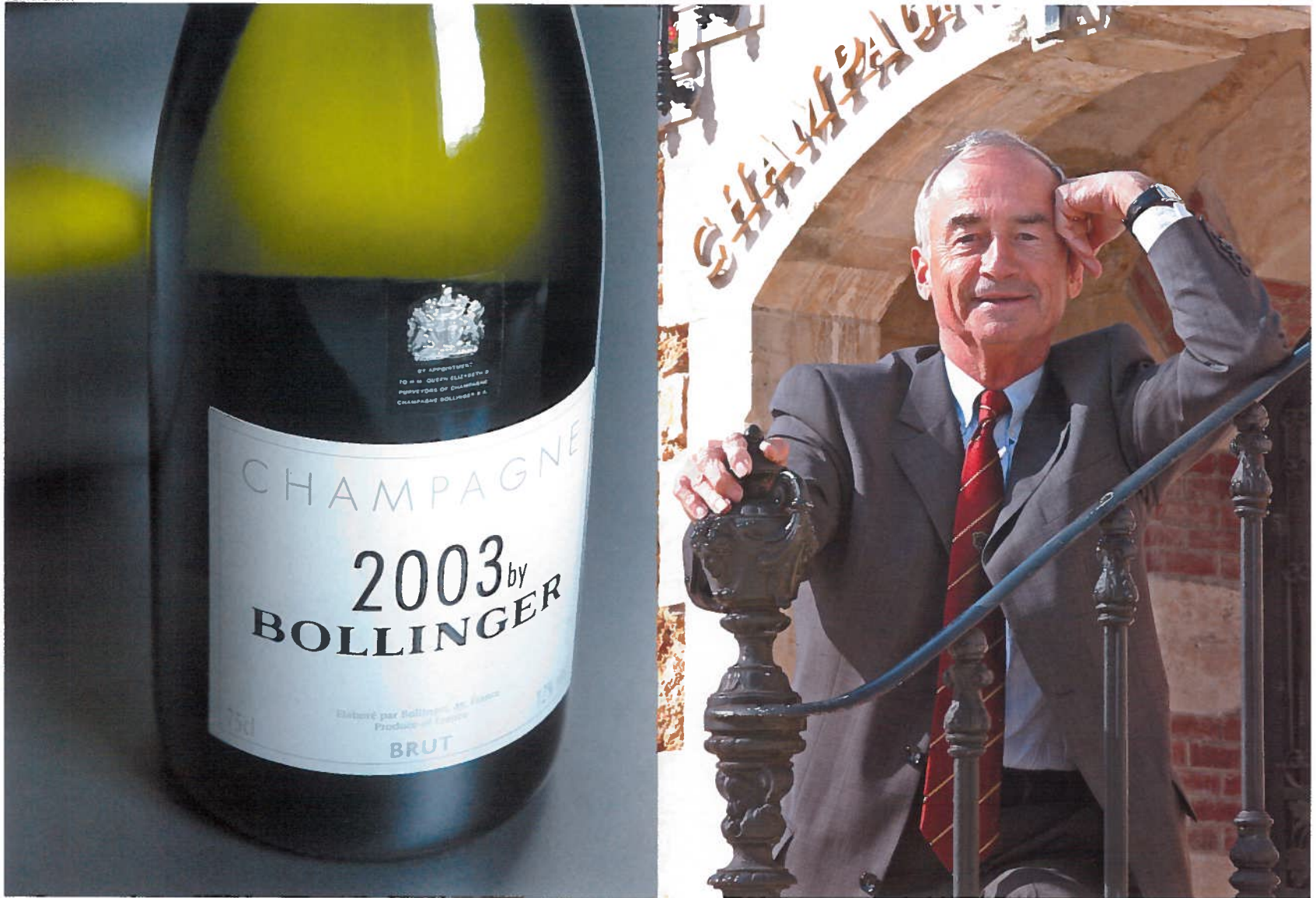


Old

A photograph of a bottle of Cuvée R. Lalou Champagne and a flute glass filled with champagne. The bottle is the central focus, with a label that reads "CH. MUMM", "CUVÉE R. LALOU", "CHAMPAGNE", "EXTRA DRY", and "1998". The glass is partially filled with a golden, bubbly liquid. The background is a warm, textured wall, possibly made of stone or brick, with a dark, woven basket visible on the left. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a cozy atmosphere.

Named for René Lalou, who shepherded C.H. Mumm through the dual devastations of phylloxera and The Great War, Cuvée R. Lalou is actually the second prestige-level Champagne named for him. The first, given his full name, was discontinued after the 1985 vintage came out because of a corporate reorganization; fittingly, a subsequent change in corporate ownership led to the rebirth of the *cuvée*.

Something New



Above left & right: The atypical growing conditions of the 2003 vintage came at a propitious time for the esteemed house of Bollinger. The 2003 by Bollinger is a “one-shot deal,” according to the house’s president, Gisleine de Montgolfier. Though the wine, as indicated by its unusual name, is a bit of an oddity, it conveys the willingness of houses to show consumers something new.

highly regarded Blanc de Blancs Clos du Mesnil. It comes from a small pinot vineyard the Krug family purchased from one of its favorite growers in the village of Ambonnay in 1994. “The idea arose a few years after the revelation of Krug Clos du Mesnil, when both Henri and Rémi had in mind to find a second jewel vineyard,” Olivier Krug recounts. “That jewel was owned by one of our suppliers in Ambonnay, which had always been one of our darling villages.” The 1995 Clos d’Ambonnay was announced this fall and carries a suggested retail price of \$3,500. That is not a typo. With only 250 cases made, even at this price, this rarity is certain to sell out. By comparison, the 1995 Clos du Mesnil (\$725), although one of the priciest Champagnes on the market, will seem a relative bargain.

Yet Champagne, like any non-essential product, cannot be evaluated only on its cost of production; if that were the case, the Mona Lisa would sell for \$50. Champagne has many intangibles associated with it — the ethereal aromas, the way it captures light in a glass, the texture of the wine, even the sound of a properly pulled cork sighing.

It is no coincidence that the single biggest corporate presence in Champagne is the luxury goods giant Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH). Within the company, there are six brand groups, including, Fashion and Leather Goods, Perfumes and Cosmetics, Watches and Jewelry, and Wine and Spirits.

LVMH owns the largest and second-largest producers of Champagne, Moët & Chandon and Veuve Clicquot, respectively, along with Dom Pérignon, Ruinart and the aforementioned Krug. It also owns Givenchy and Pucci, Fendi and Donna Karan, Guerlain and Tag Heuer, and the list goes on. Who better to help market a luxury product where image is crucial?

“Big houses market Champagne part and parcel with images and ideas of luxury,” says Kevin Pike, national sales manager of importer/distributor Michael Skurnik Wines, steward of more than two dozen artisanal grower-producers gathered together by importer Terry Thiese. “Look at the Web site of any major house,” he continues, “and you can see that they are marketing the way the

fashion and entertainment industries market.”

While glamour is in, special occasions are out because, as the *Champenois* recognized years ago, to sell their wine as a luxury product reserved for celebrations is to drastically limit when consumers believe it is appropriate to drink it. There are only so many graduations and weddings, even birthdays, in a person’s life.

“We used to see a lot of Champagne consumed with dessert or after dinner and for specific celebrations, but today I think that number has dropped considerably,” says Didier Depond, the president of two Champagne houses, Salon and Delamotte (both owned by Laurent-Perrier).

“This is absolutely right that Champagne is becoming more and more a wine,” says Laurent Champs, winemaker and proprietor of Vilmart, a near-cult grower house in the small village of Rilly-la-Montagne. Skurnik is its importer and makes a specialty of grower Champagne houses. Pike notes that, “Our biggest job in selling grower Champagne is to [ask] consumers to remove Champagne from the realm of a luxury item sold at a discount and put

it back into the world of fine wine. If we're successful in 'de-luxurizing' Champagne, it can only be good for the region. What's a better all-purpose food wine than good Champagne?" he asks.

The CIVC's Lorson expects the grower Champagne segment to expand. "Connoisseurs look for lesser-known brands [of] high quality that have a story to tell. They are the expression of a micro-*terroir*, or of special vinification."

Salon's Depond agrees that Champagne relies less and less on mystique and more on its vinous quality. "More than 70 percent of Champagne sold today is consumed as an *apéritif*. In many cases, it carries on into a meal to accompany the first course, and that is part of a big shift in Champagne. People increasingly see Champagne as a wine, and even more important, as a dinner wine." Champs adds, "You can taste it throughout the meal; it is like a 'universal wine.'"

Depond further observes, "In the U.S. market, I see demand increasing among young consumers and among women, especially. People want to dine well, and I don't think you can find a good restaurant that does not feature Champagne anymore, and many will have eight, ten or twelve on their list."

As demand from new Champagne consumers rises, the industry itself is consolidating. Spirits specialist Pernod-Ricard acquired G. H. Mumm and Perrier-Jouët from Allied Domecq two years ago, an arranged marriage that seems off to a good start, despite concerns in some quarters that the sales techniques of even the most high-end spirits company would dilute the image of Champagne.

Didier Mariotti, *chef de caves* at Champagne G. H. Mumm says this is simply not so. "When Pernod-Ricard purchased Mumm in 2005, they were new to the Champagne business, both the making of the wine and selling it. But we educated each other: They had excellent ideas about marketing and we had to teach the sales force about Champagne to help them be effective representatives of the product. They had to rethink their image of us and help us reach the consumer."

Small and highly prized houses in the Michael Skurnik/Terry Thiese portfolio, including the aforementioned Vilmart, René Geoffroy, Pierre Peters and Jean Milan, are marketed with an emphasis on *terroir*, as opposed to drawing wines from several areas and blending them as is the tradition in Champagne, especially at the large houses. The view among the *négociants*, many of whom own little vineyard land of their own, is that blending maximizes the qualities of each region without letting any one element speak too loudly. Grower wines, on the other hand, go to lengths to point up regional differences.

Each camp believes its approach is the best and, while the rhetoric can be heated, everyone in Champagne agrees that no one style of wine suits everyone's taste.

If a non-vintage Brut from a large *négociant* appeals to a new consumer, a much smaller

production *cuvée* may appeal to a seasoned aficionado looking for something different. Pike also looks to "a consumer who has a fairly substantial base-knowledge of fine wine...because they know that fine wine first must be made in the vineyard, and the cellar is secondary."

So what style of Champagne is being crafted for the broader market that finally views the effervescent quaff as more than a once-a-year tippie? The short answer is *cuvées* with a certain level of sweetness, and the influence or flavor of oak. Both are traditional elements of Champagne that faded from the market half a century ago and are now returning. "If you look back at what we know about the first Champagnes," Bollinger's Montgolfier says, "they were much sweeter than present-day Bruts," which, by law, can have up to 15 grams of sugar per liter. "To give an example, one famous *cuvée* had as much as 200 grams of sugar per liter, whereas Bollinger Brut has 9 grams, and the Extra Brut only 3."

It's unlikely that even a complete neophyte would tolerate a Champagne with 200, or even 100, grams of sugar these days, but just as the song says, "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." Many newcomers to Champagne find a bit of sweetness moderates the inherently high acid levels of sparkling wine. Sugar can also hide flaws in wine, be it bubbly or still. Moët's White Star is a non-vintage Champagne made exclusively for the U.S. market that is sweetened beyond the *brut* threshold and into an "Extra-Dry," which can have up to 20 grams of sugar per liter. It is hugely popular in urban areas with drinkers looking for something both sophisticated and easy to drink. Following White Star's lead, Champagnes with sugar levels beyond *brut* have capitalized on the nightclub scene.

Within the last few years, Moët took another step down sugar lane by rebranding its lackluster *demi-sec* as Nectar Impérial. With a flashy package and improved flavor profile, this wine, with 45 grams of sugar, is a commercial hit. It weans young cocktail drinkers off sweet drinks like the Cosmopolitan; there is now even a full range of cocktails created using Nectar as a base. For the more serious Champagne lover, Nectar Impérial functions as a food wine with dishes that were traditionally paired with sweet wines, like foie gras in any guise, Roquefort cheese and fruit-based desserts.

Four-packs of Pommery POP may have made connoisseurs cringe, but the slightly sweet Champagne, packaged in something akin to a petite soft drink bottle, has undeniable commercial appeal, especially among new bubbly drinkers.

A more serious debate is taking place about the renewed interest in wood treatment for Champagne. At the prestigious Decanter World Wine Awards that took place in London last spring, one of the judges on the Champagne panel balked at what he felt was a noticeable oak influence in some of the Champagnes presented for judging. The judge was Dr. Tony Jordan, CEO of LVMH's extensive holdings in Australia (including the sparkling wine

property Domaine Chandon, called Green Point outside Australia). Panel chairman Tom Stevenson, a respected Champagne authority, countered that "if a trend exists for the use of new and relatively new oak in Champagne, then we should recognize that and reward its very best examples." In short, Stevenson said, "It was not our duty to dictate the legitimacy of a style."

Yet the no-nonsense Jordan is hardly opposed to innovation. He raised eyebrows with Domaine Chandon's recent release of a number of sparkling wines topped not with a cork, but with a crown cap (the type more commonly found on beer bottles). This isn't as heretical as it might seem — most Champagnes undergo their second fermentation under crown cap, but the caps are invariably removed and replaced by corks when the wine is disgorged.

In a sense, Jordan's position on oak in Champagne springs from the same philosophy — an opposition to flavors he considers out of place in a wine, whether that is cork taint at one extreme or the more subjective determination of what is an objectionable level of oak.

Regarding this issue, the marketplace is speaking fairly loudly. Following a year-long study, the French government announced in 2006 that, to better compete in the international marketplace, it would allow the use of oak chips in making most wines. Bernard Pomel, who wrote the government report, said, "We must make wine for consumers and not wines which producers dream about." He went on to call for a "viticulural revolution" in France to better meet international competition from New World wines, noting that Australia had just surpassed France as the leading wine exporter to the U.K. Pomel's report, including a recommendation to allow the use of varietal names on labels for even the top level AOC wines was immediately adopted by the French Ministry of Agriculture.

The question of oak chips is not just how much flavor is imparted, but depth of flavor. Chips are much cheaper than new oak barrels, and effective if the goal is adding a superficial flavoring and aromatic agent. No serious winemaker in Champagne is arguing for using oak chips as a flavoring agent, but many winemakers there feel the pressure to engage a marketplace that has fallen in love with oak. If oak is what many consumers are most familiar with, the flavor they most closely associate with wine, how should Champagne respond?

"For a long time, oak in Champagne has been criticized," notes Champs, who took over Vilmart from his father in 1991 and immediately set about experimenting with a way to make his wine more contemporary. "For me, oak is the most noble material for aging wine, but as all good things we have to use it like a support and not abuse it."

Champs makes several wines that showcase the judicious use of oak, though some of his earlier efforts were perhaps less balanced and more



Above left: Though not as well known as during its 19th-century heyday, the author calls this Delbeck a fine choice for those looking for an NV from somewhere other than a big house.

Above right: Many Champenois, including Salon's Didier Depond, who says "it is more and more a wine," agree that Champagne relies less on mystique for sales, yet Salon remains an icon.

controversial. Champs now neatly balances a fearless, contemporary approach with a traditionalist's palate that appreciates elegance in wine. "This is really complex [and] we need many years to try to understand it and to get the right combination. But today it is really amazing to see how many Champagne houses or cooperatives can buy and use this traditional method."

Kevin Pike of Vilmart's importer, Michael Skurnik Wines, observes, "Many producers, like Bollinger and Krug, have been using oak to some degree for over a hundred years, and most cellars originally were oak. [So] it's an issue of how much is too much — [an issue] not of kind, but degree."

"We do, indeed, have a unique tradition of using oak," Bollinger's Montgolfier agrees. While the non-vintage Special Cuvée is fermented in stainless steel, Bollinger's vintage Grande Année is fermented in 205-liter vessels that Montgolfier stresses are "old" oak barrels. "The use of new oak is counter-indicated for early vinification, since we're not seeking to bring out the tannins — quite the contrary. Some Champenois also use wood for their reserve wines," he says, adding, "We appreciate the initiatives of

everyone to diversify the styles of Champagne."

One warm October Sunday afternoon, I visited René Geoffroy, a family owned grower-producer in the *premier cru*-rated village of Cumières. Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy is a third-generation winemaker who, looking around the cramped quarters where he makes about 10,000 cases of Champagne per year, laughed at being called a cellar master. Preparing to move to a new property in the *grand cru* village of Aÿ, where he will have much more space, he pointed to a 1,200-gallon oak vat that had belonged to his grandfather.

"When I go inside to wash it, there is a wonderful aroma of flowers — it's a beautiful aroma and I always use it for my best [pinot] meunier, not for the wood taste, but just for its mellowness," he says. Using the old wood is not about imbuing oak flavor — all of that has long since been leached out of the wood. Geoffroy is after texture. "I can put the same juice in stainless steel and in wood; in metal, it has a very present, noticeable acidity, but in wood, it is more round."

Old oak and large containers with odd names like *foudre* and *demi-muid* have long been a part of

Champagne tradition. It has only been in the last 50 years that technology and economies of scale made it possible for many houses to abandon oak for stainless steel, in which it is easier to control temperature and prevent oxidation. "I hate oxidation and reduction," says Geoffroy. "With careful winemaking, I don't encounter it using wood."

"I love the quality a small amount of wood-fermented wine gives a blend," says Bruno Paillard, whose eponymous Champagne house is, at 30 years of age, one of the newest important producers in the region. "The wood offers a quality not so much of micro-oxidation, as a preparation for oxidation — the wine gains some color and the ability to age."

Until the early 1960s, wood was the container of choice for fermentation and storage in Champagne, as it was for Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy's grandfather. Post-war prosperity and technology came together and made a revolution in France that saw wood slowly replaced in many cellars by stainless steel. Today many producers, including some of the most admired in the region, are finding, or continue to find, a place for oak in their cellars.

Louis Roederer's Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, notes,

"Oak is very important for the Roederer style, not so much because it flavors the wines, but because of its impact on texture — the roundness and the soft, elegant structure."

Yet Veuve Clicquot eschews wood completely. "We ferment all our wines in stainless steel," says cellar master Jacques Peters. "We make a style of wine that relies on the flavors of the grapes and the *terroir* where they are grown. For us, that style is best maintained without adding the variables that can come with wood." And, he agrees, the larger the volume a house produces, the harder it is to control in wood, though he admits he has experimented. "You never know," he says with a wry smile.

Wherever a house comes down on the issue of oak, the debate is very vinous and underscores another fundamental shift in the thinking of both Champagne consumers and those catering to them. Many producers now view their success as tied to an incongruous perception: Champagne isn't special anymore. "In general, there is a growing interest in different Champagnes [among] consumers who regard Champagne not just as a celebratory drink,

but as a great wine," says CIVC's Lorson. Louis Roederer's Lécaillon agrees. "We have always presented our wines as 'wines of Champagne.' It is a complex hybrid between wine and celebration: You can enjoy it without any food; you can have it with food; you can celebrate success and lifestyle. In other words: Let's not separate the two; there is room for both, and this is good for Champagne."

Nonetheless, the issue of being a product for all versus one for the few remains complex. A case in point is the new prestige *cuvée* G. H. Mumm introduced in September, Cuvée R. Lalou, named for René Lalou who, for 50 years, directed the house and helped rebuild it after the double devastations of phylloxera and WWI. An earlier-launched prestige *cuvée* named for René Lalou was discontinued after the release of the 1985 vintage due to decisions made during one of the several corporate takeovers the house endured before landing with Pernod-Ricard.

Another luxury *cuvée* replaced it, though in short order it, too, was withdrawn and the house had no prestige *cuvée* at all. Guided through the 1990s by *chef de caves* Dominique Demarville, who, for many

years, was the youngest cellar master at a major house, a project of his own making took shape that would ultimately relaunch Cuvée René Lalou, a wine he had very much admired. Rejected in his proposal to create a new prestige *cuvée* by the then-owners, he secretly forged ahead, confiding in his assistant Didier Mariotti, who took over as *chef de caves* last year when Demarville left to join Veuve Clicquot. Mariotti offers these insights: "When René Lalou began making his original prestige *cuvée* in 1961, he had very specific requirements for his grapes. He wanted to highlight *terroir* in his wine so he selected seven *grand cru*-rated villages for the original blend. He started trial runs with the 1961 vintage, but the earlier vintages were never commercially released. The first true vintage of the wine he created was 1966. There was never much of it — it was a real artisanal wine within a large house."

Enter Pernod-Ricard in 2005. "They said they wanted to do something special and create a prestige *cuvée* for Mumm," Mariotti recounts. "We were a bit nervous because they didn't know we'd been

Below left: Not one to shy away from doing things his own way, Bruno Paillard makes his outstanding Réserve Privée in the traditional *crémant* style, which results in a softer mouth-feel.

Below right: Part of LVMH, Dom Pérignon is the epitome of luxury itself. Its lux roots, however, long predate its corporate owner: Dom is Champagne's first prestige *cuvée*, launched in 1936.





Tasting BAR

The Champagnes that follow were singled out by the author as symbolic of how each house is showcasing a new direction or style, or highlighting a particular vintage; all were tasted open and scored on the BuyLine 100-point scale.

2003 by Bollinger — \$125: This new wine is unusual in every regard, from the label on the bottle to the wine inside it — and even the vintage itself, which featured frost decimating some vineyards in the spring and crushing heat wreaking havoc in the late summer. Yield was down substantially, but the grapes that remained until harvest turned in very good wine for some houses. Bollinger made an outstanding wine, but not one that fit its house style, hence this singular bottling was conceived by acknowledging how different it was from the norm — the Grande Année to which it is “neither superior, nor inferior,” says Bollinger president Ghislaine de Montgolfier. “It’s just different.”

Note: Pale gold color with pinpoint bubbles. Chalk and mineral notes provide an appealing foundation for an expansive second layer of red apple and citrus. Mineral aspects spread across the palate with pleasant notes of citrus and fresh bread dough. Underpinning these qualities is a firm, solid structure and bracing acidity (though not as evident as in a

Grande Année). An elegant and powerful wine that offers satisfying drinking now or over the next five years. **Score:** 92

Bruno Paillard, Blanc de Blancs Réserve Privée NV — \$69: Bruno Paillard invites tasters to sample his wines with the admonition, “Beware of enchantment.” I’ve tasted with him on many occasions and am always struck by his deep passion — some would call it missionary zeal — and his determination to preserve timeless techniques and meld modern methods and impeccable science with them. His Blanc de Blancs Réserve Privée is a real find, made in the *crémant* style using slightly less pressure in the bottle than regular Champagnes, so it is less filling and thus a perfect aperitif.

Note: Brilliant white-gold color with a green highlight and small bubbles. Beautiful white flower and mineral aromas on the nose followed by citrus and honey with a pleasing hint of hazelnut. On the palate, the honeyed notes evolve further, together with a firm foundation of apple and citrus. Exceptionally long finish. **Score:** 92

Charles Heidsieck, Blanc de Millénaires Brut Blanc de Blancs 2000 — \$92: All the wines in the portfolio are strong examples of their type, from one of the best rosés in the market to this prestige *cuvée* that is the epitome of what a Blanc de Blancs should be.

Note: Bright pale lemon gold with very fine

bubbles. Appealingly fresh aromas of yeast, toasted bread and nuts. Lovely flavors of orange citrus fruit emerge on the palate. A wine with terrific structure and crisp acidity, yet it remains subtle and elegant. The finish is very long. An unusually versatile Blanc de Blancs that repays cellaring for several years. **Score:** 96

Delamotte, Brut Rosé NV — \$77: Delamotte is owned by Laurent-Perrier, which makes the best-selling rosé Champagne. Delamotte’s version is 80 percent pinot noir and 20 chardonnay. The color comes from *saignée* or “bleeding,” allowing the skins to stay in contact with the juice long enough to add color and fruit aromas to the wine. The trick is not to extract the tannins from the skins, making this a risky method, though when it works, it is often superior to the customary approach of adding red wine to the white juice during blending. In the case of Delamotte, the technique succeeds beautifully. Only 20,000 bottles of this wine are presently made, and it’s well worth a hunt.

Note: Luminous pale rose-pink color with shimmering overtones of mother of pearl and very fine bubbles. Intensely red fruit-driven aromas with impeccable balance and just enough dried orange peel lingering in the background to add wonderful dimension. A bit of spice emerges on the close along with resonating red fruit. There is just enough acidity

Far left: After being rebranded as Nectar Impérial, Moët's Demi-Sec took off particularly in two markets: the urban club scene and among newer Champagne drinkers.

Center left: Proving that even large houses can be nimble market players, Perrier-Jouët created this single vineyard Blanc de Blancs, one the author finds "youthful and zesty."

Near left & below: Laurent Champs is an oak proponent, saying, "Oak is the most noble material for aging wine." He admonishes: "[Do] not abuse it." Cuvée Creation does not.

working on it in a corner of the cellar. But, fortunately, they were happy about it."

The biggest issue was the parent firm's hope to release the first results of the experiment from the much admired 1996 vintage. "It is good, but for me it was not 'Mumm enough,'" Mariotti notes. He persuaded the house to give them more time and release the 1998 instead. He had more of it and felt it better matched his goal of creating a stylistic descendant of the original René Lalou. And to underscore the point that this is a successor, and not a copy, the name was subtly changed to Cuvée R. Lalou.

In some ways, Cuvée R. Lalou is atypical of G. H. Mumm because it is cultivated and released in such small quantities. But the house sees this is an asset, believing that connoisseurs will be drawn to a small

here to give the wine great structure for food without disturbing its balance and elegance. An exceptional rosé. *Score: 95*

Delbeck, Brut Heritage NV — \$50: Founded in 1832 by Félix-Désiré Delbeck, the house became the third largest exporter of Champagne to the United States by the end of the 19th century. Today the label is not nearly so well known, yet it enjoys considerable success for its size. Name recognition aside, this offering, 70 percent pinot noir and 30 chardonnay, makes for a fine starting point for someone wanting to try a non-vintage Champagne from a source other than one of the big houses.

Note: Elegant pale gold color with medium bubbles. A lovely mineral nose of apple and red and black fruit. Medium-bodied and well-structured with honey, hazelnut and dark fruit elements on the palate. Honey and cherry sensations linger on a long, complex finish. *Score: 92*

Dom Pérignon 1999 — \$160: This iconic wine, the first prestige *cuvée*, was created by Moët & Chandon from the 1921 vintage, and finally released for sale in 1936. Other houses followed over time with luxury *cuvées* of their own, but Dom Pérignon was the first and for many years the only one. *Tasting BAR continued on next page >*

production wine with a great story behind it.

Wines with stories to tell capture consumer interest in ways a recitation of technical data cannot. A new release from Bollinger speaks to this marketing truth as well. "It is a one-shot deal," its director says. Montgolfier describes the just-released *cuvée* as, "a crazy thing Bollinger did in 2003, given the frost and the drought of that year. The very small yield of our vines produced atypical grapes whose quality seemed not to lend itself to creating a wine to lay down, in the style of the Grande Année [the company's emblematic vintage Champagne] or the RD [the highly allocated late-disgorged bottling]. We wanted to amuse ourselves by bringing out a wine issued from three historic parcels of land, just to commemorate the year 2003."

Because of frost damage in the spring, the crop was projected to be small; intense heat in June and July forced the harvest earlier than anyone could remember, August 13. Walking through the Bollinger estate vineyards in back of the winery with Montgolfier in mid-October of that year, it was still warm. He was animated and brimming with anticipation. "Sometimes we harvest early enough that the vines produce a second crop — very small, but they give us grapes. But this year, look," he said, pointing at a vine with clusters of elderberry-size grapes. "This is the fourth crop [here] this year!"

The wine Bollinger eventually made is as unusual as the harvest had been. "We made a good wine, but

it is not like Grande Année. To this day, there is no other wine of that style in the Bollinger cellars," he says. It is unique, "a pleasure the Bollinger winemakers wanted to share with the aficionados of Bollinger Champagne." Released with a label completely different from Grande Année, it is simply called 2003 by Bollinger.

It should be clear to consumers that 2003 is not a junior Grande Année. "It's a wine whose drinking pleasure is unique, whose openness and finesse display the great freedom of thought and creation that exist in our house, which is proud of its tradition and of the Bollinger style." He adds that the crucial element is quality, and the public's perception of quality. Montgolfier steers the *grande marque* clear of discount houses and gray market sales, which he believes tend to dilute the impression Bollinger makes. "A luxury product should have a fixed price to justify the consumer's loyalty."

Roederer's Lécaillon echoes his sentiment: "Being fanatics on quality, we believe that any step of the production and distribution can affect the quality, and our philosophy is to control our wines from the vineyard to the consumer. The image is also important: You should not find our wines in any kind of bottle shop, [just] as you do not find Hermès bags in any kind of leather shop!"

And yet as the *Champenois* become more successful in creating a desire in us to drink their wine more often, for more reasons and for no reason,



Note: Beautiful medium gold color, small bubbles and striking brilliance. Aromas tend toward fresh bread dough and toasty scents with a wisp of underlying minerality. Flavors are full yet delicate — not so much a food wine as an invitation to dine. Citrus, toasted bread and a bit of maltiness predominate in the mouth. Finishes with notable length. *Score: 92*

G. H. Mumm, Cuvée R. Lalou 1998 – \$170: The house's new prestige *cuvée* and my favorite Champagne tasted in 2007, was developed in secret, then quietly unveiled in Reims over the spring and summer before being offered for sale abroad in September. The wine is made from just twelve small parcels of vineyards (*lieux-dits*) scattered through the Côtes des Blancs and the Montaigne de Reims. Their modest size assures there will never be more than 70,000 to 80,000 bottles made, even in the best of years.

Note: Glimmering gold color and minute bubbles mark this wine as exceptional from first sight. Not a fruit-forward bouquet, but something more subtle and all encompassing with nuances of spice, citrus, fresh bread and red apple, qualities that are magnified on the strikingly elegant and balanced palate. A creamy texture and breadth of flavor make this a serious wine that would be an ideal match with many foods. Many prestige *cuvées* are too subtle to be good food wines; this one is subtle and good with food — it has it all, including an endless finish. *Score: 98*

Jean Milan, Cuvée de Réserve Grand Cru NV – \$64: Jean Milan's 12 acres of vineyards are in Oger, a *grand cru* village geographically and stylistically nestled between the austere purity of Mesnil and the fruitier style of Cramant. His Champagnes are not for the faint of heart — they are acidic Blanc de Blancs, steely and loaded with enough minerals to qualify as vitamins. He makes several *grand cru*, all-chardonnay Champagnes; the wine noted here gets a year's aging in oak barrels of various sizes and ages, from new to 30 years old.

Note: Shimmering white-gold color with a very fine and persistent mousse. Aromas of white flowers, some honeyed notes and citrus peel. On the palate, the addition of steely, flinty mineral nuances surfaces. This wine shows a bit of tannin from the wood and much less of the roundness old oak gives Geoffroy's wines. With just 5 grams of sugar per liter, it is nearly an Ultra Brut, and perfect with rich food. *Score: 92*

Louis Roederer, 2000 Blanc de Blancs – \$72: This family house is very well known for its wines at opposite ends of the price spectrum: Brut Premier NV and Cristal, the prestige *cuvée*. Unfortunately, the renown of these bookends prevents many consumers from becoming familiar with the rest of the portfolio, including a nearly unknown but lovely Blanc de Blancs that is aged for four years on its lees before disgorging.

Note: Medium yellow color with fine bubbles and notable brilliance. The first aromas showcase soft citrus and red apple; in the mouth the benefit of the extra time on the lees clearly shows in the

fine texture and depth of flavor. Apple, candied citrus peel and a hint of yeastiness make for a winning combination that stretches into a long finish. *Score: 92*

Moët & Chandon, Nectar Impérial NV – \$38: This single largest producer of Champagne, and significant marketing force, has made a *demi-sec*, or off-dry (read: slightly sweet) Champagne for many years. Only recently the wine was renamed Nectar Impérial and given more attention by its maker in the cellar and in the market, promoting it as especially suited to blue cheeses and foie gras.

Note: Rich gold color with shimmering silver highlights. Pleasant cotton candy aromas with a bit of spiciness. On the palate, the wine is only slightly sweet with citrus, spice and even anise nuances. While it may not win a competition, for a *demi-sec* at this price point it is more than respectable. *Score: 88*

Perrier-Jouët, Fleur de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2000 – \$220: Hervé Deschamps has created an artisanal wine within the large P-J portfolio made from a single small vineyard in the village of Beaumont des Crayères in the Côtes des Blancs. In tasting it, one begins to understand why the French do not speak of "making" a wine, but "raising" it (*élevée*).

Note: Fine pale lemon yellow color and very fine bubbles that drift upward through the wine as if it has a dense texture. Aromas of candied citrus peel mix with ripe stone fruit that gain further definition on the palate. Youthful and zesty with an appealing underlying yeasty character. *Score: 94*

Pierre Peters, Cuvée Spéciale 1999 – \$88: This small and highly artistic house is based in the tiny but hugely influential village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger on the Côtes des Blancs, the same location of Krug's Clos du Mesnil vineyard and Salon. Yet Peters's wines possess mineral flavors of Mesnil *terroir* at a fraction of the cost of the neighbors' offerings.

Note: Beautiful silver-gold color with very fine bubbles. A heady scent of hawthorn and loads of minerality; it's a bracing, even exciting aroma that slowly unveils dried citrus peel and a bit of hazelnut. These qualities are amplified on the palate, coupled with bracing acidity that makes this an excellent first course match. Very long finish, and a big sigh. *Score: 93*

René Geoffroy, Cuvée Volupté Brut NV – \$78: While René Geoffroy is famous for the purity of its red fruit, it is the chardonnay that has pride of place (80 percent) in this non-vintage blend. Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy uses his older vines (average age 30 years) and vinifies the juice in barrel. Two years ago, Geoffroy changed the names of several of his Champagnes — in addition to this NV Volupté, there is Empreinte, Expression and Elixir. While the new names invite inquiries about their origin, Geoffroy maintains they aren't a bid for market attention. Not denying the contemporary nature of his labeling, he says the reason was a reaction to how over-used (and ill-used) words like "Privilege" and "Réserve" had become.

Note: Pale golden yellow with small bubbles and excellent clarity. A multifaceted nose of white flowers, apple, pear and minerals, all of which are amplified on the palate. This is forceful Champagne that manages its subtle power without sacrificing elegance, its creamy texture carrying the pear and apple flavors to the end of a very long finish. Voluptuous, indeed. *Score: 93*

Salon, Cuvée S 1996 – \$350: Everyone calls this wine — the only one made by the house — Salon for short. Its fruit is gathered from a single-hectare (about 2.5 acres) estate vineyard augmented by purchases from 19 individual parcels all in the *grand cru* village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger on the Côtes des Blancs. All chardonnay, but hardly made all the time, rather only in exceptional years (fewer than five vintages out of ten on average). The wine receives eight to ten years of cellar aging before sale, but requires another 10 to 20 years to reach its peak, where it may remain for decades. Its maker, Didier Depond, recommends serving this in a tulip-shaped glass, not a flute, to give it extra room to breathe.

Note: Pale lemon yellow color with a green highlight that underscores its persistent youthfulness and very fine bubbles. A lovely bouquet of lime, white flowers and green apple open up on the palate to admit pear and grapefruit nuances to the mix. Exceptionally long finish, but still just a baby. *Score: 95*

Veuve Clicquot, Brut Rosé NV – \$50: Clicquot made a non-vintage rosé for several years early in the house's history, then stopped. In 2006, as one of the final creations of soon-to-retire cellar master Jacques Péters, the house released this exceptional rosé. It's not unusual to make a rosé by adding red wine to the base blend, but it is unusual for that red wine to be made from both pinot noir and pinot meunier, the latter of which contributes a spicy note to the wine and helps provide a shimmering depth of color. Due to the unprecedented demand that recognizes an instant classic, the wine will be in short supply for some time.

Note: Endowed with a luminous pink color and fine bubbles. An elegant nose full of ripe, youthful red fruit add to its attraction, but the real appeal is on the elegant, full-bodied palate. Spice, citrus and above all, red fruit, especially strawberry, go on and on. *Score: 92*

Vilmart, Cuvée Creation 1998 – \$114: Laurent Champs is in the vanguard of those experimenting with the judicious use of new oak, though he makes a good deal of wine using older oak as well. Cuvée Creation is a prestige-level *cuvée* made from 40-year-old vines and fermented in two- and three-year-old *barriques*. Given nearly ten years in the cellar, this wine isn't completely up to date with Champs's current thinking, but it's a marvelous bottle for the Champagne lover looking for new thrills.

Note: Lovely medium golden yellow color with small bubbles. This wine is a remarkable compendium of aromas and flavors highlighting orange fruit, apple and a hint of coffee. An exceptionally long and elegant finish. *Score: 94 — LF*



Above left: Clicquot's NV Rosé, reintroduced after a long absence, quickly became one of the world's most sought-after rosés, in no small part because of Clicquot's marketing savvy.

Above right: Roederer's supple vintage Blanc de Blancs is usually overlooked in the considerable glare of Cristal's bling and the superb value of the family-owned house's NV Brut Premier.

we consumers will look for the best and most economic way to acquire it. A *chef de caves* like Richard Geoffroy, who makes Dom Pérignon, the first and still the best-known luxury *cuvée*, believes, "One doesn't make this wine, one crafts a Dom Pérignon," he says. "The style is not about aromatics," he continues, "it is about weight and texture. It is a very ethereal thing, talking about Champagne style. I like a seamless, silky, creamy feeling, as far from a tannic impression as possible."

DP keeps production figures closely guarded, though it is widely available, often at prices as low as \$110 (compared to the suggested retail price of \$160). Ten years ago, Champagne producers worried that discounting would tarnish the image of Champagne, but — Montgolfier's and Lécaillon's shared viewpoint notwithstanding — many houses openly sell their wines to discounters with pleasing results.

Senior Editor Lyn Farmer received the 2003 James Beard Journalism Award for magazine writing and was also nominated in 2004.

"The industry's position has changed over time," observes Annette Alvarez-Peters, wine buyer for discount giant Costco. "Costco has the same demographics that most wineries want drinking their wine," she says. And DP continues to exert its magic, even over other brands stacked nearby. "The wineries maintain their brand image, while their wine is in the box next to Dom Pérignon or Opus One or any of the Classified Growths. My belief is that there is a better understanding of Costco today." She concludes: "We are a small wine shop — in a big warehouse." According to Charles Curtis, M.W., Moët Hennessy USA's education director, Costco is the world's largest retailer, not only of prestige Dom Pérignon, but also of entry-level Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label, which pleases a lot of purses, both at the corporate and consumer levels.

With people falling in love with Champagne, and treating it as an everyday — or at least an every Saturday night — wine, marketers must keep up with the educated consumer. At a 30-million-bottle house like Moët or a 100,000-bottle Blanc de Blancs

producer like Jean Milan, remaining *au courant* helps Champagne flow from cellars uninterrupted, making room for next year's *cuvées*. "Today's Champagne lover appreciates the qualities that allow Champagne to match well with food — that is the direction the contemporary drinker wants to go," Salon's Didier Depond observes. Lécaillon adds, "In my recent trips to the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, I was surprised to see so many young people drinking wine, including Champagne, in a bar where they used to drink beer just a few years ago. It seems that wine has become a popular, cultural drink for the new generation. Perhaps consumers, and especially young consumers, are no longer [intimidated] by a complicated concept of wine."

That there are so many emerging, and re-emerging, styles of Champagne, together with so many newly awakened Champagne palates, makes this a very dynamic time to be making and drinking the world's foremost sparkler. The only challenge for Champagne fans is to find the style that best suits them from an already impressive and expanding field. ☞