

Champagne

Tom Stevenson

Without doubt, the biggest news involving Champagne over the past 12 months has been the severe frost that has halved the potential crop in 2003.



TOM STEVENSON

In the worst climatic catastrophe since 1985, temperatures plummeted as low as -10°C (14°F) for a three-day period in April, when the warmest temperature logged was -3°C (26.6°F), but that accompanied an even more dangerous freezing fog. Chardonnay received the most damage, with an estimated 80 per cent crop loss. Pinot Noir followed with a 50 per cent loss, and Meunier, the widest-planted and most hardy variety, suffered between 30 and 40 per cent loss. Unusually, the frost also hit high up the slopes, affecting many of the very best sites. All hopes are on the second buds, although many possess a very low number of embryo grapes, especially for Chardonnay, and it takes a very special year (such as 1989) to actually ripen a second harvest. Some growers on the Côtes des Blancs are predicting an average 2003 crop of about 5,500 kilograms per hectare (kg/ha). To put this into perspective, this is a district that easily averages 20,000 kg, with 30–40,000 kg not uncommon in a generous harvest, despite the fact that 13,000 kg is the absolute theoretical

TOM STEVENSON has specialized in champagne for almost 25 years. *Champagne* (Sotheby's Publications, 1986) was the first wine book to win four awards, and it quickly established Tom's credentials as a leading expert in this field. In 1998, his *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* (Absolute Press) made history by being the only wine book ever to warrant a leader in any national newspaper (*The Guardian*), when it published a 17th-century document proving beyond doubt that the English used a second fermentation to convert still wine into sparkling at least six years before Dom Pérignon even set foot in the Abbey of Hautvillers. Tom's annual champagne masterclass for Christie's is always a sellout.

maximum, and even though 10,500 kg has been the officially declared yield in recent years.

Some villages, like Chouilly and Cuis, still looked like a desert one month later, while surrounding vineyards were sprouting with green colour. The Petite Montagne, Ardre Valley, and Aube seem to be the least affected. Inexplicably, some vineyards that were not even touched by frost will also produce a relatively small harvest. In the Marne Valley, for example, the Meunier will probably yield a maximum of just 9,000 kg. As Benoît Marguet-Bonnerave of Champagnes Marguet-Bonnerave and Launois Père & Fils candidly admitted, "This is probably Nature's way of making us pay for overcropping the vines in 1999, 2000, and 2001."

Grapevine

- **Although grape prices** have been rising steadily over recent years, it is well known inside Champagne that Pierre Martin (see Double Whammy, below) single-handedly pushed up prices in 2002 by paying whatever it took to secure supplies over and above his own vineyards and contracted growers. Other buyers were miffed, but he did nothing wrong. Until, that is, he did not pay the growers. So everyone ended up paying above the market value except for the one guy who inflated the price.

- **Pierre Martin**, ex-chairman and CEO of La Financière Martin, which owned Champagnes Bricout and Delbeck, was charged with fraud, fraudulent bankruptcy, and breach of trust in April 2003. The group's financial director, Louis Fariello, and Epernay-based wine broker Luc Lhermitte were also charged. The charges surround the sale of Bricout and Delbeck's €185-million turnover from the sales of *vins sur lattes* (see *Sur Lattes* Transparency, at right). A well-placed source informed me that this involved speculation on a massive scale (6.2 million bottles, compared to the group's annual sales of less than 2 million). It seems that Philippe Bajiot of Champagne Chanoine was the first to pull the rug from beneath Martin, even though he was someone he had long done business with. Martin

allegedly telephoned Tony Rasselet at the cooperative Champagne H Blin to buy a large volume of champagne. Apparently, he would pay him at the end of the month, but could he have the bottles immediately? They have done business before, so no problem. Then he telephones Bajiot and offers him a large volume of bottles at a price he could not refuse. The bottles would be with him by the end of the month, but to do the deal, could he have immediate payment? No problem. Martin pockets the money from Rasselet and Bajiot never sees a bottle. When Opson-Schneider took over, it found the company had not been able to meet its payments for two months. On 24 April, Bricout and Delbeck filed for bankruptcy, with estimated liabilities of €100 million.

- **The European Commission** has given the go-ahead for Champagne Taittinger and its subsidiaries (including Bouvet-Ladubay, the Envergure and Concorde hotel groups, Baccarat crystal ware, and Annick Goutal perfumes) to be jointly owned by Compagnie Nationale à Portefeuille, a financial holding company controlled by the Belgian baron Albert Frère and the Taittinger family, previously the sole owners. Albert Frère is also on the board of LVMH.

SUR LATTES TRANSPARENCY

The big frost might have been the most public story, but it was not the most important. By far the most significant event took place in March 2003, when the UMC (Union des Maisons de Champagne) unanimously agreed to ban all *sur lattes* transactions among *négociants* as from 1 January 2004. *Sur lattes* is an innocent name that has been coined for a far-from-innocent practice: the deceitful, but entirely legal, procedure by which a Champagne house purchases champagne made by another producer (house, grower, or cooperative), which is then disgorged and the Champagne house's own famous label slapped on. The stage of production at which most of these purchases are made is when the wine has been through its second fermentation but has not undergone *remuage*. It will be ageing on yeast lees and stacked horizontally (traditionally separated by lathes, hence *sur lattes*). So does this mean that at long last we can be sure what champagne we will be drinking, and if so, when will this be? Sadly the answers are no, and quite some time. The houses wanted an outright ban, but this was bitterly opposed by the cooperatives and growers. They did, however, agree to a certain transparency whereby any *sur lattes* champagnes must be identified on the label, albeit in small print, as 'Distribué par...' (rather than the 'Elaboré par...' in current use). So keep your eyes peeled for the tell-tale 'Distribué', which will tell you that the champagne in the bottle was not

actually made by the name writ large on the label. As to when: well, it applies to wines as from the 2003 harvest, which as non-vintage could theoretically be on the market by April 2005, although realistically not likely before autumn 2006.

GETTING TOUGH IN THE VINEYARD

Of all those responsible for overcropping, the part-time growers who sell just grapes, not wine, are probably the worst offenders, yet even these might have seen the light. As part of its initiative to revalue AOCs throughout France, INAO (Institut National des Appellations d'Origine) has formed 'work committees' to visit the vineyards, to detect any aberrations. Essentially, but not exclusively, they will be looking for signs of over-production, and if found, they will tell the grower (depending on the time of year) to prune, green-harvest, or thin the bunches. Later in the year, the grower could have his entire crop declassified if he has not done as requested. In future years, such an offender might not be given the opportunity to rectify any over-cropping and could have his entire crop carted off for distillation for inadequate pruning.

CIVC SHOT MISSES FOOT

In March 2003, the CIVC (Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne) pulled a series of advertisements slated for inclusion in major US newspapers, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The advertisements were supposed to put across the unique nature of the Champagne region and

name, in support of EU negotiations to phase out the misleading use of semi-generic names (including Chablis, Sherry, Chianti, Cheddar, Stilton, and others) in the USA. With French opposition to the war against Saddam's regime in Iraq, the CIVC felt that there was too much anti-French feeling in the USA for the campaign to be effective. Indeed, it was thought that it could well backfire on them. This would have been the third time that the CIVC had shot itself in the foot in a bid to protect its name, having previously banned *méthode champenoise* globally (while Champagne houses produced and sold Champaña in South America), and looked a gift-horse in the mouth when the late Jack Davies of Schramsberg offered to convert from 'Champagne' to 'Champagne-style' in the USA.

THE POMMERY AFFAIR

Champagne Pommery was sold by LVMH to Vranken Monopole (since renamed Vranken Pommery) in June 2002 for a sum believed to be in the order of €150–180 million. The deal included some of the deepest cellars in Champagne, the wacky edifice above, and plenty of stocks, but just 20 out of 307 ha that LVMH acquired when it purchased Pommery in 1990. Some pundits believe that Pommery will now be repositioned at a lower price to facilitate the mass-market sales necessary to pay back Paul Vranken's debt. However, while it is true that he wants Pommery to sell more bottles, he does not want the brand to drop in price.

Although some *Champenois* resent this Belgian upstart owning one of their greatest institutions, the view from outside is quite clear: it is Vranken's

greatest masterstroke. He bought Pommery at the bottom of the market, unlike Marnet Champagne, which notoriously purchased Lanson at the top of the market and has been struggling ever since. Although sales inevitably sunk after the millennium blip, they were about to rise, and Vranken saw this. Thus he knew that Pommery would soon be worth at least \$50 million more than he paid, and indeed it is. Furthermore, Pommery sells at a significant premium compared to other Vranken brands, and this increased the group's profit margin overnight. The only smarter thing that Vranken could do now is to put Pommery's winemaker, Thierry Gasco, in overall charge of all Vranken winemaking operations.

ALL CHANGE

New winemakers over the past 12 months of so include Jean-Philippe Moulin, who took over from François Barot at Ruinart; Eric Lebel, who is now in charge at Krug following Henri Krug's retirement (although Henri will still be involved in the *assemblage*, as his father was following his retirement); Régis Camus, who assumed the mantle at C&P Heidsieck, following the untimely death of maestro blender Daniel Thibault; Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, who followed Michel Pansu at Roederer; Thierry Garnier replaced Norbert Thiébert at Philipponnat; Monique Charpentier, who took over from Alan Parentheon at Mercier; and Georges Blanck succeeded Dominique Fourmon at Môt & Chandon. Patrick Laforest is due to take over from Gérard Liot at Bollinger.

Opinion:

Vintage nonsense

Disgoring to order is as traditional in Champagne today as bottling to order once was in Bordeaux. The *Bordelais* realized that the bottle variation this created was harming them and stopped the practice as long ago as the 1950s, but half a century later the *Champenois* still have no idea of the ramifications of their actions. Many critics are reluctant to describe a specific vintage champagne because when tasted it might be rich and toasty, yet, by the time their words are in print, a new shipment could have arrived and the recommended wine would now be fresh and crisp. Now perhaps readers realize why champagnes are rarely reviewed in *The Wine Advocate*. It is not because Robert Parker does not like champagne. Every year he publishes a list of 60-odd champagnes, all rated, many over 90 points, but with not a single word of description. I do not blame him. If the *Champenois* want the attention of Parker and others, they must ensure the wines these critics taste are the same as those their readers buy, and the only way to achieve that is to disgorge each vintage *cuvée* in one session.

Stagnated appellation

How long will it take the *Champenois* to realize that their single-wine AOC must go? It is ludicrous that this appellation does not distinguish, for example, between a *premier prix* with a fantasy name and Krug Clos du Mesnil. The dangers of clinging on to such an inappropriate appellation should have been blindingly obvious by 1999. That was the year that Bollinger launched its Charter of Ethics and Quality, which, in turn, prompted other producers to adopt myriad back labels guaranteeing quality criteria superior to those of the AOC itself. What better evidence that the criteria laid down by Appellations Champagne Contrôlée are inadequate than their own efforts to say so on the very bottles they sell?

Clamp down on sponge vineyards

There are several variations on the theme, but essentially these are vineyards that have been purchased in lower-classified areas, and ultimately go unpicked while the owners harvest double the official yield in their *grand* and *premier cru* vineyards. This illegal activity should be stopped.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2002

I have seen miracle vintages before, but this takes the biscuit! It was a dry year, but with higher-than-normal rain in August. At first, this benefited the vines, but it poured down so hard in the last week of August that rot set in immediately and the grapes struggled to ripen. With September historically a wet month in Champagne, and the last four Septembers very wet indeed, growers feared the worst, expecting the harvest to be at least as bad as 2001; but the rain suddenly stopped and the vines basked in a dry period, especially in the last two weeks of the month. The grapes gained weight until 5 September, and the rot disappeared one week later. Then something extremely rare for Champagne occurred: the crop started to shrivel and concentrate on the vine, reducing the yield by an amazing 30–40 per cent. The last two weeks of September and the first week of October were unforgettably dry and sunny. This is doubtlessly a vintage year and a very special one too, though it will be a difficult year to rate because of its peculiarities. Tasting the *vins clairs*, it definitely seemed to be a Pinot Noir year, with Aj-Champagne the most successful village. There are some fine Chardonnays, but in general they are less impressively structured and lack acidity. Not that the Pinot Noirs are overblessed with acidity. Low acidity is a feature of this vintage. Not as low as 1999, but the lowest bar that in more than 25 years, and the pH is the third-highest in 16 years (after 1999 and 2000). The *passerillage*, however, has endowed these wines with the highest natural-alcohol level since 1990, and that was the highest since 1959. In structure, these wines fall somewhere between 1976 and 1989, leaning closer to the former in terms of concentration, but nearer to the latter's slightly better acidity. Then there is the *passerillage*. This will be the hallmark of the 2002 vintage, but precisely how it expresses itself is something we will not start to understand for at least another five years.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2001

Vintage rating: 35

Dilute, insipid, and unripe. Anyone who declares this vintage needs their head testing.

2000

Vintage rating: 80

Virtually vintage-quality ripeness, but more of a good non-vintage year, although there are a lot of *Champenois* who believe that 2000 is a magical number, so we can expect more declarations from this year than it really deserves. However, good, even great, champagne can be made in almost any year if the selection is strict enough, and with so many 2000s likely to be marketed, there should be plenty of good bottles to pick from. Some special wines, like Clos des Goisses, will be great.

1999

Vintage rating: 80

Vintage-quality ripeness, but the worst acidity and pH levels Champagne has seen for a couple of decades. Some very good champagnes will no doubt be made through strict selection, but with fewer producers likely to declare, the number will probably be much lower than for 2000.

1998

Vintage rating: 85

The 1998s and 1997s are not dissimilar to the 1993s and 1992s respectively, which means this vintage is in theory not quite as good as 1997; but although the 1993s were not supposed to be as good as the 1992s, they turned out to be better in the end. Indeed, some of the 1998s are already quite impressive, and a number of *Champenois* winemakers rate this vintage above the 1997s, so the underdog could triumph once again.

1997

Vintage rating: 85

In theory, this vintage should have a definite edge over 1998, but it is not yet clear whether that is how it will pan out. However, there should be some very good champagnes produced in both vintages.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 Krug
- 2 Pol Roger
- 3 Billecart-Salmon
- 4 Roederer
- 5 Bollinger
- 6 Deutz
- 7 Jacquesson
- 8 Gosset
- 9 Pierre Gimonet
- 10 Vilmart

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 Mumm
- 2 Bollinger
- 3 Duval-Leroy
- 4 Bruno Paillard
- 5 Pannier
- 6 Mailly Grand Cru
- 7 Philipponnat
- 8 Vve Devaux
- 9 Moët & Chandon
- 10 Vilmart

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Henri Giraud
- 2 Serge Mathieu
- 3 Fluteau
- 4 Bruno Paillard
- 5 Audoin de Dampierre

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 Charles Heidsieck
- 2 Serge Mathieu
- 3 Henri Mandois
- 4 Duval-Leroy
- 5 Alfred Gratien
- 6 Bruno Paillard
- 7 Lanson

- 8 Roederer
- 9 Drappier
- 10 Paul Déthune

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Vieilles Vignes Françaises 1996** Bollinger (€295)
- 2 **Brut 1990** Krug (€150)
- 3 **Dom Pérignon Rosé 1992** Moët & Chandon (€310)
- 4 **Blanc de Blancs 1995** Salon (€160)
- 5 **Cuvée William Rosé 1996** Deutz (€130)
- 6 **Vintage Réserve 1996** Pol Roger (€44)
- 7 **Celebris 1995** Gosset (€68)
- 8 **Clos des Goisses 1991** Philipponnat (€90)
- 9 **Grand Sèndrée 1996** Drappier (€27.50)
- 10 **Mis en Cave NV 1997** Charles Heidsieck (€25)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 **Mis en Cave NV 1997** Charles Heidsieck (€25)
- 2 **Cuvée Victor Mandois 1996** Henri Mandois (€19)
- 3 **Brut Cazanova NV** Charles de Cazanove (€20)
- 4 **Club des Viticulteurs 1996** Goutorbe (€17.99)
- 5 **Princesse des Thunes NV** Paul Déthune (€22)
- 6 **Grand Sèndrée 1996** Drappier (€27.50)
- 7 **La Cuvée Grand Siècle** Laurent Perrier (€70)
- 8 **Blanc de Blancs 1998** Duval-Leroy (€23)
- 9 **Brut 1996** Mailly Grand Cru (€25)
- 10 **Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1995** Taittinger (€85)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 **Krug 1981 Collection** (€320) *One of Krug's greatest-ever vintages rereleased after more than 20 years.*
 - 2 **Grand Cru, Fût de Chêne Brut 1993** Henri Giraud (€165) *Extremely rich, exquisite fruit. Not all overoaked, although the oak is indeed noticeable.*
 - 3 **Dom Pérignon Rosé 1992** Moët & Chandon (€310) *Pure wild strawberries.*
 - 4 **Mis en Cave NV 1997** Charles Heidsieck (€25) *The greatest-quality champagne sold at the best-value price, with an amazing consistency of style, including rich fruit and a touch of vanilla, although it never sees so much as a splinter of wood. All cuvées recommended, but the Mis en Cave 1997 is based on 60 per cent 1996 and will cellar beautifully.*
 - 5 **NV Cuvée aux 6 Cépages** Moutard (€22.50) *Includes three other little-known Champagne varieties: Pinot Blanc and the ancient, obscure Arbane and Petit Meslier.*
 - 6 **Verzy 1995** Nicolas Feuillatte (€30) *The best of Feuillatte's four mono-cru champagnes,*
- the concept of which is the most innovative of any Champenois cooperative to date. The quality of all four wines is also of a considerably higher standard than Nicolas Feuillatte's norm.*
- 7 **Les Sarments d'Aÿ NV** Moët & Chandon (€55) *The best of Moët's recently launched trilogy of single-vineyard champagnes, although the terroir concept is marred by the blending of more than one year.*
 - 8 **Cuvée No 2 Trilogy 1996** Paul Déthune (€50) *The very best of three mystery cuvées sold together (€150). Your mission, should you be prepared to undertake it, is to decide the composition. Answers are provided on a scroll.*
 - 9 **La Terre 1996** Mailly Grand Cru (€53) *All of this cooperative's 1996s are stunning, but this just pips Les Echansons, L'Intemporelle, and the standard brut vintage.*
 - 10 **Blanc de Blancs Biodynamique 1998** Duval-Leroy (€26) *One of two blanc de blancs from this vintage that were vinified separately in barriques, both very good (see Best Bargains), neither the slightest bit oaky, but the biodynamic version is a tad racier.*

Grapevine

- In April 2002, Henkell & Trocken Gratién, thus one of Champagne's most traditional producers (fermentation in wood, hand riddling, corks used instead of crown-caps, and manual disgorgement) is now owned by a Sekt factory!
- Champagne's chefs de cave and oenologues are setting up a library of 30 growths of champagne. The idea is that every year base wines considered to be

representative of these villages will be bottled with just enough sugar and yeast to create a slight *pétillance* and will be laid down for future reference.

- The Piper and Charles Heidsieck brands render about 3 per cent profitability, which is far too low for shareholder satisfaction. Rumours are rife – yet again – that these Champagne houses are up for sale.