



THE VAULT

JULY 2021

FOR LOVERS OF
FINE WINE

XIV



OCTAVIAN



WELCOME TO THE VAULT, AN OCTAVIAN PERIODICAL

Buoyed by the prospect of lockdown easing in the UK as we go to press, we at Octavian are looking to the future with a sense of optimism.

The events of 2020 demonstrated the importance of working together and staying connected. Praise to all within the Octavian team for their willingness to adapt, stoicism and unerring good humour which have enabled us to continue delivering exemplary levels of service to our customers. During this period, we have focused on the well-being of our staff and worked hard to reach out and stay in close contact with those relying on our services. Touch points, with minimal 'human' interaction, have included email updates, and the provision of an outside viewing area so that wines may be safely inspected and taken home by customers to enjoy. Also, the Octavian Portal has gone from strength to strength as has the Octavian Exchange with many external parties in contact with us to gain access. They do so in the knowledge that the quality of stock and the level of provenance information shared is second to none.

It has been heartening for us all to receive such wonderful feedback and kind gestures from our customers. Rest assured, we intend to continue delivering 'the personal touch' and the service commitment that differentiates Octavian from other cellars. We would be interested to hear if any potential new services, such as:

- Video wine inspections – where you can access and interact with your wines remotely without the need to travel to us
- A document repository in which customers will be able to securely file and store purchase invoices for provenance and HMRC evidence
- A wine purchase reconciliation service, to help reduce the administrative burden of ensuring all your wine purchases from different merchants are received. This would include periodical chases on your behalf, ensuring stock is landed into your account and reconciled to your invoices to ensure no items are outstanding. This may be timely for those of you currently buying en primeur

If any of these ideas are of interest to you, or you have any other suggestions, please email your thoughts to care@octavian.co.uk

Wine has helped carry many through difficult times of late – as an indulgence, a newfound hobby, bringing people together for online tastings and e-socialising. In our latest Market Update, Charles Curtis MW reveals how the fine wines market embraced 'virtual' and performed almost 'heroically' well in 2020, with the first quarter of 2021 proving almost equally vibrant.

Elin McCoy's 'Why Old Vines Matter' invites us to fall 'under the spell of old vineyards' as she explores the growing movement to save the thick, gnarled, intricately twisted vines behind some of the most interesting and collectible bottles she has been lucky enough to drink.

Good things are often worth the wait, including mature Champagne. We are pleased to give you a flavour in an extract from Charles Curtis' book, 'Vintage Champagne: 1899 to 2019'.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Vincent O'Brien
Octavian Managing Director

THE RARE WINE MARKET OUTLOOK 2021



IN HIS APPRAISAL OF 2020 AND THE FIRST QUARTER OF THIS YEAR, CHARLES CURTIS MW REVEALS HOW, DESPITE UNPRECEDENTED CIRCUMSTANCES, THE 'DRIVE TO DIGITAL' AND 'A STRONG CAMPAIGN FOR FUTURES OF THE 2019 BORDEAUX VINTAGE' HAVE FUELLED THE FINE WINES MARKET.

As the Covid-19 pandemic prepares to slowly loosen its grip on our consciousness, wine lovers are looking up to find that the market for fine wine is arguably as strong as it ever has been. Hugo Rose MW, Executive Director of Cellar & Co. was optimistic about the U.K. market despite a slowdown in the first half of 2020: "While not evaporating completely, fears of serious market dislocation due to the new UK/EU border arrangements in operation from 1st January proved largely unfounded. Wine is moving across the border in both directions. Some of the ramifications of the UK's exit from the Single Market have yet to play out however, such as the prospect of importer labelling for the UK. Negotiations over implementation are ongoing." Rose goes on to comment that "The first months of 2021 witnessed a return to form for the elite members of the fine wine market, wines of scarcity and renown proving easy to sell but hard to acquire."

Tim Triptree MW, International Director of Christie's wine department based in London, notes that their 2020 season ended well: "At Christie's London last sale of 2020, on 10 and 11 December, Finest and Rarest Wines and Spirits, featuring Three Superb Private Collections which totalled £2,666,353, the top lots of the auction were a case of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Romanée-Conti GC 1988, which achieved £226,625 and 6 magnums of Château Latour 1961, which achieved over twice its high estimate, selling for £102,900." In truth, the past twelve months have been a busy time for wine and spirits sales in the UK as U.S.-based wine auction specialists Zachys and Acker both opened offices in London, and Sotheby's sales also produced satisfying results, including the Macallan Red Collection which consisted of 6 bottles of Macallan with labels by artist Javi Aznarez that sold for £756,400 in an auction to benefit City Harvest London.

· FEVERISH ONLINE ACTIVITY ·

Indeed, the underlying structure and dynamics of the market globally are encouraging for collectors of fine wine, since the primary (retail) market for wine has been buoyed by a cloistered public who feverishly bought wine online. Savvy retailers used electronic platforms such as Zoom to drive sales, and the rise of influencer marketing has also

taken on greater importance as consumers turned to their mobile phones for entertainment and information. This burgeoning digital marketplace is evident in the success of online retailer Wine.com, which reported revenue of US\$ 329 million, up 199% over 2019. Another winner was the alcohol delivery service Drizly, which was acquired by Uber for US\$ 1.1 billion earlier this year.

The drive to digital has been seen across the board. Auctions are still live events, but they happen online, and the only spectators are virtual ones. Wine specialist retailer/auction house Zachy's refers to the new format as a 'studio sale'. The combination of the pandemic and the progress in digital technology means that collectors are increasingly bidding online. 'Traditional' online sales have been timed affairs where collectors have one or two weeks to bid on a selection of lots that close at a pre-determined time. The newer-style online auctions are conducted in real time by an auctioneer. It seems that both styles of online sales will continue, and both have been adopted by wine specialist retailers and by traditional auction houses alike across markets from the UK to Hong Kong and New York. Many auction houses now roll all of the figures into one number. Online wine specialist WineBid.com has recently begun to report its sales, which totalled \$33.8 million in 2020, while the French online specialist Idealwine reported global sales of EUR 23.4m last year, up 9.5% over 2019, selling a bottle of 2001 Leroy Musigny for EUR 17,499.

SAVVY BUYERS WERE ABLE TO SECURE DEALS ON A PAR WITH THOSE FOUND DURING THE 2009 FINANCIAL MELTDOWN (BUT THE WINES ARE BETTER)

In addition to strong online sales, the primary market for fine wine was also sustained by a strong campaign for futures of the 2019 Bordeaux vintage. Quality of



the wines was very good, the quantity was generous, but most importantly in these times, châteaux slashed prices as the pandemic disrupted the normal course of sales and producers panicked. Savvy buyers were able to secure deals on a par with those found during the 2009 financial meltdown (but the wines are better). Burgundy sales also continued apace as focus continued unabated in this category. Italian wine also continued to grow in popularity, driven by the release of the 2016 vintage which was superlative both in Tuscany and in Piemonte.

Supplementing the vibrant primary market, the wine auction market globally has shown unprecedented strength despite the pandemic. Overall sales at auction were well over \$400 million in 2020, and the market evolved rapidly to meet the demands of the pandemic. These sales have continued and even accelerated in the first quarter of 2021. Market leading wine specialist auctioneer and retailer Acker reports prices have increased by 9.8% in the first quarter. Interestingly, they report that Bordeaux prices are up more than 28% on last year. This may signal the end to the buying opportunity that has existed for the last several years. Initial reports from this house are that sales of Italian wine and Champagne are also outperforming their 2020 results.

· THE STAR LOT OF THE FIRST QUARTER ·

Undoubtedly, the star lot of the first quarter of the year was a dozen bottles of La Romanée direct from the cellars of Bouchard Père et Fils that sold for the equivalent of \$2.13 million – more than \$175,000 per bottle. The lot was sold by Baghera/wines auctions in Geneva, and the entire sale generated \$10.45 million.

Other auctioneers have also been busy thus far this year. Chicago-based Hart Davis Hart (HDH) reported \$10.3 million in sales for their February sale against a pre-sale estimate of \$5.8 – 8.7 million. The top lot here was also Burgundy, twelve bottles of Echézeaux, produced by Henri Jayer for his brother Georges, which sold for \$71,700 inclusive of premium against an estimate of \$40,000 – 60,000. Nine of the top ten lots in the sale were Burgundy. Burgundy was also the central attraction in Zachys La Paulée sale in March, which produced \$8.99 million in sales. The top lot was a tie: ten bottles of 1990 Dujac Clos–St.–Denis tied a methuselah (six–litre bottle) of Domaine de la Romanée–Conti La Tâche; both sold for just over \$80,000. In total, seven of the top ten lots in the sale were from Burgundy. Christie's has also shown well in the first quarter. Although the venerable auction house has not emphasised wine in recent years, their \$3.59 million sale

THE MARKET FOR FINE AND RARE WINE:
LEADING INDICATORS, Q1 2020

LEADING INDICATORS: AVERAGE SALE PRICES WITH
PREMIUM FOR ICONIC WINES / 2021 Q1 UPDATE

VINTAGE	WINE	PRODUCER	2021 YTD	2020 FY	% Δ
1996	Brut Vintage Clos du Mesnil	Champagne Krug	\$2,087.00	\$1,996.00	4.6%
1990	1er GC Saint–Emilion	Cheval Blanc	\$1,243.00	\$1,050.00	18.4%
1989	Pessac–Leognan	Haut Brion	\$2,084.00	\$1,909.00	9.2%
1982	Pauillac	Lafite	\$2,697.00	\$2,425.00	11.2%
1986	Pauillac	Mouton	\$985.00	\$847.00	16.3%
2000	Pomerol	Petrus	\$4,757.00	\$4,285.00	11.0%
1990	Romanee Conti	DRC	\$26,988.00	\$23,349.00	15.6%
1999	La Tache	DRC	\$7,593.00	\$6,280.00	20.9%
1993	Musigny	Domaine Leroy	\$21,553.00	\$17,123.00	25.9%
2010	La Romanee	Liger Belair	\$6,622.00	\$6,629.00	–0.1%
1990	Chambertin	Rousseau	\$4,978.00	\$4,971.00	0.1%
1996	Corton Charlemagne	Coche Dury	\$6,058.00	\$5,437.00	11.4%
2005	Montrachet	DRC	\$8,566.00	\$7,229.00	18.5%
1999	Cote Rotie La Mouline	Guigal	\$644.00	\$605.00	6.4%
1978	Hermitage La Chapelle	Jaboulet	\$1,673.00	\$1,327.00	26.1%
1990	Chateauneuf–du–Pape	Rayas	\$2,892.00	\$2,034.00	42.2%
2007	IGT Toscana Masseto	Ornellaia	\$679.00	\$688.00	–1.3%
1997	Napa Cabernet Blend	Screaming Eagle	\$5,065.00	\$4,346.00	16.5%
2001	South Australia Shiraz Blend Grange	Penfold's	\$429.00	\$367.00	16.9%
1963	Vintage Port Nacional	Quinta do Noval	No Trades this period	\$2,896.00	

COINCIDENT INDICATORS: AVERAGE SALE
PRICES WITH PREMIUM / 2021 Q1 UPDATE

VINTAGE	WINE	PRODUCER	2021 YTD	2020 FY	% Δ
1996	Brut Vintage	Champagne Krug	\$556.00	\$477.00	16.6%
1990	Brut Vintage	Dom Perignon	\$377.00	\$338.00	11.5%
1989	Pauillac	Lynch Bages	\$370.00	\$338.00	9.5%
1996	Saint Julien	Leoville Las Cases	\$344.00	\$285.00	20.7%
2005	Gevrey Chambertin Clos Saint–Jacques VV	Fourrier	\$803.00	\$621.00	29.3%
2009	Vosne Romanee Aux Malconsorts	Sylvain Cathiard	\$945.00	\$750.00	26.0%
1998	Chateauneuf–du–Pape Reserve des Celestins	Henri Bonneau	No Trades this period	\$637.00	
1990	Barolo Monfortino	Giacomo Conterno	\$1,893.00	\$1,906.00	–0.7%
1994	Napa Valley Cabernet Blend	Dominus	\$386.00	\$342.00	12.9%
1977	Vintage Port	Taylor Fladgate	\$142.00	\$143.00	–0.7%



in Hong Kong in March performed well. A fifteen–bottle assortment case of 2015 Domaine de la Romanée–Conti sold for more than \$77,500. Christie's sales in London are scheduled to resume over the summer.

Coming off an almost shockingly strong performance in 2020, the prospects for 2021 continue to be sunny. It appears that Burgundy prices will not slacken and that prices in other categories will continue their inexorable

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THEIR INEXORABLE RISE

rise. At this point, however, competition is fierce. Auction houses have altered the structure of their commissions over recent years: vendors seldom pay a fee to sell their wines and are often given a 'rebate' from the buyer's premium. This can be anywhere from 2% to 10% depending on the desirability of the property and the size of the collection. These 'enhanced hammers' have been steadily increasing in order to maintain the flow of wine into the market. For the time being, the strategy is continuing, and buyer's premiums continue to inch forward to compensate. Zachys recently announced an increase in their buyer's premium to 24.5% to meet the other major players. Now only HDH (at 19.5%) is below the 20% threshold for their buyer's premium. These changes serve to emphasise the fact that in the wine category the devil is in the details and the careful buyers who pay attention to the minutiae of storage, shipping, taxes and premiums will see superior appreciation of the value of their collection.



WHY OLD VINES MATTER

WHY ARE OLD VINES ENDANGERED? DO THEY REALLY MAKE BETTER AND MORE LONG-LIVED WINES? OR IS THEIR APPEAL MOSTLY ROMANTIC, EMOTIONAL, NOSTALGIC? ELIN McCOY EXPLORES THE FASCINATING PHENOMENON OF ARDENT OLD-VINE LOVE.



Like so many wine lovers, I'm fascinated by ancient vineyards of thick, gnarled, intricately twisted vines, the ones that look like stumpy bonsai trees or old work-worn hands reaching out of the earth. Nearly indestructible, these heirlooms carry a sense of mystery, of more traditional ways of thinking about grapegrowing and winemaking. At Old Hill Ranch, one of the most historic vineyards in Sonoma, I've wandered blocks planted in 1885 that contain a mad mix of more than 30 grape varieties, some of which are still unidentified.

Old vines have been the source of some of the most interesting and collectible bottles I – and maybe you – have been lucky enough to drink. Henschke's Hill of Grace, whose namesake Shiraz is one of Australia's most coveted and long-lived wines, is surely the country's most famous vineyard. First planted in 1860, the oldest vines are nicknamed 'The Grandfathers.' Stephen Henschke once told me that when he stands in their midst, he feels the powerful presence of history.

After Danish winemaker Peter Sisseck fell under the spell of old neglected vineyards of Spain's Ribera del Duero region in the 1990s, he used grapes from two plots planted in 1929 to create Spain's first cult wine, Pingus, which retails for \$1,000 a bottle. He's convinced that the age of those vines contributes to the wine's complexity.

But there's much more to today's old vine story. Why

are they endangered, under threat of extinction? Who's trying to save them – and why? Do they really make better, more long-lived wines or is their appeal mostly romantic, emotional, nostalgic?

Wine has a long, 8,000 year or so history, but this ardent old-vine love on the part of winemakers is a fairly recent phenomenon that's surfaced in the past twenty to thirty years. The latest effort to put the spotlight on their virtues is a new non-profit called The Old Vine Conference, which held its first event in March via Zoom. Organized by U.K. Master of Wine Sarah Abbott, it drew some 500 enthusiasts, professionals and consumers, from more than 20 countries. Its aim is to galvanize a global movement and create a new category of wines. (For future editions, go to oldvines.org.)

· HOW OLD IS "OLD"? ·

Sisseck, Henschke, and a number of others have been valiant early protectors of old vines, but the real push has come in the 21st century. Dedicated champions in places like South Africa, Australia's Barossa Valley, and California, as well as website Jancisrobinson.com, have begun cataloguing historic vineyards that remain and trying to define how old is "old."

Surprisingly, there's no legal or international age definition of the term 'old vines' (or 'vieilles vignes,' 'vinha velha,' 'alte reben,' and so on), even though the

phrase is regularly slapped on labels. The first category in the Barossa Valley Old Vine Charter classification, established in 2009, starts at 35 years, while the alluring term "ancestor vines" is reserved for those age 125 and above. The Consejo in Spain's Priorat region certifies vine plots at least 75 years old, while they can only make California's Historic Vineyard Society list if they've been around for 50 years or more.

VINE AGE IS A LITTLE LIKE HUMAN
AGE – AT 35 WE START SETTling
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Naturally, it's not always easy to prove exactly how old a vineyard is. There's general agreement, though, that from about the age of 35, vines become more balanced and adapted to their surroundings, and come into their own. More than one winemaker has reminded me that vine age is a little like human age – at 35 we start settling down, a little wiser, a little more reflective, toning down our party animal mode and trading late-night clubbing for dinner at home.



In all locations, old vines have things in common. First, they're dry-farmed, meaning unirrigated, and were planted and tended using older ideas of viticulture. "One benefit to dry farming," says Abe Schoener of the Scholium Project, "is that grapes ripen fully earlier, so they have less sugar and therefore lower alcohol."

Dry farming sends roots deep into the ground, as far as 40 to 60 feet, where they can tap into water reserves younger vines can't reach. That allows them to be more resilient and withstand droughts, heat waves, and other extreme weather events that are fast becoming the norm of climate change. Their wide network of roots connects to more complex microbial activity and absorbs more mineral salts, which may give wines themselves more complexity.

While some winemakers make much of old vines' lower yields, Schoener and others say it's a matter of pruning. For his Los Angeles River Wine Company, he tracked down abandoned 100-year-old vineyards on a Native American reservation; pruning the second year resulted in four times more grapes. Most old vineyards are also keepers of natural genetic diversity, with interplanted mixtures of all sorts of grape varieties. And vines mutate over time, adapting to the stresses of where they grow. Some rare forgotten examples may better adapt to climate change than today's tight mix of popular grapes such as Merlot and Chardonnay. The Torres family has been recovering ancestral varieties for the past 30 years, and several have been found significantly resistant to heat and drought.

· QUALITY AND LONGEVITY ·

Even in places like Burgundy an old vineyard might contain 40-odd strains of Pinot Noir. And all of this contributes to wider shades of flavor and depth. The bigger question for most wine lovers is what old vines contribute to quality and longevity in wines. The science isn't yet clear, and vine age isn't a guarantee of quality, but many winemakers I've talked to insist that they usually produce better wine, a view I share. They trot out anecdotes and refer to their own tastebuds. All things being equal, younger vines make more fruit-forward, exuberant wines, while older vines give a more subtle, complex character.

A recent study by Dylan Grigg, Post-Doctoral Researcher at the University of Adelaide found that older vines produced wines with more flavors and aromas, with a fresh red fruit and floral character, while those from younger vines had a darker fruit profile and more alcohol.

OLD VINE WINES DELIVER THE
WARM, RICH TONE OF A VIOLIN
VERSUS THE BRIGHTER TIMBRE
OF NEW WOOD.

Dawnine and Bill Dyer, of Napa's Dyer Vineyards, say old vine wines deliver "the warm, rich tone of a violin versus the brighter timbre of new wood."

Bordeaux first growths, for example, don't put fruit from young vines into the grand vin, believing that the grapes won't have the concentration or ageability to add something important to the top blend.

The two oldest blocks of vines at Chateau Mouton Rothschild are Cabernet Sauvignon that was planted in 1900. They lie right in the center of the Plateau du Mouton, the best part of the vineyard and have even been named: Baronne Pauline and Baronne Philippine. Estates manager Jean-Emmanuel Danjoy says those grapes go into the grand vin every single year. "The quality of their crops is both exceptional and consistent," he says.

Philippe Bascaules, tech director at Chateau Margaux, who also made the wine at Napa's Inglenook, explains, "In the wines, you see more complexity in the nose and in the quality of the tannins, which have more finesse." Bascaules is convinced that old vines also make a difference to the aging potential of the wine. "Longevity



depends on balance," he says, "the richness of all the flavors is important. You see the importance of very old vines after the wines have aged 10 to 20 years, when the bright fruitiness of young wines diminishes and layered complexity comes forward."

Given the way so many winemakers get misty-eyed and passionate when they talk about old vines (I do, too), you might be wondering why growers rip them out or just abandon them. Welcome to economics 101 and the law of maximizing yields and profits. Maintaining head-trained old bush vines is viewed as a costly hassle. They need nurturing with hands-on labor and workers with special skills. You can't mechanize an old vineyard. And many growers complain that yields are much lower than they are from young vines. (Which turns out not to be true if you prune properly.)

Yet wineries can't charge a premium just because they put 'old vines' on the label. Perhaps that's because consumers don't understand why they should pay more. Large wineries often just throw the grapes into blends and want to replant in ways that make it easy to machine harvest.

Politics and wine fashions play roles, too. In the 1980s, the government of the state of South Australia offered financial inducements to growers in the Barossa Valley to modernize their vineyards by pulling out old vines.

In Sonoma, winemaker Morgan Twain-Peterson MW of Bedrock Vineyard once told me the county's old vines were "victims of pinot noir madness." As consumers embraced Pinot Noir after popular movie *Sideways* debuted in 2004, grape prices shot up. When vineyard investment fund Silverado Partners bought Sonoma's Barbieri vineyard, they pulled out its magnificent hundred year old vines to plant more fashionable – and lucrative – pinot noir. That spurred Twain-Peterson, and several other producers to found the Historic Vineyard Society to preserve the state's viticultural history.

So no surprise that the best way to save them is to raise the value of their grapes the way Peter Sisseck did via his somewhat utopian Psi project. Since 1990, the amount of old vines in Ribera del Duero has dropped from 6,000 to 2,000 hectares, as growers opted to plant, in his words, "non-descript bullshit clonal Tempranillo with irrigation." He works with growers to improve their farming and pays them top price if they promise not to grub up the vines. The grapes go into a wine labeled Psi, intended to capture the "soul of the Ribera del Duero."

The heroine in South Africa is viticulturalist Rosa

Kruger, who began hunting down forgotten vineyards in 2002, eventually drawing up a map of where they are. Most grapes were going to winery cooperatives that paid the minimum. Her idea was to match growers who owned them with wine producers like Eben Sadie who wanted their grapes and would pay four, five, or six times more.

Patches of old vines exist in just about every wine region, from Australia to the Portugal's Douro. California's Lodi appellation is known for its fantastic old vine Zinfandels. In Chile, a group of wineries rediscovered neglected old Carignan vines in Maule, realized they were a precious resource, and founded The Vigno Project.

· THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABILITY ·

But making better wine isn't the only reason they're worth saving. They're part of the quest for sustainability, the latest wine buzzword. Our ideas of what the term means have broadened to include social sustainability, and valuing old vines extends to dignifying the traditional knowledge and skills of those who have tended them for generations, and recovering a lost wine heritage. "I choose to work with them for sentimental and aesthetic reasons, because it's personally rewarding to preserve them," Schoener told me.

I LIKE TO THINK THEY SING AN
ANCIENT SONG OF SURVIVAL, ONE THAT
CALLS FORTH THE PAST AND INSISTS WE
CARE ABOUT THE FUTURE

I'm always aware of how often wine lovers – and writers like me – respond to the siren call of what's the latest, whether a new grape, wine, vineyard, or producer. But I have to admit I'm partial to the old. These vines have lasted through wars, weather, disease, drought, abandonment, real estate sprawl, and now face climate change. They link us to the history, traditions, and patrimony of winemaking in places across the globe. They can teach us about how to farm in ways that ensure new plantings will carry on after we are gone. So when I sip wines like Quinta do Crasto Vinha Maria Teresa from the Douro valley or Gini Soave Salvarenza from Italy or Bedrock Wine Company's Old Vine Zinfandel from Sonoma, all from vines more than 100 years old, I like to think they sing an ancient song of survival, one that calls forth the past and insists we care about the future.

They repay collecting, not just because of their high quality and ability to age, but also because they're wines with soul and authenticity and stories. And each bottle you treasure will be your own investment in keeping old vines alive.



AN INTRODUCTION TO VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE

AS AN INSTRUCTOR ON THE MASTER-LEVEL CHAMPAGNE COURSE FOR THE WINE SCHOLAR'S GUILD, CHARLES CURTIS MW REALISED THAT WHILE THERE WERE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BOOKS ON VINTAGE CONDITIONS IN BURGUNDY AND BORDEAUX, THERE WAS NO COMPARABLE BOOK FOR CHAMPAGNE. THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT IS FROM 'VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: 1899 TO 2019', PROVIDING INSIGHT ON THIS MOST LUXURIOUS CATEGORY BASED ON DECADES OF TASTING AND VISITS.

To define "vintage Champagne" as Champagne produced only from grapes grown in one specific vintage year and aged three years from bottling is correct as far as it goes. As a definition, however, it is certainly incomplete. Unlike most other types of wine, vintage-dated Champagne is the exception rather than the rule. At first blush, this may strike the neophyte as odd, since nearly all of the world's great wines bear a vintage date. The only category with a similar indifference to vintage dating is sherry. As with sherry, the blending process is central to the production technique for Champagne, and there are other categories such as Port and Madeira, where blending across vintages is an accepted practice.

The 2019 newsletter of the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) concerning 2018 Champagne shipments informs us that the categories of "Vintage" and "Prestige Cuvée" together comprise 6.1% of shipments by volume and 17.7% by value. These figures translate to the equivalent of 18.4 million bottles worth € 513.3 million at the cellar door – a significant category by any measure. And while these wines account for 4.2% by volume and 12.8% by value of shipments to other EU member countries, in non-Eurozone markets, they are even more critical. The United States is the most valuable export market for Champagne, and here vintage wines account for 8.4% by volume and 20.5% by value.

· EXHILERATING MOMENTS ·

In some ways, vintage Champagne runs counter to the essence of Champagne. The art of blending is at the heart of Champagne, which is most often a blend of grapes, a blend of wines from different years, and a blend of fruit from different sub-regions within Champagne. It can be a blend of different winemaking techniques and a blend of wines of different colors. In one sense, however, vintage Champagne is in fact the soul of Champagne since it tries to capture the region's superlatives. Vintage Champagne will always be a snapshot, showing one particular moment in time and one specific winemaker, but these moments can be exhilarating.

THE PROCESS OF MAKING THE WINE SPARKLING (WHICH THE FRENCH CALL THE "PRISE DE MOUSSE") IS ESSENTIALLY A PROCESS OF ENRICHMENT

The reason for this practice in Champagne is unique and stems from the terroir itself. It is a region of such a northerly location that grapes ripen with difficulty. It is only because of the chalky, water-bearing soils, and the region's well-aligned hillside slopes that grapes can ripen at all. Grapes here seldom reach the minimum alcoholic strength of most other appellations and often retain notably high acidity. Because of the soil and the slopes, however, the resulting wines' fruit character is usually well-developed, even if the potential alcohol remains low and the acidity remains high. The Traditional Method of producing Champagne is a response developed over centuries by the Champagne winemakers to the raw materials that nature provides. Even the method of putting in the bubbles was a response to these characteristics of the terroir. The process of making the wine sparkling (which the French call the "prise de mousse") is essentially a process of enrichment. It is carried out today by adding sugar and yeast (known as liqueur de tirage, or bottling liqueur) to finished wine before bottling. The yeast begins a second fermentation in the bottle, increasing the alcoholic strength of the wine while it adds depth of flavor as well as the characteristic bubbles.

THIS WINE IS THEIR TREASURE, THEIR ESSENCE, USED TO ENRICH AND PERFUME THE WINES OF THE MISERABLE YEARS

· THE MASTERY OF BUBBLES ·

There are other elements of the Traditional Method that are tied to the innate character of the base wines produced in the region. These base wines, quite thin and sharp before the secondary fermentation in the bottle, are often given a bit of sweetening before shipping to balance out the acidity. The agent of this sweetening, either in the form of concentrated, unfermented grape juice or cane sugar, is known as the shipping liqueur (liqueur d'expédition in French) or dosage, another long-standing adaptation of the Traditional Method to the raw materials available in Champagne. Sweetening Champagne with Vintage Champagne sugar began in the 17th Century, but the mastery of the bubbles came later. The particular sparkling character of Champagne, however, can only be preserved by the use of bottles (as distinct from bulk storage in cask), and the widespread use of glass bottles for long term storage also dates to the 17th Century. The use of bottles leads to a final element of the method that arose from the same needs: the tradition of blending across vintages to minimize the difficulties posed by a poor vintage. Wines produced in great years would be uncorked and added to the wines produced in lesser years to improve the blend. Dr. Jules Guyot explains this process in his seminal work "Culture de la Vigne et Vinification":

"Not only does one add shipping liqueur to the wine, but when the bottling has been done in poor or mediocre years, one also adds a proportion of wine from a great year which has been set aside for this purpose. This is called recoupage. One blends, for example, the mediocre wine from 1874 with 10% or 15% or 20% of wine from the great vintage of 1846. Through this blending, the wines of Champagne may present each year and everywhere in the world characteristics that differ very little and are generally very acceptable. Also, the great and rich [négociant] houses buy at any price the most significant quantity of wine from the great years. This wine is their treasure, their essence, used to enrich and perfume the wines of the miserable years. A house deprived of old wines of the first quality during a series of mediocre years is a house undone, lost to the market."



This blending was called “recoulage” because the reserve wines that Dr. Guyot mentions were stored in bottles (or magnums) and literally “repoured” into the blend. Guyot also mentions the reason for this: to maintain the consistency of the blends. As the method became codified, this type of blending became the accepted practice, and in time, no other way was known. François Bonal explains in his excellent book “Le Livre d’Or de Champagne”:

“If one blends only wines from a single year, one has what one would call today a vintage. In the 19th Century, this word did not exist, and the notion was somewhat hazy. At the beginning of the 1830s producers began to date some labels, but rarely, and only to signal a year that was truly exceptional, notably for the British and American markets. Simultaneously, however, wine merchants and connoisseurs, particularly in England, often refer to the years of production, even when they are not indicated. It was only from 1865 that Champagne that in principle did not contain any reserve wine began to be marketed, every two or three years in France and more frequently in England. Nevertheless, the vintage only occasionally featured on the label, at least until the 1870s.”

George Saintsbury makes a further reference to the 1865 vintage in his “Notes on a Cellar Book”, published in 1920: “And, taking well-known brands all round, I do not know that I was more faithful to any than to Krug. I began my fancy for it with a ‘65, which memory represents as being, though dry, that “winy wine,” which Champagne ought to be, but too seldom is. And when, just fifty years after that vintage, I drank farewell to my cellar before giving up housekeeping, it was in a bottle of Krug’s Private Cuvée, 1906.”

· VINOSITY – A ‘WINY WINE’ ·

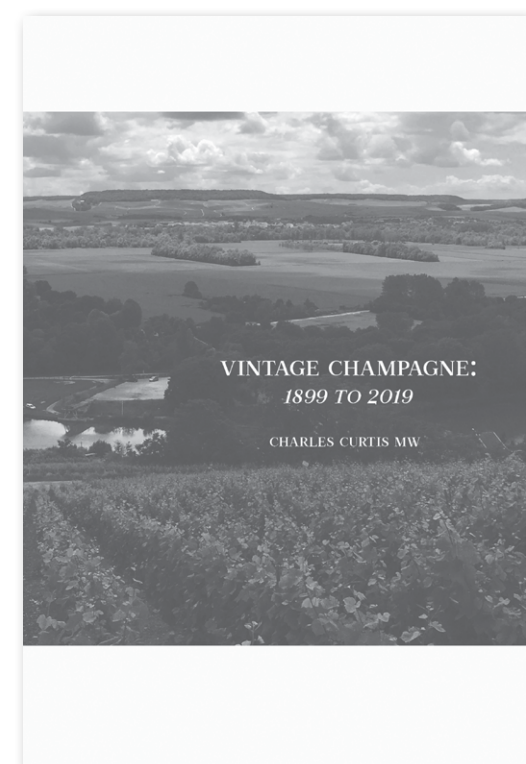
In addition to documenting the 1865 vintage, Saintsbury’s comment is interesting because it speaks to another characteristic of vintage Champagne – its vinosity. When

Saintsbury praises it as a “winy wine,” he is referring to precisely that quality that sets vintage Champagne off from non-vintage blends. The non-vintage blends are crafted on purpose to reduce the differences between vintages. Just the opposite is the case with vintage wines, where the differences between vintages are their very *raison d’être*. Most often, a vintage wine is made when wines have greater ripeness than usual. Usually, the base wines also have firm acidity and abundant dry extract. It is this combination that endows a wine with vinosity. This character makes vintage Champagne a “winemaker’s wine” in the words of Frédéric Panaïotis, Chef de Caves at Champagne Ruinart.

André Simon has given us invaluable information regarding the origin of vintage Champagne in his 1905 work “History of the Champagne Trade in England.” He explains: “Shippers used to sell their wine in very small lots to suit the requirements of their customers, whether they had only a blend of several years to show or an exceptional vintage wine such as the 1834, 1842, 1846 and 1857. In this last case, there was nothing to indicate the vintage, either on cork or label and wine merchants bought it in very small parcels, and during as long a period as the size of the cuvée, and the amount of the demand allowed.”

He goes on to note: “The vintage which was sold at the highest figures ever paid for Champagne in London was that of 1874, probably the first strictly speaking vintage and Brut or Nature Champagne shown in England,” and that “Messrs. Perrier Jouët were one of the first to indicate the year of the vintage on their labels, and Messrs. George Goulet did so when they showed their 1870 vintage. The branding of the corks with the year of the vintage was only adopted universally later on, the last shipper but one to do so being Messrs. Heidsieck, who never branded any of their wines before the 1889s; the last were Messrs. Pommery, whose 1892 was the first cuvée bearing the date of the vintage on the corks and labels.”

Bonal, citing Henry Vizetelly, who wrote several works on Champagne in the late 19th Century, documents which vintages were sought after during the 19th century “Here are the very good years of the 19th Century, according to Vizetelly’s research and observations, and according to other, later witnesses: 1802, 1806, 1811, 1815, 1818, 1819, 1822, 1825, 1834, 1840, 1842, 1846, 1848, 1857, 1865, 1868, 1874, 1880, 1884, 1889, 1892, 1893, 1898 and 1899. One must add that 1875, which gave the largest harvest of the Century, has sometimes been praised for its quality...” In contrast, André Simon sees the matter somewhat differently and discerns top honors on these 19th Century vintages: 1802, 1804, 1811, 1818 and 1819, 1822, 1825, 1832, 1834, 1842, 1846, 1857, 1862, 1865, 1868, 1870, 1874, 1880, 1889, 1892, 1893 and 1899.



If your appetite has been whet, a copy of ‘[Vintage Champagne: 1899 to 2019](#)’ may be purchased on Amazon.



OCTAVIAN

Published by Octavian
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