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Champagne as a sector of the overall wine market is exceptional. Apart from possibly port, it is the most brand oriented wine sector and enjoys healthy profit margins, so is very lucrative.

That gives producers the foundation to be expansive in their thinking and actions.

So extending *Drinks International's* The World's Most Admired Brands survey to champagne was natural. Now in its second year, we decided to utilise the expertise of champagne writer Giles Fallowfield, former Prix de Lanson Champagne Writer of the Year and author of *Le Snob Guide to Champagne*, to write the content for the top 30.

Drinks packaging experts from Seymourpowell give us their spin on the innovation in champagne packaging. Added to that, *DI's* travel retail correspondent, Joe Bates, tells us how champagne brands fare in the cut-throat world of airport and cruise line retailing.

Some of the rankings will surprise you. But this survey is about the perceptions of people who work every day, buying, selling, listing or specifying wine. They may not equate to sales and volume statistics but they act as a weather vane of current trade opinion.

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HOW WE DID IT





Holly Motion explains the process behind finding the top champagnes

The World's Most Admired Champagne Brands has undergone quite the transformation in its second year. The Academy might be largely unchanged – increasing from 200 to 202 – but the same cannot be said of its voting. The top 30 includes seven newcomers and four non-movers. Of the brands that were fortunate enough to retain a place in this year's list, 13 fell down the ranks as six climbed, Piper Heidsieck and Tarlant leaping a mammoth 11 places.

The majority of our Academy members let their votes speak for themselves, but champagne expert Giles Fallowfield is on hand to offer historical and current insight into the brands and their movements in the rankings.

So, to the winner. Bollinger is sitting pretty in first place for the second year running – quite the achievement made all the more impressive

by the changing face of the top 10. Fallowfield will explore the whys and wherefores but the champagne house is clearly doing something right to garner such admiration from the industry elite for a consecutive year. Krug is one of only three brands to retain a foothold in the top five as it falls two places and last year's seventh, Dom Pérignon, ousts it from second place.

Ruinart jumps eight places to finish in third as Louis Roederer rounds off the top five after falling three places. Piper Heidsieck and Pommery grace the top 10 for the first time, in sixth and ninth place respectively. They might finish in a different order to last year but the top third of the chart is familiar territory for Billecart-Salmon, Moët & Chandon and Taittinger as they

finish seventh, eighth and 10th in 2015.

The rest of the top thirty will be explored in the following pages so let's turn an eye to how such a list was formed.

Armed with three votes, MWs, sommeliers, journalists, buyers and educators were once again asked to nominate their most admired brands in order of preference from a supplied list of past winners and other well-known brands. Members were also able to put forward their own for inclusion if their most admired was not listed. The Academy was asked to base votes on the following criteria:

- the wine should be of consistent or improving quality
- it should respond to the needs

and tastes of its target audience

- it should be well marketed and packaged

- it should have strong appeal to a wide demographic

In the case of a tie, a small jury of key

voters was assembled to decide final positions, but it should be known this did not affect any of the top 10 brands.

In addition to the top 30, this magazine provides insight into the sparklers' performance in global travel retail and its popularity in some of the best bars in the world – the test of any brand's worth. We also take a look at the importance of champagne packaging.

It may only be the second Most Admired Champagne Brands supplement but it is a changing beast. Debutants in this year's list and the movement of past winners are indicators of the ever-changing shift in a brand's popularity in the eyes of the Academy and a possible hint at a category that is experiencing changes of its own. ■



BOLLINGER IS SITTING PRETTY IN FIRST PLACE FOR THE SECOND YEAR RUNNING



1 BOLLINGER

The quality of the wines from this family-owned and resolutely independent traditional house is underpinned by the 164ha of prime vineyard it owns – 85% of which is premier and grand cru classified. In an era when sourcing quality grapes is so important, to own nearly two-thirds of the supplies you need for your production, compared to the average for all négociant houses of just 10%, is a substantial advantage. Jérôme Philipon, president of Bollinger since September 2007, is on record as saying he thinks vineyard ownership will become increasingly vital for the major houses because of the importance of continuity of supply, traceability and transparency.

The reputation of Bollinger wines is, as this survey underscores, second to none. Another crucial contributor to the continuing long-term success of the brand was the decision by Christian Bizot, then head of the house (1978-1993), to set out Bollinger's *Charter of Ethics and Quality*, published in 1992. This was at a crucial time for the champenois, who had been widely criticised for allowing 'green' wines to be released during the boom growth period at the end of the '80s.

Its publication just pre-dated the attempts of another champagne heavyweight – Jean-Claude Rouzaud – to introduce 'quality' reforms to the now defunct Syndicat des Grandes Marques in the '90s in an effort to improve champagne's generic image. Not enough of the 24 houses involved in the SDGM could or would comply with the more stringent rules governing quality, though these were still some way short of those defined in Bollinger's charter.

The main points of the Bollinger charter are: only to use the cuvée or



first pressing in its wines; to ferment its vintage and reserve wines in casks (more a stylistic decision than a qualitative one); to age its wines on lees for a minimum of three years for Special Cuvée, five years for grand année and eight years for RD; and to rest its wines for a minimum of three months in the cellars post disgorgement before they are shipped.

The charter also specifies a minimum 95% of the blend for vintage wines must come from premier and grand cru vineyards and for Special Cuvée the proportion of these in the blend should be no less than 80%.

The significance of some of these points may be lost on many of Bollinger's loyal consumers, but the idea that here is a producer promising to follow significantly more stringent quality criteria than the overall Champagne appellation rules is not. Perceived quality – not just taste – plays an important role in establishing and maintaining any champagne's image.

The fact that Bollinger still keeps all its reserve wines that are used to help maintain the quality and continuity of style of its flagship

Special Cuvée blend in magnum, cru by cru and vintage by vintage is also enshrined in the charter.

On a recent visit to the winery in Aÿ the winemaking team led by Gilles Descôtes was involved in the process of opening and tasting the 75,000 magnums of reserve wine that will be an important component in the blend of Special Cuvée based on the 2014 harvest. It takes the seven oenologues involved more than a month to do this and this wine makes up just over 5% of the final blend, says Descôtes. For this latest blend of Special Cuvée they used reserve magnums from 2008, 2007, 2006 and 2005.

While other houses have generally increased the amount of reserve wine they use in their non-vintage blends over the past decade or so, Bollinger has always had a particularly high proportion of reserve wine as it also incorporates around 45% of the previous harvest (ie 2013 for the 2014-based blend) along with the older reserve magnums.

This adds further weight and depth of flavour to a blend that, like the rest of Bollinger's range,



PERCEIVED QUALITY PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ESTABLISHING ANY CHAMPAGNE'S IMAGE

contains a majority of Pinot Noir – between 60% and 70% of the total, depending on the year – along with around 25% Chardonnay and 15% Meunier. As Descôtes says: "The percentage of reserve wines [used in Special Cuvée] can vary a little but it stays usually between 50%-60%, including the wines coming from the reserve magnums.

In terms of its vintage wines Bollinger has just moved from 2004 to 2005, for the first time releasing Grande Année in bottle, magnum and jeroboam format simultaneously because, in the words of Jérôme Philipon: "We thought they were all ready." (Normally the slower developing larger formats would be launched a year or more later than the 75cl bottles.)

And, like other ripe harvests from the past decade, it is quite forward already, showing a fruity richness and spiciness, with a slightly higher than usual proportion of 70% Pinot Noir in the blend, mainly from Aÿ and Verzenay, the 30% of Chardonnay sourced largely from vineyards in Avize, Chouilly and Le Mesnil-sur-Oger though 13 crus in total were used.

Although Descôtes agrees the 2005 is relatively forward and open he doesn't envisage it having any problem ageing further over the next two to 15 years.

2 DOM PÉRIGNON

Although it is now widely accepted that Dom Pérignon didn't invent sparkling champagne, and that in fact the English were intentionally making 'sparkling' wines about a decade before he became cellar master at the Abbey of Hautvilliers around 1669, his name still resonates. It remains synonymous with the best that Champagne has to offer, thanks partly to many years of clever advertising and marketing support from drinks giant LVMH, which, as we can see from this report, dominates the champagne category with its high-profile brands.

This is the brand that effectively created the prestige cuvée sector of the champagne market. The original release was the legendary 1921 vintage, described by today's Moët winemaking team – with some justification – as the greatest white wine vintage of the past century.

Dom Pérignon 1921 wasn't released until 15 years later in 1936, at which time Moët & Chandon was run by Comte Robert-Jean de Vogue who, came from one of the oldest families of the French aristocracy. He is also credited with helping to set up the CIVC and was still running the business 30 years later.

It is interesting to note that De Vogue chose to launch Dom Pérignon with an 'older' vintage and thus anticipated by several decades the idea of the Oenothèque range of older re-released cuvées of Dom Pérignon.

As the distinctive bottle hadn't been designed long before the launch, this vintage and the next four – 1926, 1928, 1929 and 1934 – were all transavaged (decanted into the new bottle shape from the original bottles in which they were fermented).

The 1943 vintage, the next

release after the '34, was the first to be fermented in the bottle it was actually sold in.

Moët had the prestige champagne sector pretty much to itself for the first couple of decades – although Louis Roederer's Cristal was created many years earlier for Tsar Alexander II, the first commercially available vintage of Cristal was the 1945.

As the top wine from the best-known house in Champagne its celebrity was pretty well guaranteed. The rich and famous flocked to drink it and in 1971 the Shah of Iran ordered several bottles of the first vintage of Dom Pérignon Rosé, the 1959, for the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire.

According to Patrick Forbes in his renowned book on champagne, President Kennedy was served Dom Pérignon the evening before he was assassinated.

Today, under the ownership of LVMH, the presentation and marketing of Dom Pérignon as an icon luxury

item has become more and more evident. Limited-edition bottles have mushroomed, appearing with each new wine – most recently with

the 2014 vintage launched last year in conjunction with both Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen and Jeff Koons. However it is fair to say the wine values of the liquid inside the glitzy packaging have not been forgotten.

The man who has been charged with looking after those since his appointment as chef de cave in 1990 is Richard Geoffroy, an excellent and erudite champion for DP whose skilful handling of the world's wine press matches his ability in the cellar to create memorable blends.

One of the great advantages that Geoffroy bought to the job was working previously in vineyards outside France as technical adviser for Domaines Chandon in various New World vineyards, notably in California and Australia where he teamed up with Dr Tony Jordan.

Geoffroy has overseen the important introduction of the Oenothèque Collection, where the wine is given a second and third release at around 12 and somewhere beyond 20 years maturity, in what

The blend for Dom Pérignon is a roughly 50/50 mix of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, though this does vary a little according to the harvest. For example, the 1980 vintage was 60% Pinot Noir while the very fine 1988 vintage pushed in the other direction and was 60% Chardonnay. But usually the split is closer.

The core of the blend is eight grands crus, Aÿ, Bouzy, Verzenay and Mailly for Pinot Noir; Chouilly, Cramant, Avize and Le Mesnil for Chardonnay, plus the top-rated premier cru of Hautvilliers, said to be at the heart of the blend. With Moët's buying power today the brand has access to grapes from all 17 grands crus in Champagne.

Geoffroy has called its second and third "plenitude". With many of the competition following this lead over the years Moët has recently renamed these two later releases as P1 and P2, but the principle remains the same. He has also overseen the release of P1 and P2 versions of Dom Pérignon Rosé.

The just-released 2005 Dom Pérignon is the 41st blend of this cuvée. Its counterpart, Dom Pérignon Rosé was first made in 1959 and there have been 23 further releases since, with the 2004 the current cuvée in the market.



THE RICH AND
FAMOUS FLOCKED
TO DRINK DOM
PÉRIGNON



3 RUINART

It is symptomatic of the efforts the LVMH group has been making to put Ruinart on the map that the brand has shot up the Most Admired listings from number 11 in the original 2014 report to be rubbing shoulders with Dom Pérignon in the top three.

Ruinart was, until quite recently, an understated brand relatively unknown outside France, where it enjoyed a good position in the on-trade, the higher echelons of the restaurant market and upmarket cavistes. Importantly, it wasn't ever made available in grande distribution and thus have to suffer the indignity of discounting.

Serious wine lovers had long been aware of its top-quality prestige cuvée Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs, a wine that ages impressively, but perhaps less was known of the rest of the range. The 'R' de Ruinart non-vintage blend deserved more followers and its quality was picked up by the likes of Silvano Girardin, for many years the maître d' at the Gavroche in London's Mayfair.

Ruinart was purchased by Moët & Chandon back in 1963, later to become part of the LVMH group, but for many years it was left alone and continued to be enjoyed by a small but enthusiastic cognoscenti following. However, gradually it dawned on someone at LVMH that here was a sleeping brand with an extraordinary untapped history and legacy that more could be made of.

It was, after all, the oldest champagne producer, founded in 1729 by Nicolas Ruinart, whose nephew, Dom Thierry Ruinart, was a contemporary and friend of Dom Pérignon. Towards the end of the 18th century it was Nicolas Ruinart's grandson, Claude, who decided to move the firm from Epernay to Reims and was the first to develop cellars in the old Roman chalk pits in an area outside and south east



of the city walls known as the Butte Saint Nicaise. These were carved out by the Romans from the top down – which explains their extraordinary shape – to provide building materials for the city.

Originally he owned 250-odd pits but he later sold about half to Madame Pommery, founder of Pommery & Greno, which, like Veuve Clicquot and Taittinger, is still based in this same area of Reims. Ruinart's cellars, classified as an historical monument in 1931, remain among the most impressive in Champagne to visit today.

In wine terms Ruinart was also unusual in the wider LVMH group in being best known for its all-Chardonnay and Chardonnay-led styles. The only other ongoing line that is a blanc de blancs produced by the other five houses – Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Dom Pérignon, Krug and Mercier – is Cramant Blanc de Blancs in its short lived Trilogie des Grands Crus series of single vineyard, single varietal wines launched in June 2001.

So the first step in really putting Ruinart on the map brand-wise was

in launching the non-vintage blanc de blancs style which happened, curiously, in the same year and month as Moët's Trilogie – June 2001 – based on fruit from the 1998 and 1997 harvests. It was a stroke of marketing genius to put it in that distinctive stubby bottle which all the NV Ruinart wines now use. At the time of its launch it had an rrp of £27.99 while today is regularly retails for over £50 a bottle and demand is such they can't make enough of it.

Gradually promoting its image on the international circuit has taken another decade of hard work, but Ruinart's success has a lot to do with the quality and accessibility of the blanc de blancs non-vintage style. In the words of chef de cave Frédéric Panaiotis: "It's a wine designed to be enjoyed by four people in 10 minutes."

Panaiotis, with his great skills as a multi-linguist communicator, has become a fine ambassador for the brand, which has been specifically mentioned by Bernalt Arnault in the annual report as one of the star performers in the LVMH portfolio in recent years. Ruinart has well and truly arrived on the international scene.

At a vertical tasting celebrating 50 years of Dom Ruinart held at restaurant Apicius in Paris in October 2009, also attended by Jancis Robinson and Serena Sutcliffe from the UK, we sampled 18 of the 21 vintages ever made.

Because the house only had stocks of 10 vintages going back to 1981, plus the 1969 left in its own cellars in Reims, we tasted these 11 plus the seven venerable vintages chef de cave Frédéric Panaiotis purchased from specialist retailers and collectors specially for the tasting.

While sadly no good quality bottles of the first 1959 vintage could be found, the 1969 – the oldest properly cellared sample in the line-up – was still amazingly fresh and a fine advertisement for Champagne's longevity.

The five vintages from the 80s – '81, '82, '85, '86 and '88 – provided most of the highlights of this tasting. The 1988, with the highest proportion of Montagne de Reims Chardonnay in the blend at 44%, was redolent of mature white Burgundy with bubbles. The 1985, with three-quarters Côte des Blancs-sourced fruit, was opulent but still with a refreshing streak of acidity.

The key thing to know about Dom Ruinart's Blanc de Blancs style is that the fruit isn't all sourced from the grands crus of the Côte des Blancs. It is all grands crus but there is an important element in the blend – 50% of the cuvée in the case of the 1990 though this is the highest proportion – from three Montagne de Reims grands crus – Sillery, Verzenay and Puisieulx. This tends to give the wines more weight and a certain white Burgundian quality as they age.

4 KRUG

Perhaps the most singular and individual of all the LVMH champagne brands, this famous house remains one of the few in Champagne where family members are still actively involved. House director and sixth generation of the family Olivier Krug is a tangible link with the past who clocks up an extraordinarily large number of air miles in supporting the business created by his great, great, great grandfather Joseph Krug in 1843.

He, like his father Henri and uncle Rémi before him, is the family representative on the tasting committee who helps head winemaker Eric Lebel put together the blends for Krug, notably the flagship Grande Cuvée.

Between 1989 and 1997 when he died, Paul Krug continued to work with Henri and Rémi plus Olivier, so there were three generations of Krug in the tasting room. Today Olivier holds, if you like, the memory of the family's 'taste' of Krug and its very distinctive, rich, oxidative style, fashioned in part by fermentation in small oak casks, long ageing and the incorporation of a large range of reserve wines, the oldest of which may date back 20 harvests.

Of course, one of the reasons he is so much in demand is that Krug lovers around the world – and they are by all accounts a dedicated if disparate band – love to share their thoughts on the wine, particularly older bottlings or vintages, with someone whose name appears on the bottle.

You only have to take a quick look at his twitter or Instagram account to see that. Introducing an ID code on bottles of Grande Cuvée, which identifies the relative age of different blends of the wine they hold in their cellars, has made that even more of a temptation for the Krugists.

And in its skilled marketing of



the wine LVMH has recognised this interest with the launch last year (2014) of the three-bottle Limited Edition ID case, available for an rrp of £840, which contains the blends of Grand Cuvée made from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 harvests. And older bottlings of Grande Cuvée which can be recognised by the subtle label changes that have taken place over the years now fetch a premium in the auction market.

Although a very traditional house there have been innovations over the past 15 years or so since LVMH bought the brand from Rémy Cointreau in early 1999 for a reputed Fr1,000m (£500m).

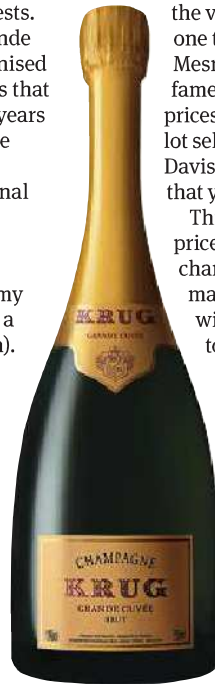
One of the most notable came in early 2008 when Rémi and Olivier Krug together oversaw the inaugural launch of Clos d'Ambonnay with 1995 vintage, the Blanc de Noirs foil to the relatively long established Clos du Mesnil Blanc de Blancs single vineyard wine that was launched back

in 1986 with the 1979 vintage. (Krug Rosé also first appeared in this decade in 1983.)

With its tiny production of just 3,000 bottles coming from a relatively flat plot right next to the village of just 0.685ha – one third of the size of Clos du Mesnil – this wine had instant fame as its rarity value helped prices soar, with a six-bottle lot selling for \$22,000 at a Hart Davis Hart auction in Chicago that year.

This made it the highest priced regularly produced champagne cuvée by some margin. It should be said the wine itself is remarkable too, with great intensity of flavour, silky elegance and considerable length.

Having sampled this new member of the Krug family Clos d'Ambonnay 1995, later over dinner at the family house at 5 Rue Coquebert next door to the cellars in Reims, there was an opportunity to taste some more memorable wines, including Krug



At the time of the ID code launch on Grande Cuvée back in November 2011, Olivier Krug was keen to stress that neither he nor chef de cave Eric Lebel saw the particular harvest base on any given Grande Cuvée blend as an important piece of information.

To demonstrate the point he said: "The senior members of the tasting panel [that is himself, Eric Lebel and Lebel's deputy, Julie Cavil] recently assessed blind six past consecutive blends of Grande Cuvée that had already been released to see which they thought the best.

"We all three picked the blend based on the 2001 harvest as our favourite, despite this being the poorest harvest by some way of the six we tried."

He said that the 2001-based blend was in the middle of the six, so we can assume the range ran from 1998 to 2003 – a pretty interesting and diverse collection of harvests.

The ID codes have been on all bottles leaving the house since the start of July 2011.

vintage 1990 and, from the 1996, both the straight vintage and Clos du Mesnil side by side. Running out of superlatives it was hard to imagine anything surpassing the sheer intensity of Krug 1996 but Clos du Mesnil 1996 managed to do exactly that.

Asked at a later interview when it's the best time to drink Krug, Olivier Krug said: "There's no special time to drink it. You can't put Krug in a box, it defies boundaries, there's no fixed formula. Any time is good for me, but perhaps on reflection on a summer's evening relaxing on the terrace after dinner."



LOUIS ROEDERER

Louis Roederer is one of the few high-profile houses in Champagne of any size that remains family owned and run. In 2006 Jean-Claude Rouzaud, one of the most influential figures in champagne of recent times who had led the business for 38 years, handed over the reins to his son Frédéric.

Rouzaud senior is a hard act to follow but, as he has gradually changed and modernised the business since, Frédéric has been fortunate to have had Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon at his side to help. Lécaillon, who joined the company just after the 1989 harvest, becoming Roederer's chef de cave 10 years later in 1999, is one of the most widely respected winemakers in the region.

Since Frédéric Rouzaud started working with his father at the business in 1996 – like Lécaillon he had a 10 year 'apprenticeship' – the two men have gradually overseen an evolution of the winemaking approach at Roederer, much of it in the vineyard.

"Since Frédéric [Rouzaud] arrived we have mainly concentrated our efforts in the vineyard, introducing ploughing between the vines – a quarter of the Cristal estate is horse ploughed – and then two years later we started some biodynamic farming. We now have 60ha farmed in this way and that's more than half the total Cristal estate," says Lécaillon. In fact today Roederer has by some way the largest biodynamic vineyard holding in the whole of Champagne.

All the vintage wines in the range, including the icon prestige cuvée Cristal, are produced from fruit grown on the family's own 240ha vineyard estate, which provides two-thirds of the grapes it needs to make the 3.5m bottles or so it elaborates each year. And it is this estate that underpins the quality of the Roederer range and allows new wines to be produced, such as the recently launched Brut Nature 2006 vintage that comes from the biodynamically farmed Cumières vineyard.

The Rouzaud family is also the majority shareholder in Deutz Champagne but that business is run entirely separately by Fabrice Rosset (see page 19).

PIPER HEIDSIECK

Piper, like its sister house Charles, was until fairly recently part of the Rémy-Cointreau drinks group (which also used to have Krug in its grasp) but both brands were purchased in June 2011 for €412m (£353m) by the French luxury goods group Entreprise Patrimoniale d'Investissements (EPI), owned by Christopher Descours.

Since buying the two houses, EPI has made fundamental changes to how the business is run, installing former boss of Veuve Clicquot Cécile Bonnefond as its CEO, in line with its ambition to reposition both brands and setting up some new distribution chains with appropriate agents in the key markets it is targeting.

For Piper this has involved trying to distance the brand, which has a very good track record on the competition circuit where its vintage cuvées have won many awards over the past decade or so, from the discounting off-trade sector, particularly in the UK and French domestic markets.

Piper's ace card has for some time been its winemaker, Régis Camus, who has won the title of

Champagne Winemaker of the Year on several occasions (for his efforts with both Piper and Charles) and is one of the most highly regarded and experienced winemakers in the region, following in the footsteps of the late, great Daniel Thibault, his immediate predecessor.

While the vintage champagnes from Piper, sparingly released compared with some other large houses in the region, have maintained a consistently high level – and Special Cuvée Rare is comparable with some of the very best wines made in the region, particularly in great vintages such as 2002 – the Piper NV had occasionally been somewhat lacklustre under the previous ownership.

One of Camus's most notable achievements has been to reinvigorate this cuvée, starting to change that perception and, while it takes time to turn around a wine's image, the performance of Piper in this survey moving from 19th last year to number six this year suggests the quality message is reaching a wider international audience.



BILLECART-SALMON

7



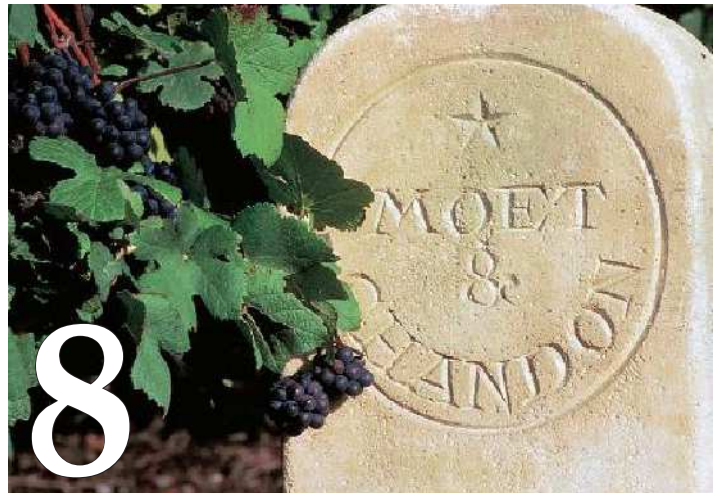
François Roland-Billecart and his brother Antoine are the seventh generation of the family to run this highly regarded house based in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, particularly well known for its rosé wines. They still retain a controlling 55% share, although they did have to sell the remainder back in 2004 to Jean-Jacques Frey's Reims-based Compagnie Financière Frey to gain more financial muscle. This transaction has given them access to Frey's 80ha of grand cru vineyard and, while production has more than doubled, it doesn't seem to have had any adverse effect of quality. Chef de cave François Domi, one of the unsung heroes of the Champenois winemaking scene, continues to work his magic across the range.

This is a house rightly renowned for the quality of its wines, particularly the vintage cuvées that age deliciously well.

The 1961 and 1959 vintages of Cuvée Nicolas-François Billecart, both fermented in oak, outshone all the other prestigious names at one notable blind tasting of great vintages in Stockholm in 1999.

Since 1995, Denis Blée, an expert in oak who learned his craft at the impressive boutique Alfred Gratien operation in Épernay, has also helped with the reintroduction of some partial oak fermentation for the grands crus juice predominantly used to make the half dozen vintage cuvées in the range.

While the aim has never been to produce an overtly oaky flavour, Billecart has also introduced an entirely oak-fermented cuvée, Brut Sous Bois, and its regular vintage, currently the 2006, sees 20% oak vinification. The single vineyard all-Pinot Noir Le Clos Saint-Hilaire is also completely vinified in oak. Ordinary though the soil may look, this wine has something very special.



8

MOËT & CHANDON

If there is one brand that dominates the world of champagne this is it. It outsells its rivals by a mile and it's the only name that everyone has heard of, even if they can't pronounce it properly. Moët is not just the largest vineyard owner but also the biggest purchaser of grapes and, as such, dictates the price paid for the latter.

Everything that goes on in the region is affected by what the brand leader does, whether it is helping to open up new markets, introducing advances in technology, innovating in terms of winemaking techniques or new packaging or making the big, theatrical gestures to draw consumer attention to the wider brand 'champagne'.

Under LVMH ownership Moët & Chandon has been an impressive leader and the branding is so slick, so well thought-out, that sometimes people fail to notice the consistent and improving quality of the wines from Brut Impérial up.

It's hard to make a good quality, all-round appealing cuvée that tastes consistently well through the year wherever it is consumed. That job sits on the broad shoulders of chef de cave Benoît Gouez and his winemaking team. Perhaps it is easiest to notice the improvement they have managed with Brut Impérial Rosé and Moët's pink Grand Vintage.

Evidence of the benefits of the company's large investment in new red wine making facilities and the whole set for making quality pink champagne comes not just in the glass but also from the fact that rosé styles now account for more than 20% of its sales, that's not an accident.

Moët and Gouez have also upped the ante with the vintage wines, ageing them longer before release on their lees and, importantly, post-disgorgement on the cork. Wider access has also been given to those wanting to try longer-aged champagnes from the Oenothèque Collection where superb quality and great value for money is to be found. More innovation is promised this summer.





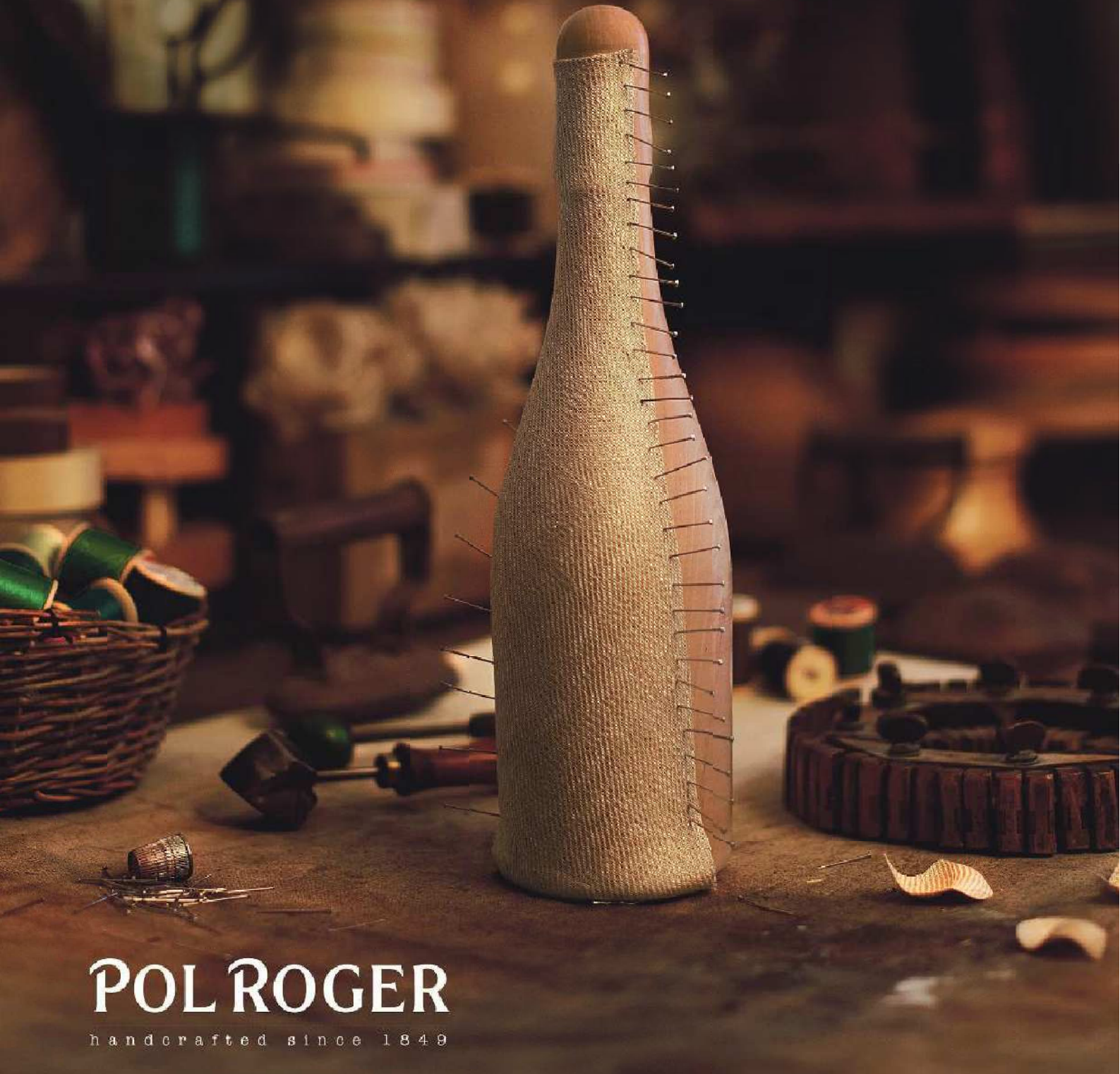
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POMMERY

Founded in 1836, the house of Pommery & Greno was put on the map by one of Champagne's famous widows, Madame Jeanne-Alexandrine Louise Pommery, who took over running the house on her husband's death in 1860 at the age of 39. She is widely credited with starting the 'dry' champagne revolution, shipping the first* commercially available Brut style from the 1874 vintage to London in 1879. Until the mid-19th century all champagne was essentially sweet and considered a dessert wine.

Today Pommery is part of the Vranken Pommery Monopole group, owned and run by Paul-François Vranken, another entrepreneur and an innovator who has shaken up the champagne establishment with his new ideas since he started his business in the mid-seventies (see also Heidsieck-Monopole and Charles Lafitte entries).

While the Belgian-born Vranken was seen as an 'outsider' in this conservative minded region when he arrived, his spark, financial acumen and enterprising approach to marketing is now more widely admired. Today Pommery is unusual in producing no fewer than nine non-vintage cuvées. This range includes the Seasons Collection, a quartet: Springtime Rosé; Summertime Blanc de Blancs; Falltime Extra Dry Blanc de Blancs and Wintertime Blanc de Noirs.

This foursome offers interesting marketing opportunities in the on-trade as well as helping educate consumers about the different styles of champagne that are available, something the Champenois have not been very good at over the years.

Another of Vranken's notable innovations is the extended Pommery Pop family in its various brightly coloured and painted formats, large and small, which has helped open up another gifting sector, attract younger people to the category and unbutton Champagne's stiff, formal image.

* Perrier-Jouët had shipped what was technically a Brut Nature style with no dosage to the English market with its 1846 vintage some 30 years earlier, but most commentators see the more widely available Pommery wine as the start of this trend.

TAITTINGER

Another of the small band of family-run businesses left among the major brands in Champagne.

The charismatic Pierre-Emmanuel successfully fought to keep it that way when, in the summer of 2005, six other branches of the large Taittinger family voted to sell their shares in Le Société du Louvre – including the champagne house, Baccarat Crystal and the perfume house Annick Goutal – to the American-owned Starwood Hotel group for £1.75bn.

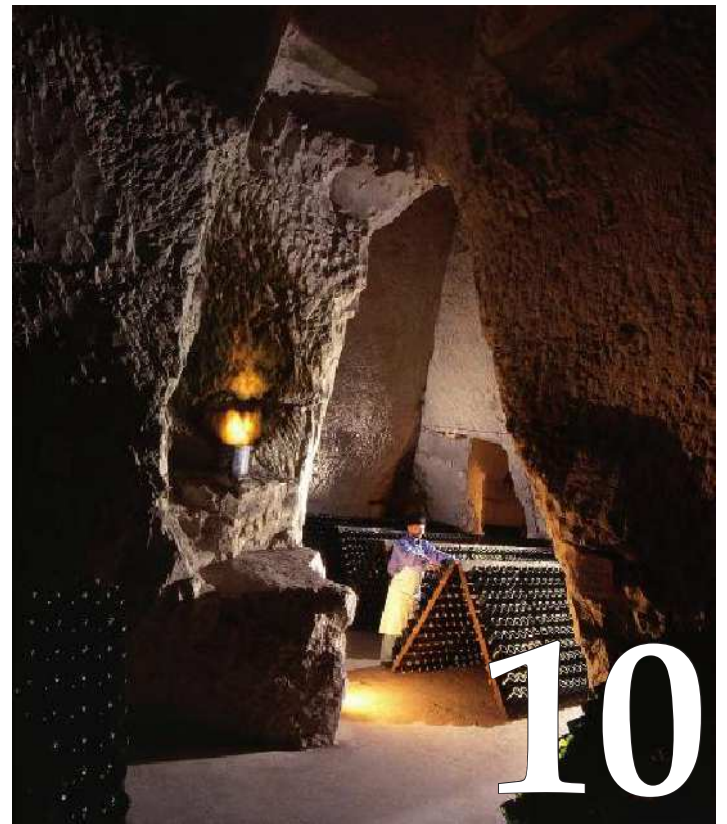
Starwood, however, quickly put the champagne business back up for sale and Pierre-Emmanuel, with the help of French bank Credit Agricole, got the go-ahead to buy back the house, stock and cellars in May 2006.

Since then he has remodelled the business, building it back up, and today two of his children, Clovis and Vitalie, work beside him. He's

proud that Clovis managed the coup of securing 'official champagne of the 2014 Fifa World Cup' for the brand, while Vitalie is the public face of Taittinger, appearing in its advertising.

Crucially, at a time when high grape prices have made it very difficult for independent houses to compete with the corporate strength behind the LVMH and Pernod Ricard-owned brands, Taittinger has retained its high-quality vineyard estate of some 288ha in 34 crus, which supplies around half of its needs.

The vineyard includes important holdings in the Côte des Blancs, which are used to good effect in the company's prestige line, Comte de Champagne, an all-Chardonnay vintage cuvée that ages terrifically well, taking well over a decade to reach its peak.





TARLANT

The first of the grower producers in our Most Admired supplement, the Tarlant family has a history in Champagne to match any of the big names. There were Tarlants cultivating vineyards in the Aisne district as far back as 1687.

Louis Tarlant, who was mayor of the village of Oeuilly just to the west of Epernay – the premier cru where the business is still based today – began bottling his own wines with the memorable 1928 harvest.

Today Benoît Tarlant and his sister Melanie run the business, which owns 14ha of vineyard in four crus – Oeuilly, Boursault, St-Agnan and Celles-les-Condé – laid out in 55 separate parcels.

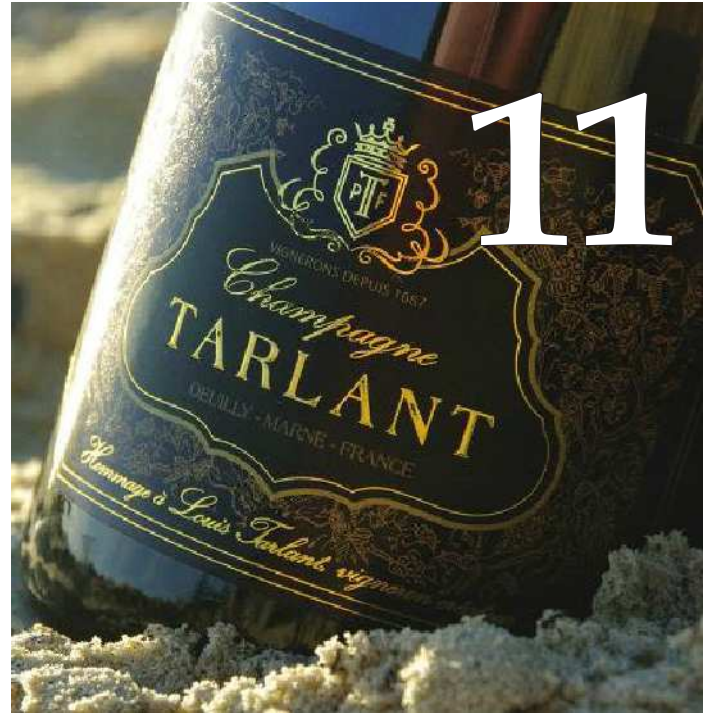
Benoît, who is a 12th generation Tarlant, is one of the new breed of exciting young producers experimenting with new methods and styles of wine, trying to make the most of their unique terroirs to

produce wines of typicity that reflect that terroir, while remaining rooted in the history of the region.

As well as the three classic varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier – Tarlant also has ancient varieties such as Arbanne, Pinot Blanc and Petit Meslier, which used to be more widely planted.

And these three varieties are used to create the cuvée BAM, from one specific terroir in Oeuilly, fermented and vinified in oak barrels then typically aged more than five years before release.

Tarlant also makes three single vineyard, single varietal wines: La Vigne d'Antan, which comes from ungrafted pre-phyloxera style Chardonnay; La Vigne d'Or, a Blanc de Noirs from pure Meunier; and La Vigne Royale from Pinot Noirs. Like BAM these wines are all brut nature with no sugar added at disgorgement.



PERRIER-JOUËT

Based in Epernay's Avenue de Champagne, Perrier-Jouët is perhaps best known for the Art Nouveau-style, Émile Gallé-designed flower motif that adorns its prestige cuvée Belle Époque – arguably the most distinctive bottle in Champagne. The link with this era is maintained at the beautifully restored Maison Belle Époque opposite the winery. It has a delightful terrace on which to sip the elegant Grand Brut or luxuriate in a glass of Belle Époque Blanc de Blancs served in an Art Nouveau-style flute.

While Perrier-Jouët is a brand very much redolent of that great era for champagne consumption towards the end of the 19th century, 100 years later it went through a tricky period of neglect during its ownership by Seagram and then Allied Domecq (via investment company Hicks Muse).

Both of these drinks conglomerates were reputed to be more interested in the performance of their highly profitable spirit brands, though Seagram's owners, the Bronfman brothers, are said to have favoured and looked after Perrier-Jouët better than sister brand GH Mumm.

Today, under Pernod-Ricard's ownership both brands are in much better shape and the Perrier-Jouët brand's reputation is substantially restored with the various Belle Époque cuvées going through a period of renaissance under the watchful eye of experienced winemaker Hervé Deschamps.

Pernod-Ricard, with its dedicated French sales forces for Pernod and Ricard given one champagne brand each to champion, is one of the few companies capable of matching the power and marketing savvy of LVMH in Champagne. And while its brands don't yet enjoy the same 'admiration' as some owned by LVMH, it is certainly moving in the right direction with what's in the bottle showing a new consistency to match the flair that's been there for a while.

Photography by Warren & Nick



CHAMPAGNE
PERRIER-JOUËT



PERRIER-JOUËT, THE ALLURING CHAMPAGNE

Since its foundation in 1811, the champagne house Perrier-Jouët has crafted elegant, floral wines of rare finesse with a Chardonnay hallmark. The elegance of the cuvees echoes that of the Art Nouveau anemones adorning the Belle Époque bottle and offers moments of pure delight and beauty. www.perrier-jouet.com

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