

TOM STEVENSON

Aging gracefully

I would like to place my first *volée* clean across the bows of those Champagne producers who use less than 6g of residual sugar in any of their cuvées. A *dosage* of 6g or more has a positive, smoothing effect on the aromatic development of Champagne; but below this level, the lower the *dosage*, the more coarse and aldehydic a Champagne's evolution is following the oxidative impact of disgorgement.

Other factors come into play, such as sulfur, but even when adequately sulfured, it is impossible for a Brut Nature (0–3g residual sugar per liter) or Extra Brut (0–6g/l) to age as gracefully as a Brut with more than 6g. A true Brut should taste dry, but exactly where the *dosage* should be between 6g and 15g will depend on the balance of the cuvée in question. A perfectly balanced Brut Nature is, however, like a Champagne harvest without rain. It happens, but not often. And because Brut Nature cannot age gracefully, it has to be absolutely ready to drink when purchased, which is a far more difficult task than it sounds. Drinkability is not all, though, since serious Champagne consumers also expect finesse and a certain complexity, and to find those qualities in a Brut Nature as soon as it is launched requires nothing short of a miracle. When that miracle occurred with the Pol Roger Pure, I was moved to write a personal note to Pol Roger's MD, Patrice Noyelle (quoted on p.31 of the last issue).

Grand Vin Sans Sucre

Laurent-Perrier sold a Grand Vin Sans Sucre as long ago as 1889 and launched the first modern *non-dosage* Champagne, Ultra Brut, in 1981, but the recent re-emergence of Brut Nature is riding on the back of the current far more general trend toward lower Brut *dosage* levels, which itself is a response to warmer weather. Anomalies to one side, this has resulted in increasingly lower acidity and higher—sometimes disturbingly and disproportionately higher—pH levels. In the 1980s, the average residual sugar in a Brut Non-Vintage Champagne was 12–13g,



whereas today it is 10–11, and when a *chef de caves* of a quality-conscious house is trialing *dosages* for a so-called gastronomic cuvée, decisions tend to hover between just 6 and 8g. From here, the drop to Extra Brut and Brut Nature is negligible, in a purely numerical sense, but unless the industry would like to see its reputation start to merge with that of other up-and-coming sparkling wines, the drift toward progressively lower *dosage* levels must stop.

Extraordinary longevity is an intrinsic part of Champagne's reputation, setting it apart from all other sparkling wines, but for Champagne to age gracefully, it must have a certain minimum *dosage*. It is not a sweetness issue; rather, if Champagne has less *dosage*, it has less longevity; and if Champagne has no *dosage*, it has no longevity. If Champagne develops a reputation for less longevity, this will erode its lucrative position of being perceived to be in a totally different class.

There are genuine obstacles for Champagne to overcome if the current climatic developments continue (unless they result in another "Younger Dryas" event, in which case Champagne will be the last thing on our minds!), but simply to decrease the *dosage* is not the answer. If it is permissible to acidify every year in Champagne, which it is (and perversely so, considering that French wine regions in warmer climes much farther south are not allowed), why do so few *chefs de caves* take advantage of



This article by *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews and comprehensive international auction results. For further information, and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.fineninemag.com or call +44 (0)844 844 0383.

this? The answer is because they are not comfortable with the process. Relying entirely on acidification would be as mindless as merely decreasing the *dosage*, but a combination of the two could be a superior temporary solution. Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon at Roederer is the maestro at acidification in Champagne, and if anything, Roederer's cuvées have gained in potential longevity since he took over.

No idea!

Long-term answers must be sought in the vineyard. These include the obvious, such as tweaking the balance of growth and reassessing clonal selection based on changing climatic criteria, but answers are also required in the laboratory. It is madness that this industry believes, but does not know how or why, sugar affects the postdisgorgement development of its own wine. There are quite a few papers on the effect of sugar on volatile aromas in foodstuffs, but either the sugar levels or the viscosity is too high to be applicable. Almost 30 years of tasting, comparing tens of thousands of Champagnes, tells me that it does, and the greatest expert I know on the chemistry of Champagne, Bertrand Robillard, agrees with me, but when pressed on actual research, he confessed, "I've never read of any experiments on the influence of sugar on aromas, but I have noticed this effect. I know that some people consider it to be a fact, and we can imagine that some aldehydes could be sensitive to this phenomenon."

Dr Ron Jackson, the Wine Science columnist for *Wine Report*, dug out a paper called "Volatile Flavoring Substances in Foodstuffs" (Hans Gerhard Maier, 1970), which supports the theory that sugar suppresses acetaldehyde. While this is a useful starting point, later researches in this area have involved sugar and viscosity levels that are not appropriate for the aroma matrix of a wine. One thing is clear, however: The Champagne industry should not be embarking on ever-lower levels of *dosage* without a thorough understanding of the processes involved. ■