TOM STEVENSON

A full English

In the previous issue, I pointed out the dangerous path the Champenois were treading, as they embark upon ever-lower levels of *dosage* without a clear understanding of the negative effect this could have on the potential longevity of Champagne. I now contemplate how Champagnes age, so that individuals may decide which they should cellar, and for how long, according to their own personal taste—be that for a fresh, fruit-driven style or one with more toast than a full English breakfast.

It is often said that a *dosage* should be in balance with the wine, and indeed it should, but this equilibrium takes time to achieve, and it is not the only consideration. The fulcrum upon which the level of *dosage* and potential longevity of the end product are finely balanced is the timing of the disgorgement. It is a pretty scary thought, especially for Champagne, which is more likely than any other sparkling wine to be aged after purchase, but thanks to disgorgement, this is the only wine in the world that is opened up after bottling and its contents exposed to the air. It always happens a few months before shipping, but precisely how long this is after it was originally bottled will dictate the oxidative impact, and the level of *dosage* utilized will determine the Champagne's potential longevity.

Immediately prior to disgorgement, Champagne is in a reductive state because yeast cells are such voracious consumers of oxygen that none is left after the second fermentation. Admittedly, oxygen molecules will creep into the bottle through the crown cap or cork, due to partial pressures, but for all practical purposes Champagne is in a completely reductive state when it is disgorged. The longer it remains in this reductive state, the more sensitive it becomes to the process of oxidation. Thus, although a great Champagne disgorged after 50 years on its lees will be much fresher than exactly the same Champagne disgorged when it was commercially released (say, five to seven years after bottling), it will peak and deteriorate far more quickly, even when stored under the same ideal conditions. Three months after disgorgement, the 50-year late-disgorged bottle would probably be significantly superior, but within another three or six months it will begin a relatively rapid decline, whereas the original commercial disgorgement will continue its gentle demise, regaining superiority for many years to come.

I doubt many readers will have the problem of deciding when to drink a 50-year-old Champagne, and unless you have temperature-controlled storage of 50.9°F (10.5°C), I would not recommend you contemplate it. But if you can maintain a steady 60.8°F (16°C), you should be able to age Champagne at an acceptable rate of evolution for 20 years or more. Even if you have a slightly warmer, but equally stable, storage temperature, I would recommend that you keep virtually every Champagne you buy for at least 12 months, and up to five years if you keep a strict eye on how the wine is developing.

What is there to be gained from just 12 months aging? Well, you won't get many complex bottle aromas building up, but the flavor will deepen and lengthen. Most noticeably, however, the mousse will soften as more CO_2 becomes fixed and the bubbles get smaller and are slower to release. However skillfully you open a bottle of Champagne, you will see bubbles streaming to the surface inside the bottle. This is the free CO_2. It requires mechanical action, such as pouring Champagne into a glass, to release fixed CO_2. Once the froth of fixed CO_2 dies down, any stream of bubbles you see rising in the glass will be free CO_2. Even free CO_2 requires nuclei to entice the gas out, thus you can pour six glasses from the same bottle and see what appears to be six different degrees of fizziness. Some will stream faster than others, while some might not stream at all, and the bubbles can vary in size from glass to glass, or even between two parts of the same glass. All this depends on the different nuclei (anything from microscopic fragments of linen to etched engravings), which demonstrates why the pressure of the mousse and size of bubble can only be determined physically in the mouth, and never by sight.

Some Champagnes can have a surprisingly soft and silky mousse consisting of the most minuscule bubbles as soon as they are released, but these are rare occurrences. As a rule of thumb, 12 months is the minimum aging I would recommend for any Champagne after purchase, and the more aggressive the mousse, the longer you should cellar the wine.

As the flavor deepens and lengthens, so it moves across the spectrum from floral notes to fruit, and from elegance to richness, before you see the development of any mellowing bottle aromas. This sea change in the maturity of Champagne usually takes at least three years to appear, so if you prefer only fruit and freshness, then three years should be your maximum window of cellarage. Should you like toasted, roasted, cream-biscuity, or creamy-walnut notes wafting through the fruit, then lay your Champagne down for five to seven years. If you prefer these characteristics to dominate, want mellowing richness and complexity to overlay, rather than underpin, the fruit, then keep your Champagnes for 20 years or more—but keep an eye on how they are progressing by opening a bottle every couple of years. ■