

Young or old?

PERSONAL TASTE is largely due to conditioning; and in the wine trade, that conditioning consists to a significant degree of tasting new wines every year. The more young wines that are tasted, the more the palate gets used to the harsher elements of youth—thus the more likely that the taster's taste will gravitate from older to younger.

This applies to the spit-and-scribble brigade as much as to the wine trade itself. The established pattern among most people I know who taste wine professionally is that the older we get, the younger we drink. At one time, I seldom drank Vintage Champagnes of less than ten years of age, yet nowadays I often enjoy a bottle that might be just five years old. I still enjoy magical encounters with marvelously mature Champagne, but the younger the wines I drink every day, and the more earth-movingly exceptional the older vintages I am privileged to taste, the less patience I have with Champagnes that are merely older, not greater. I can understand the kick most of us get from drinking anything that pre-dates a momentous historical event, but when evaluating the intrinsic quality of a wine, there can be no virtue in age alone.

I was once invited by a nouveau riche collector in LA to a personal vertical of Moët in magnums going back to 1908 or thereabouts, and they were all as chipper as the proverbial Norwegian Blue. Why are some collectors prepared to maintain much lower standards for Champagne than for other wines? Because to do otherwise would be to render worthless a large chunk of their costly cellar. What other justification could there be for someone who opens up an old bottle and is unsurprised to find a dark liquid that is devoid of bubbles, with no freshness or fruit, and so oxidized that it looks, smells, and tastes more like Sherry than a fine old Champagne?

A degree of freshness is a vital component of any wine, but as wine matures, it trades freshness for complexity. So while we track the development of a wine, the question



Tom Stevenson

that must be asked is, How much freshness are we willing to trade for complexity? I certainly prefer my wines to age as gracefully as possible, and this applies as much to Champagne as to any other wine. I do not see any reason why Champagne should be treated any differently. When comparing, say, two 50-year-old Champagnes of almost equal quality, the one that is fresher and livelier will always have the edge, as far as I'm concerned.

Six of the best

When freshness is retained against all odds, the result is very special indeed, and no other Champagne fulfills that criterion more than Pol Roger 1914. The longer a Champagne is left on its lees, the fresher it will be compared to a normally disgorged version of the same wine. But everything comes at a price, and the price paid by recently disgorged old vintages is that, once disgorged, they evolve more rapidly than the regular commercial disgorgement of the same Champagne (see *A la Volée*, *WFW* 22). Pol Roger 1914 is the exception that proves the rule. Since all remaining stocks of this Champagne were disgorged to celebrate the liberation of Paris in 1944, it should have been on its last legs in the 1950s, and yet it remains magnificent to this day. Pol Roger also produced the greatest Champagne I

have ever tasted, Pol Roger 1892, since it is the only 19th-century Champagne that still has a mousse and sufficient fruit to taste more like wine than Sherry. Furthermore, it has an amazingly pale color, a wonderful honeyed-coffee aroma, great length, class, and finesse. Although 30 years younger, Pol Roger's Grauves 1928 is so water-white that it looks as though it has been made with the same time-travel technology. Extraordinary for any 81-year-old wine, technically Grauves 1928 is not Champagne but merely a reserve wine. It was bottled with a tiny amount of sugar to produce just enough carbonic gas to maintain its freshness yet has more mousse than most of the few fully *mousseux* 1928s surviving today.

These three Pol Roger vintages have always featured in my list of the greatest Champagnes I have ever tasted. Others include 1928 Salon, which blew away the 1947, itself so perfect that I had already scored it 100 points; 1907 Heidsieck & Co Monopole, which spent 82 years at the bottom of the Baltic at a constant 35.6°F (2°C) and consequently tasted 50 years younger than it was; and 1921 Moët, which was so special that it was transvasaged into a fancy 18th-century replica bottle to become the very first vintage of Dom Pérignon. These are not all of my greatest ever Champagnes, but each has an anecdote to smooth the way in an interview or at question time following a tasting.

With the obvious exception of the 1907 Heidsieck, they always came direct from the producer's own cellars. Even then, however, any wine is only as good as the bottle opened on the day. Hugh Johnson, Serena Sutcliffe MW, and other brilliant tasters swear that Krug 1928 is possibly the greatest Champagne they have tasted, yet regrettably it has been my own misfortune not to have tasted one that has shone. There are probably a dozen different Krug vintages I could compare to some of the six greatest Champagnes listed above, yet every bottle of Krug 1928 I have tasted has aged more like a 1929 than a 1928. *C'est la vie!* ■