CHAMPAGNE AND SPARKLING WINE

# Back to the future?

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MALOLACTIC WAS NOT commonly practiced in Champagne until the 1950s, but it was soon regarded as essential by most Champagne producers. With growing-season temperatures on the increase, however, and the rate of that increase having doubled over the past ten years compared to the preceding decade, the question must be asked: Has the acid-softening malolactic process outlived its usefulness?

As explained in last issue's *À la Volée*, the pan-European drought year of 2003 was Champagne's wake-up call. This was an extremely difficult year to vinify, with unprecedented extremes of heat and resultant problems. It is reasonable to suppose that any half-competent, forward-thinking *chef de cave* might want to produce at least one pure 2003 vintage, if only to learn from his or her mistakes when another scorching year happens. Yet many did not declare 2003. Most of those who did made extraordinary wines, but they ranged from extraordinarily good to extraordinarily bad, with not a few extraordinarily weird wines between. But even those who made the biggest mistakes will be ahead of the learning curve when another 2003 comes their way. And if individual years are not so extreme, Champagne still faces the escalating problem of decreasing acidity and increasing pH, as the 20-year-old trend of warmer conditions continues.

The long-term strategy for the region as a whole must include two radical proactive steps: (1) a recalibration of the classification of clonal vinestock, and (2) an adjustment of the pruning regime to redress the balance of the vineyards (shoot density, number of leaf layers, number of nodes per shoot, canopy gaps, cluster exposure, ratio of leaf area to fruit weight, pruning weight per extent of canopy, and ratio of fruit produced to weight of prunings removed). The clear aim would be to adapt to the changing requirements of a gradually warming climate, encouraging a higher ripe acidity and lower pH to occur naturally in the vineyard. Until that happens, however, winemakers will be faced with increasingly deteriorating acidity/pH balance. For the sake of clarity, let me emphasize that the Champenois are not experiencing wholly unsuitable climatic conditions. Champagne still has the best climate in the world to produce great sparkling wine, and every serious sparkling-wine producer outside this region would give their right arm for such "increasingly deteriorating acidity/pH balance." But the effects must be taken seriously if Champagne is to maintain its superiority.

The options for Champagne's winemakers trying to rectify less-than-perfect acidity and pH during vinification are reactive and extremely limited. The choice is between reducing the *dosage*, acidifying, and preventing malolactic.

During the 1980s, Brut Champagnes averaged 12–13g/l, whereas today they are closer to 10–11g/l, and many new "gastronomic" cuvées are just 6–8g/l. My position on low- and no-*dosage* Champagnes is well documented, but as a solitary solution, reducing the *dosage* is rather knee-jerk and cannot go on forever. A more elegant solution is to lower the *dosage* by just a gram or two and combine that with a small acid-pH adjustment. But do you acidify, prevent the malolactic, or do a touch of both?

It may come as a surprise to discover that acidification is legal in a northerly region such as Champagne. In truth, though, very few Champagne producers acidify because, unless they have New World experience, they have no idea how to. The exception is Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, *chef de cave* at Louis Roederer, who has made sparkling wine in Tasmania and the Anderson Valley. Lecaillon is a maestro, acidifying his Champagnes virtually every year, even in vintages that appear not to need it. It's as if he wants to keep his hand in, and it has yielded stunning results, especially in 2003. Lecaillon typically tweaks the *dosage* by no more than a gram or two, acidifies just a touch, and, most famously, employs an à la carte use of non-malolactic for Chardonnay and *tailles*.

This brings us to the third option: preventing malolactic. Most Champagne today is fermented in stainless steel and undergoes a full malolactic conversion. This is so common that it is referred to as "classic" or "traditional" in Champagne. A non-malolactic Champagne is as rare as the use of oak casks for the first fermentation, yet at one time all Champagnes were vinified in wood, and no malolactic took place. As a result, the difference between vintages was more defined than it is today. Malolactic tends to even things out, whereas preventing malolactic generally retains 1.5–4.6g of total acidity (expressed as tartaric) and prevents the pH from increasing by as much as 0.1–0.3, resulting in a crisper taste profile and greater potential longevity. There are very few non-malolactic Champagnes today. Bollinger, Gosset, Gratien, Krug, and Lanson spring to mind. Piper-Heidsieck used to claim to be non-malolactic, but the late Daniel Thibault once told me that he suspected this was not the case most of the time.

I adore the best malolactic *and* the best non-malolactic Champagnes—not to mention superb partial-malolactic Champagnes such as Louis Roederer. I hope all these styles survive, but interesting times lie ahead if the warming continues. Non-malolactic was the style of the past and seems sure to become the style of the future. ■