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## Lanson 1976–1996: The acid test

by Tom Stevenson

Lanson is the only 18th-century *grande marque* to remain true to Champagne's original non-malolactic style. For those in the know, it has always been acknowledged that Lanson's avoidance of malolactic is one of three primary reasons why its vintaged cuvées benefit from being laid down and that—with sufficient aging—they can slog it out with best vintages from any of the greatest names. The other two primary reasons are, of course, the provenance of the grapes and the skill of the winemaker. Avoiding malolactic is not an end in itself. It will not turn a sow's ear into a silk purse.

The non-malolactic style is by definition approachable only after additional aging. Lanson has recently acknowledged this by bringing out Extra Age—a beautiful Non-Vintage blend of three vintage-class years, five grands crus, and a splash of premier cru. This cuvée is aged for a minimum of five years, providing Lanson's Gold Label customers with a stunning Non-Vintage of rare finesse to sip while they wait for their slow-developing vintage cuvées to mature.

### The magnum effect

The following notes are an amalgam of a review of Vintages tasted at Lanson

UK in September 2009; a comparison of different disgorgements of the same Vintages at the Summertown Wine Café in October 2009; a trade tasting I presented in November 2009; and then my Christie's masterclass in December 2009. It will be noted that most of the wines are in magnum. This is generally considered to be a superior bottle format because, with the exception of artistic design anomalies, the crown cap, cork, upper neck, headspace, and ingress of oxygen during second fermentation and after disgorgement are exactly the same as they are in standard 75cl bottles, but since magnums hold twice the volume of wine, the rate of oxidation is half that experienced in a bottle; and the slower the evolution, the more finesse the final product has.

Another factor is the duration of the second fermentation, which is significantly longer, resulting in what could be described as a slightly different wine. However, Jean-Paul Gandon, the *chef de cave* at Lanson, states categorically that at Lanson the duration of the fermentation in bottle and magnum are precisely the same. I suppose I must believe him—not only because I have tremendous respect for his skill, but also because clearly only he knows what goes on in his own cellars. Gandon's assertion does, however, directly contradict what most other *chefs de caves* have told me. Most *chefs de caves* claim that fermentation in magnum is usually between one and two weeks longer than for the same wine in 75cl bottle. The following was sent to me by the *chef de cave* of another house on the understanding that its source is confidential. (He did not want to be seen as contradicting a colleague.) From this chart (Fig.1, *overleaf*), it can be seen that the same wine X in magnum took eight days longer to complete its fermentation than in standard 75cl bottles. The other wines charted are the CIVC norms for normal, slow, and incomplete second fermentations. It is interesting to note the “stuttering” fermentation inside

Right: Jean-Paul Gandon, Lanson's *chef de cave* and guardian of its distinctive, dry, rich house style



Photography by Jon Wyand / www.burgundywinephotos.com

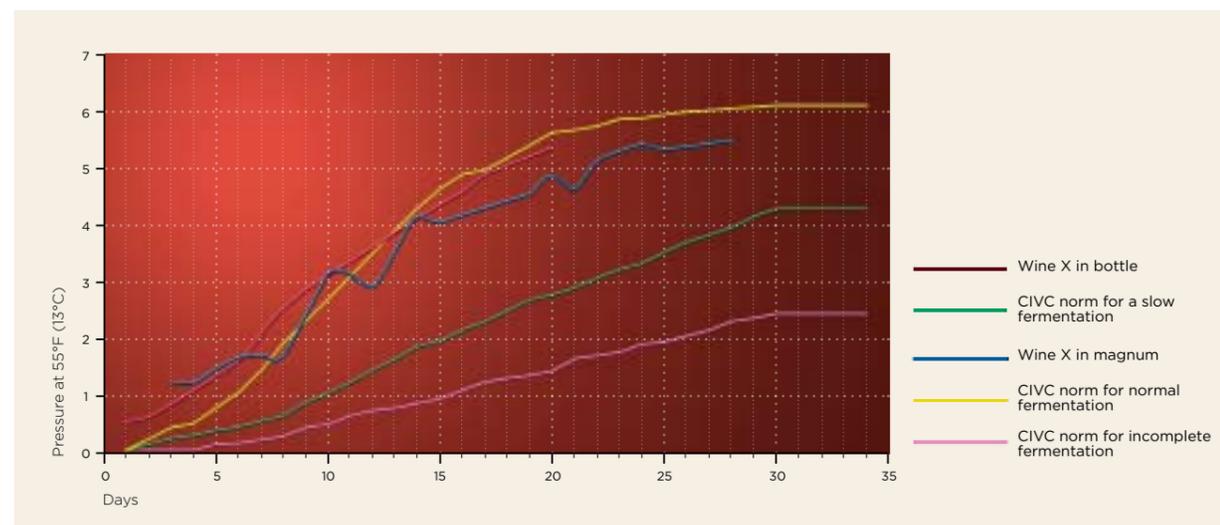


Figure 1: Progression of the second fermentation of a bottle and magnum of the same wine (X), as against industry norms as supplied by the CIVC

the magnum of wine X. The *chef de cave* of wine X told me he thought this might be due to a lack of oxygen (remember, magnums have approximately the same oxygen as bottles but twice the volume of wine to ferment) enfeebling the yeast. Bizarrely, the house in question is now experimenting with magnum crown caps engineered to permit a greater ingress of oxygen, but if this does encourage a shorter, more consistent second fermentation, would the result be any better? If most of us, including the *chef de cave* of wine X, agree that magnums are intrinsically superior to 75cl bottles, perhaps one of the most important factors is its drawn out, malnourished second fermentation? If so, instead of working toward a consistently smoother second fermentation in magnums, maybe it would be preferable to starve the 75cl bottles of oxygen?

Except for the avoidance of malolactic (which is achieved by lowering the temperature to 46.5°F [8°C]), the vinification process at Lanson is “classic modern,” with first fermentation in stainless steel at 64.5°F (15–18°C), bottling May–July, and second fermentation temperature 53.5–55.5°F (12–13°C). The *cuvée* and cellars are purpose-built and environmentally controlled, with no descending levels of progressively lower temperature, thus all *cuvées*

—from Non-Vintage Black Label, through Vintaged Gold Label, to prestige *cuvées*—undergo second fermentation and all stages of aging at precisely the same temperature.

### Lanson 1976–1996

Where exactly does Lanson Vintage draw its grapes from? The provenance of grapes is fundamentally important for any Champagne, and up until 1991 Jean-Paul Gandon could rely on one of the greatest viticultural estates ever assembled in Champagne. In December 1990, however, Lanson was sold to LVMH, which stripped the company of its 210ha (519 acres) of prime vineyards, then sold Lanson on just four months later. Tasting back over the following vintages, it is nothing less than a miracle that he has been able to keep up not only the quality but also the style. He did make two slips, however. His 1993 and 1994 were the first two Vintages he made without Lanson’s own vineyards, and perhaps understandably he failed to capture the true Lanson signature. Though they did not feature in the trade tasting or my Christie’s masterclass, I was tempted to include the 1994 (disgorged in November 2008), which was exceptional in quality for the year. But its very fruity style with flashes of strawberry from the Pinot Noir was not expressive of the Lanson style.

In order to get a better grasp of where the grapes come from for one vintage compared to another, I have compiled a chart (Fig. 2, *opposite*), with the *crus* grouped by variety.

All of the following wines (and other library vintages as well) are still commercially available on request, with a lead time of three weeks. Prices given are ex-tax UK trade prices, duty paid and delivered. The aim of showing so many historical disgorgements was to illustrate just how beautifully non-malolactic Champagnes age on their second cork, thus reassuring anyone interested in purchasing these wines (offered disgorged to order if no recently disgorged stock exists) that they need not worry how long the wines subsequently remain in their own cellar before consumption.

#### 1996 (magnum)

47% C (*Avize, Chouilly, Cramant, Mesnil, and Oger*), 53% PN (*Aÿ, Mailly, Verzenay, and Verzy*); £94.56  
The June 2008 disgorgement was tasted after the 1995s at both the trade and the Christie’s masterclass tastings, because its extraordinarily high acidity would have blown those two wines away. I likened the first release of Lanson 1996—the varietal and stylistic opposite of 1976—to “gargling with razor blades,” but though this wine still has lovely crisp acids, time has begun to soften the edges, with a distinctively toasted-citrus aroma and mesmerizing length. The fruit was very Chablisienne at the trade

SOURCES OF LANSON'S CHARDONNAY AND PINOT NOIR GRAPES BY VINTAGE

Crus	1996	1995	1988	1985	1982	1979	1976
Avize	•	•	•		•		•
Chouilly	•	•	•			•	
Cramant	•	•		•			•
Mesnil	•	•					
Oger	•		•	•	•	•	
Trepail							•
Ambonnay					•		•
Aÿ	•		•		•		
Bouzy		•	•		•		•
Mailly	•						•
Mareuil						•	•
Verzenay	•	•	•	•		•	•
Verzy	•	•					

Figure 2

tasting, but at both events this disgorgement was stunning. The September 2009 disgorgement, as tasted at the Summertown Wine Café, was significantly tighter.

#### 1995 (75cl)

47% C (*Avize, Chouilly, Cramant, and Mesnil*), 53% PN (*Bouzy, Verzenay, and Verzy*); £49.98  
The bottle tasted at Lanson UK was the most exciting example of this vintage I have ever tasted, with gorgeous fruit and a lovely long, rich, and exquisite finish. Disgorged in 1999, this bottle had just four years on yeast, but ten years’ post-disgorgement aging had worked its magic. However, as a solitary remnant of landed UK stocks, no further examples could be secured for either the trade or the Christie’s masterclass tasting. The bottle that was shown at both events was disgorged in September 2009, and by comparison it was disappointing, showing the oxidative whiff of not yet having recovered from a too-recent disgorgement. The trade-tasting bottles seemed particularly tired, but the creamy-nutty complexity on the finish of those opened at my Christie’s masterclass illustrated the long-term potential of this vintage, even in standard 75cl bottles.

#### 1995 (magnum)

47% C (*Avize, Cramant, Chouilly, and Mesnil*), 53% PN (*Verzenay, Verzy, and Bouzy*); £94.56  
By comparison with the recently disgorged bottles, the magnums disgorged as long ago as June 1999 were fantastically fresh at both events, despite ten years’ post-disgorgement aging. Very finely balanced, with gentle, elegant fruit and a lovely point of acidity.

#### 1988 (magnum)

49% C (*Avize, Chouilly, and Oger*), 51% PN (*Aÿ, Bouzy, and Verzenay*); £157.20  
Disgorged in November 2008, with 19 years

on yeast but just one year post-disgorgement aging, this has a noticeably deep gold hue, dusted vanilla on the nose and a concentrated, profoundly Pinot dried fruit on the palate. This is a serious wine with a silky mousse and great finesse. It promises to develop “Christmas cake” complexity.

#### 1985 (magnum)

48% C (*Cramant and Oger*), 52% PN (*Verzenay*); £164.76  
The June 2006 disgorgement is as beautifully concentrated as one would expect for a vintage in which the Pinot Noir yield was so tiny. Lanson’s 1985 is aging very gracefully indeed, with very toasty aromas, seductively silky mousse, and complex smoky aromatics on the finish, yet it needs another five or six years’ post-disgorgement aging to reach its peak. A recently disgorged example of this wine came second in the 1982 vs 1985 head-to-head tasting (see *WFW* 26).

#### 1985 (75cl)

48% C (*Cramant and Oger*), 52% PN (*Verzenay*); £82.38  
Soft and fresh on the nose, with a miraculous wealth of vibrant fruit on the palate for a Champagne that was disgorged in 1989, with just three years on yeast and as much as 20 years of post-disgorgement aging. But this 1985 is not simply about vibrancy of fruit; it has great class and finesse, too.

#### 1982 (magnum)

40% C (*Avize and Oger*), 60% PN (*Ambonnay, Aÿ, and Bouzy*); £195  
Unfortunately, the magnum at the Summertown Wine Café was corked, and one of the magnums at the Christie’s masterclass was spoiled by a struck-match aroma. Thankfully, all the magnums at the trade tasting were totally clean and remarkably fresh. All these magnums were disgorged in June 2006, with 23 years on yeast and three

years’ post-disgorgement aging. They all have a lovely, silky mousse, but whereas this merely tended to rescue the masterclass magnums, it actually increased the obvious finesse in the trade-tasting magnums, which had fresh acacia-like aromatics and tremendously elegant and refined fruit. A recently disgorged example of this wine came first in the 1982 vs 1985 head-to-head tasting (see *WFW* 26).

#### 1979 (magnum)

48% C (*Chouilly and Oger*), 52% PN (*Mareuil and Verzenay*); £227.40  
We tasted two different disgorgements at the Summertown Wine Café: one disgorged in 1999, which had malt aromas with creamy-cereal fruit, the other disgorged in 1986, which was very good indeed. Unfortunately, there was no more stock of the 1986 disgorgement. There was a time when 1979 was my favorite Lanson Vintage in magnum, but some disgorgements have become a bit quirky over the past few years, so we opted for a more recent disgorgement (October 2007) for the two tasting events. This was not, however, an entirely successful strategy. The magnums at the Christie’s masterclass had a litchi aroma, without any of the spice you might associate with the variety that most often bears that particular signature, while those at the trade tasting had varnish on the nose and lacked substance on the palate. I have different disgorgements in my own cellar that are much more attractive. There are windows of opportunity for disgorging Champagne—and Lanson’s 1979 is obviously very picky!

#### 1976 (magnum)

53% C (*Avize, Cramant, and Trepail*), 47% PN (*Mailly, Ambonnay, Bouzy, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, and Verzenay*); £227.40  
This vintage has always demanded serious post-disgorgement aging, so I expected that magnums disgorged as recently as October 2008 would be going through a developmental phase. I was pleasantly surprised and wowed by the combination of freshness and maturity of the magnum tasted at the Summertown Wine Café. The magnums at the trade tasting were not quite as pristine, but their power, poise, and persistence were impressive. The two magnums at the Christie’s masterclass were different colors, the deeper one not quite clean, while the lighter one lacked the intensity found above. This could have been the star of the show.

#### 1976 (magnum)

53% C (*Avize, Cramant, and Trepail*), 47% PN (*Mailly, Ambonnay, Bouzy, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, and Verzenay*); £227.40  
Disgorged in 1999, with 22 years on yeast and ten years’ post-disgorgement aging, these magnums were fabulously rich and powerful, with amazing complexity at the Summertown Wine Café and both tasting events. The star has just gone nova!