

The kings of bling, part 2

Bling Champagnes are all about the money they cost, what the bottles look like, the packaging, and how conspicuous they are to display; whereas prestige cuvées include some of the greatest Champagnes and are relatively inexpensive compared to, say, the greatest Bordeaux.

Not all the greatest Champagnes are prestige cuvées, of course. In fact, many great Champagnes are simply regular Vintage cuvées. As with every great wine, quality starts in the vineyards, but the difference in quality between Vintage and Non-Vintage from the same village and year in Champagne is achieved through selection, and prestige cuvées undergo the strictest selection of all. As a market sector, prestige cuvées are insignificant—they represent less than 6 percent of all Champagnes sold. And within this very small market, only four cuvées are produced in any volume: Krug, Perrier-Jouët Belle Epoque, Roederer Cristal, and Dom Pérignon, which outsells the lot.

There are other superb prestige cuvées—Mumm's R Lalou, Pol Roger's Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill, Taittinger's Comtes de Champagne, and Veuve Clicquot's Grande Dame, to name but a few. Even adding one-off so-called specialty Champagnes—such as Bollinger's Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Salon, and Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses—their total sales are relatively unimportant.

Unlike bling Champagne, there is no disputing the quality of such Champagnes, whether market leaders or niche products. But while they might be among the most expensive of great Champagnes, they are unfairly criticized for the prices they command. The prices of Champagne's prestige cuvées fall a long way short of the ridiculous cost of first-growth Bordeaux. You can pick up a 12-bottle case of 2000 Dom Pérignon for just under \$2,000, whereas the auction price for a case of the cheapest 2000 first growth (Haut-Brion) at the time of writing was \$12,453, and Lafite would set you back a staggering \$71,608. Yet if we move from genuinely great



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Champagne back to the most expensive bling Champagne, even this jaw-dropping sum pales into insignificance. A single magnum of a 12-year-old cooperative Champagne, Angel, is on sale for US\$250,000. Centiliter for centiliter, that's more than 20 times the price of a 2000 Lafite—though Angel does come in a diamond-encrusted leather tube!

Why is there so much bling Champagne all of a sudden? The first was Armand de Brignac, launched by Champagne Cattier in 2006. This was not Cattier's first shiny gold bottle, but at \$50 its Antique Gold failed miserably, whereas at \$250, with "Ace of Spades" embossed on the bottle and Jay-Z singing its praise in "Show Me What You Got," virtually the same Champagne flew off the shelf. As bling Champagnes go, all three cuvées of Armand de Brignac (brut, rosé and blanc de blancs) are not bad, but they are not in the same league as Cattier's classic Clos du Moulin, which is cheap by comparison. No one could have predicted the marketing miracle of Armand de Brignac. Within three years, it was being exported to more than 60 markets—more than twice as many as Champagne Cattier itself had achieved in the previous 40 years.

That first cuvée of Armand de Brignac was a 2003-based blend, so we have to ask what occurred prior to that

to trigger the production of so much bling? It seems obvious to me: the millennium. It was all the blinged-up "special" offerings from traditional producers that encouraged the idea that almost any price could be achieved.

A lot of second-rate "millennium cuvées" were produced toward the end of the 1990s. But when Roederer stepped up to the plate with its 1990 Cristal "2000," it was pure class, and the premium was more than deserved. (2000 Methuselahs were produced and sold for \$2,000 each, which is chicken-feed nowadays.) Then Moët brought out its Esprit du Siècle, a blend of 1995 and 1985, with no less than two thirds of seriously mature reserve wine from vintages 1900, 1914, 1921, 1934, 1943, 1952, 1962, 1976, and 1983. Just 320 magnums were produced, and only 30 were released for sale. The price was a whopping \$30,000 a magnum, but if any Champagne was worth such a price in 2000, this was it. The remaining 290 magnums were allocated for charity auctions and various special events at Moët, up to and including its 300th birthday celebration in 2043 (when I hope to taste it again!).

These two special Champagnes cannot be described as bling, but Dom Ruinart's L'Exclusive can be seen as the precursor to bling Champagne. It is not bling—the design is far too classic and tasteful for that—but the extravagance of its presentation makes the wine secondary, which is a pity, because L'Exclusive is a one-off blend of four extraordinary vintages from six grands crus, the likes of which will probably never be seen again. Here we have a fine Champagne—if not in quite the same stratospheric league as the Cristal "2000," let alone Moët's Esprit du Siècle—encased in a filigree of silver plate created by Christoffe silversmiths, then in a handmade, walnut humidior, lined with white leather. It is quality craftsmanship, but the one-off wine of Dom Ruinart plays second fiddle to the packaging of L'Exclusive, which is as much for display as any bling Champagne. ■