

Eye on the ball

What connects Lanson 1989 and 1990 with Krug Grande Cuvée? Let me give you a clue; it has nothing to do with the shared passion of these two houses for the non-malolactic style and has everything to do with what was happening behind the scenes in 1990.

It all started in the late 1990s with a simple question: Which was the better vintage, 1989 or 1990? Back then, the answer should have been so simple—1990, of course—but at Lanson, Jean-Paul Gandon, the *chef de cave*, was having none of it. For him, Lanson 1989 was infinitely better and always would be. I was not so sure, which is why I offered him my hand and said, “Jean-Paul, I bet that when both vintages are 20 years old, the 1990 will be the better wine.” He took my hand and he shook it.

With the 1989 22 years old and the 1990 21 years old, the time has come to make a definitive decision on Lanson’s performance in these two vintages. In general, the 1989s were luscious from the start, quickly developing a deep color and perceived to be more ripe than they actually were. What marked the 1990s was their uniquely high acidity-to-ripeness ratio. The acidity was not as high as it was in 1996, but 1996 was not as ripe. Furthermore, the 1990 was so great across all varieties and districts that it was soon being touted as one of the greatest vintages of the 20th century. So, as good as Lanson 1989 might be, how could Lanson 1990 not be better?

In order to resolve the issue, I took a recently disgorged bottle and magnum of both vintages to Ronnie’s of Thornbury, my favorite local restaurant, where I could taste each example with food, going back and forth to try different combinations.

Tasting the bottles first, the 1990 was deeper colored than the 1989, which is the opposite of the norm. The 1990 was not just deep in color but dark and lacked brightness. It also tasted how it looked: dark and forbidding, with maderized and oxidized aromas intermingling with notes of undergrowth, mushrooms, and dried straw (but absolutely no hint of



Tom Stevenson

TCA). The 1989 in bottle was not only paler than the 1990, it was pale for a 1989. There were some very light maderized aromas but without any additional oxidized notes. It was much clearer and cleaner than the 1990 on the palate, with an intriguing hint of coconut on the aftertaste. The difference between the bottle and magnum of 1990 was like chalk and cheese, with the magnum being significantly paler and really quite fresh, with no oxidized notes, though with rather clinical, expressionless fruit. The magnum of 1989, however, was mind-blowing. It was so unbelievably pale and fresh that if I had not known its provenance, I might have wondered as to its veracity. Its superbly fresh aromas and crisp fruit made it appear ten years younger than the Lanson 1990 in magnum, while the palate’s yeast-complexed, coconutty fruit was wonderfully rich, mellow, and sweet, with great length and finesse. It was pure heaven with Ronnie’s wild-mushroom-and-Champagne risotto.

The 1989 won hands down, but why has Lanson 1990 been such an underperformer? Let’s look at the numbers. The natural potential alcohol for Lanson 1990 was 10.34% with 8.28g/l of total acidity (expressed as H₂SO₄) compared to an average of 10.7% or 11.1% (official sources differ) and 8g/l for the region as a whole. These figures suggest

that Lanson used grapes that were either harvested early or not first choice, even though in any other year, 10.34% and 8.28g/l would be classified as super-vintage quality. Yet the Champagne made from these grapes has not evolved in any super way at all. A number of 1990s burned brightly and quickly before sinking into an early and quite ugly retirement, from which some will no doubt re-emerge invigorated, while others will wither away, but I cannot think of any 1990 that has been quite so lackluster for two decades. So, what adversely affected the Lanson 1990?

In December 1990, Lanson was sold to LVMH only to be stripped of its vineyards and sold on four months later to Marne et Champagne. Prior to this, Lanson owned 240ha (600 acres) of prime vineyards. Everytime Champagne goes through its legendary boom-bust cycle, those on top stay on top by building up their vineyards on the cheap. It’s a shame for the once-independent houses that lose them, but I actually admire Moët for investing in its future in this way. We should not forget that this is precisely how the Lanson family built up its own estate of vineyards in the 1930s. What comes around, goes around.

Jean-Paul Gandon was the *chef de cave* in 1990, and during the months of negotiation, he would have known what was happening. It must have been very worrying for him. Did this affect his handling of the vineyards in that final year? Did he take his eye off the ball during the harvest, the pressing, the fermentation, or *assemblage*? What happened to his wines in tank during those four months under LVMH? What was he allowed to bottle as Lanson 1990? All these questions remain unanswered. In fact, the only question that can be fully answered is whether the Lanson 1990 eventually turned out better than the 1989—and that answer has to be no.

So, what connects Lanson 1989 and 1990 with Krug Grande Cuvée? When I bet Jean-Paul that the 1990 would be the better wine, I rashly added, “And if it is not, I’ll give you a case of Krug Grande Cuvée.” It’s time for me to pay up! ■