

Dinner with the Dom

The problem with Richard Geoffroy is that he knows me too well. Or, at least, well enough to be certain that anything discussed off the record will remain absolutely off the record. That is why I am sitting here listening to a tape of an interview that lasted two hours and 32 minutes and can only find 20 minutes on the record.

I have known Geoffroy since the 1980s, when he was a globe-trotting enologist advising local winemaking teams in the far-flung outposts of Moët & Chandon's viticultural empire. While this charismatic Frenchman was brightening up the wine scene in the USA, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia, Champagne itself was gradually turning an industrial shade of gray. It had grown rich on the hard work of colorful personalities such as Charles Heidsieck, Eugène Mercier, and the Widow Clicquot, but by the 1980s this region was dominated by large groups whose corporate owners had forgotten that Champagne was a wine. Indeed, their influence was such that Champagne houses rarely spoke about their *chefs de caves*, and had begun peddling the world's greatest sparkling wine as if it were just a factory-made luxury good.

Looking back, it is clear Geoffroy's 1990 appointment as the *chef de cave* of Dom Pérignon was a watershed moment for all Champagne, though he would be the last person to agree with this. However, his youthful enthusiasm, friendly personality, and willingness to discuss hitherto unspoken aspects of Champagne production had already made a positive impact on the media's perception of Moët & Chandon by the time he took up his prestigious Dom Pérignon position. Then he began communicating about Champagne's most iconic prestige cuvée as if it were a great wine; and the production, content, quality, and aging potential of different vintages of Dom Pérignon became talking points for the very first time. Where Moët & Chandon goes, others follow: It is no coincidence *chefs de caves* in Champagne only began receiving due recognition as recently as the 1990s.



Tom Stevenson

Geoffroy is now in charge of all Moët & Chandon winemaking activities in Champagne, as well as Spain, China, and the New World. Though research at Moët & Chandon has never been more prolific, winemaking throughout this group has moved from a technical base to a creative slant under Geoffroy. It has become less formulaic, more risk-taking, as winemakers are encouraged to follow their heart as much as their head.

While Dom Pérignon remains Geoffroy's personal fiefdom, and the dinner we were having was ostensibly to drink and discuss the 2003, 2002, and 1996 vintages of that great Champagne, I could not help starting our conversation with my current opinion of Moët & Chandon NV Brut Impérial. So, as we enjoyed the 2002 DP with our starters, I told Richard that I had very recently tasted more than 70 Non-Vintage Champagnes from houses and growers, including almost all the top names in both categories, and under blind conditions I had given the Brut Impérial a score of 17.5 out of 20. Frankly, I was amazed (in a very pleasant way) when I saw the crib sheet. I had noticed a stylistic shift over recent years but had not imagined that Brut Impérial had such richness and pronounced acidity. It is, after all, one heck of a score for a production of a single cuvée that can be in excess of 20 million bottles a year.

Richard was obviously pleased: "Wow, this is good, very good, but there is more to come. I am sure Benoît [Gouez, the *chef de cave* at Moët & Chandon] told you that we have been spending a lot of energy on the Non-Vintage. Dom Pérignon is special, but Non-Vintage is the core of our business. We are starting to be recognized for the Brut Impérial vintage, but we won't be satisfied until the Brut Impérial Non-Vintage gets a similar reaction."

As for the 2002 DP, it showed the hallmark effects of *passerillage*—a rare phenomenon in Champagne but one that reduced yields that year, decreasing the acidity, increasing the richness of flavor, and providing a telltale dried mixed-fruit complexity on the finish. We drank the 2003 DP with a wild-mushroom risotto, and the combination was beautiful. There is a significant lack of acidity in this vintage, thanks to three days of freezing fog, which reduced the potential crop by half, and a short veraison under the relentless heat of the hottest summer since 1540. However, at the table, with the right dish, the 2003 DP does not lack acidity. It has a balance of its own. Richard finds an intensity in this wine that I call gravitas, but we agree on the remarkable minerality in a year that really should not have any. This is a Champagne that he could not have made 20 years ago, when it was the done thing to try to compensate for difficult years. Now he embraces them.

The sublime 1996 DP Oenothèque is currently far and away the best example of this vintage from any Champagne producer. Many 1996s are going through a gloomy phase, but the best will emerge, do a 180° turn, and start challenging DP. (I am not a mystic; I have seen this with some of the best 1976s, '59s, and '47s.) Even so, they will have a hell of a task to come close to its impeccable balance between complexity and finesse.

Richard Geoffroy has not just put a human face on Moët & Chandon; he's put a big smile on my face. There was lots of smiling the night I had dinner with the Dom. I would love to tell you why, but it was all off the record. ■