

## Thinking outside the box

When Veuve Clicquot announced its return to oak last year, it was—we were told—part of its vintage program, but that was not the whole story. There is always a subtext with the Champenois, and in this case, the long-term ramifications are inspired.

Last June, I was part of a group of journalists invited to visit Veuve Clicquot's new air-conditioned cuverie, which, as Michael Edwards revealed in *WFW* 33, contains 30 oak *foudres*, the use of which we were assured would not impart any oak character. The cuverie would be like a kitchen, where the *foudres* would be spices used to broaden the choice of blending components for the vintage cuvée in a bid to combat the effect of increasingly earlier and hotter harvests. If the reappearance of oak in the Veuve Clicquot production process came as a surprise to some, the decision to prevent malolactic in some of the *foudres* was an even greater shock.

However, neither oak nor the prevention of malolactic is new to Veuve Clicquot's style. Like all Champagne producers, Veuve Clicquot once vinified all of its wines in oak, and malolactic was rare in the industry until the 1960s. Veuve Clicquot began moving away from oak as early as 1946, when it started a 12-year program to switch its production to glass-lined concrete tanks, the cutting edge of technology at the time. Then in 1959, when the concrete in the final tank had barely had time to cure, Veuve Clicquot started to install stainless-steel vats. Although, as Edwards correctly mentioned, 1961 was the last Veuve Clicquot vintage to include any vinification in oak, it was not the last vintage at this house to be touched by oak. Long after the move to stainless steel had been completed, a number of 100hl oak *foudres* remained for storage purposes. Consequently, almost every Veuve Clicquot cuvée contained 3–5 percent of oak up to the mid-1970s.

The most noticeable loss for any Champagne moving away from oak is a certain amplexness of mouthfeel. When fermenting in wooden vessels that are



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large enough or sufficiently well used not to impart any significant oakiness to a wine, the primary influence is simply microoxygenation. This produces a textural enhancement that is not dissimilar to the creaminess created by aromatically low-key malolactic. Although inoculation with malolactic bacteria had been demonstrated as early as 1900, malolactic was a sporadic occurrence in Champagne up to the 1950s and was seen more as a problem than an option. During this era, however, Emile Peynaud's pioneering work in Bordeaux enabled the control of malolactic (through temperature, SO<sub>2</sub> levels, and pH), and its benefits began to filter back to Champagne. This coincided with the introduction of temperature-controlled vats, which made malolactic a serious style choice for Champagne producers for the first time. Roger Zèches (Veuve Clicquot's *chef de cave* from 1941 to 1969) was thus able to maintain the house style during the switch from oak to concrete and then stainless steel by using the controlled application of malolactic to replace the loss of the textural effect from the microoxygenation of oak *foudres* as they were decommissioned.

With the current 30 *foudres* representing just 5–10 percent of Veuve Clicquot's vintage cuvée, the reversal of a small proportion of the changes made by Zèches should be relatively easy for

Dominique Demarville, Veuve Clicquot's current *chef de cave*. Demarville and Cyril Brun, one of his senior winemakers, are both keen to emphasize that the new cuverie is exclusively part of Veuve Clicquot's vintage strategy and that any contribution to the non-vintage cuvée will merely be an unintentional result of utilizing the wines in a year when a vintage is not declared. However, they dropped enough clues during our visit to highlight a far more complex underlying strategy and to reveal that the non-vintage Yellow Label will be the primary beneficiary, not the vintage cuvée. These clues first confirm that the cuverie of *foudres* is indeed an experimental kitchen where the winemaking team will develop new recipes to tackle the unexpected results of climate change and perfect their experience with non-malolactic wines. Second, though the *foudres* are the equivalent of just 0.5–1 percent of the current volume of Yellow Label, even this will make a difference. Nothing oak, but a 0.5 percent addition can make or break a blend at a high subliminal level. Third, and most importantly, the cuverie is integral to Dominique's decision in 2008 to declare a maximum of three vintages every ten years. So many years are declared in Champagne these days that a vintage cuvée has lost its exclusivity. Dominique will therefore get the kudos for making Vintage Champagne special again, but the really clever aspect of this strategy is that by reducing the number of vintages released, he diverts the very best wines to the Yellow Label in as many as seven years out of ten. Dominique knows it is the Yellow Label that makes Veuve Clicquot's reputation, yet he is acutely aware it is also the weakest link in the chain. Almost anyone can improve the quality of a Vintage Champagne through stricter selection, but to have any significant impact on the quality of a non-vintage cuvée that accounts for 90 percent of a total 15-million bottle production is something of an entirely different order. What a brilliantly innovative strategy Dominique and his team have devised to achieve this. ■