

## Cristal clear

**W**e were crammed into Aston Martin's new showroom for Louis Roederer's first masterclass in London. It was testament to Roederer's extraordinarily high quality and the great respect shown for its gifted *chef de cave* Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon that no one minded being seated at tables packed so tight that it was impossible for anyone to pour the Champagnes!

Lecaillon explained that of the 230ha (570 acres) of vineyards owned by Roederer, 40 are biodynamic and a further 15 organic. This includes 10ha (25 acres) of certified biodynamic vineyards purchased from Leclerc Briant. The other 30ha (75 acres) are awaiting certification. Roederer has, therefore, the largest biodynamic estate in Champagne, but Lecaillon does not believe in farming according to astrological events or any of the other biodynamic mumbo jumbo. He has too much respect for science to be taken in by the fevered imagination of Rudolf Steiner, but he does have eyes in his head and too much of an inquiring mind to dismiss what he sees. He has recorded how his biodynamic vineyards react differently from his organic and conventional vineyards—sometimes for the better, sometimes not, according to the weather. He is studying biodynamics because he thinks he can learn from some of the old ways, not because he believes in goblins.

Lecaillon also explained his method for making rosé Champagne, which he believes to be unique, and I think he is probably right. Pinot Noir grapes are cold-soaked for one week. There is no crushing of the black berries and no fermentation, which would only extract tannins, and that is the last thing wanted in a rosé Champagne. The Pinot Noir juice is drained off and, depending on its depth of color, 20–50 percent acidic Chardonnay juice is added. Because the Pinot Noir has been picked for ripeness, it needs this acidity for balance, but the acidity also helps stabilize the color. The temperature is then gently increased to encourage the first fermentation, approximately 20 percent of which is carried out in oak



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(9,000-liter, well-used French oak *foudres*). Sometimes, when the color is too light after fermentation, some of the Pinot Noir pressing will be added. As Lecaillon himself admitted, the results can be variable in color, but few would dispute the consistency of its quality. The first wine of the tasting, Roederer 2007 Brut Rosé, was a mini-miracle.

Although rarely a problem in the 2000s, rot was prevalent in Champagne in 2000, 2001, 2005, and 2007. The 2005s are beginning to drop like flies from what is believed to be a new variant of botrytis, the organoleptic effects of which remained fairly dormant in the bottle until a couple of years ago. The incidence of rot in 2007 was the highest since gluconic acid readings began, but I have tasted some delightfully clean, absolutely classic 2007s, and Roederer's rosé ranks among the finest.

We finished this masterclass with the 1996 Cristal Rosé, an absolutely stunning wine of breathtaking freshness, as indeed was the 1996 Cristal Brut earlier. With so many 1996s having deteriorated unexpectedly, it was very reassuring to see both these Cristals performing precisely as promised. Unfortunately, the 1990 Cristal, from the other outstanding vintage generally to have nose-dived recently, did not show very well at this tasting. I can reveal that *WFW* will hold a 1990-versus-1996

Champagne tasting to investigate the problem. It will be restricted to 11 houses who are able to submit magnums of both vintages, and we will be tasting each vintage disgorged six months and 30 months. I hope we will find some answers, but I think the problem with this Cristal 1990 had nothing to do with Roederer and everything to do with disgorgement. There were only two disappointing Champagnes of the 11 in the masterclass, the other being the Roederer 1988 Brut Vintage. I believe it was no coincidence that these were the only Champagnes we tasted that had not been disgorged at the time they were commercially released. Both had been disgorged four years ago, which many people think should make them fresher, but the longer a Champagne remains in contact with its lees, the more used to its reductive environment it becomes and the more sensitive to the oxidative shock of disgorgement. Yes, it will immediately be exceptionally fresh, and it can keep this fresh edge for a couple of years or so; but when the oxidation sets in, it will mature far more quickly than a historically disgorged Champagne. Before long it will fall off a cliff, and that is what has happened to the 1990 Cristal and Roederer 1988 Brut Vintage.

The *raison d'être* for the masterclass was to give the London wine trade its first glimpse at the 2005 Cristal, and it showed beautifully, with clean and crisp aromatics, a seductive finesse to the fruit, and no sign of the rot that has started to beleague this vintage. Three other wines stood out: the Roederer 2002 Brut Vintage (richly aromatic, with wonderfully bottle-mature, vanilla-dusted fruit and a distinctly exotic twist from the *passerillage* fruit that is a very rare phenomenon in Champagne); 2004 Cristal (now that the 2005 has arrived, this vintage is just beginning to show its finesse through a lovely gentle richness of fruit); and 1999 Cristal (an absolute hedonist's dream, deliciously rich and toasty, with layers of cream, oats, and toast). Cristal clearly takes about eight years before it begins to show its true potential. ■