

Reinventing a classic: Charles Heidsieck Brut and Rosé Réserve

There's so much more to the rerelease of Champagne Charles Heidsieck's Brut and Rosé Réserve Non-Vintage cuvées than the change in bottle shape. For Tom Stevenson, both are remarkable examples of sensitively handled, quality-minded evolution

In September 2012, Champagne Charles Heidsieck is due to relaunch its Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve with a new blend, bottle, and label. Since it is widely accepted that the modern-day reputation of this house has been squarely built on the late Daniel Thibault's reconstruction of the Brut Réserve, this decision must have been either brave or foolish.

To understand why, we have to go back to 1985, when Joseph Henriot sold Charles Heidsieck to Rémy Martin (now Rémy-Cointreau), a cash-rich, family-run Cognac house that already owned Krug (since acquired by LVMH). The new owners immediately tasked Daniel Thibault, the *chef de cave* at Charles Heidsieck since 1976, with producing the best Non-Vintage Champagne on the market bar none. To accomplish this, Thibault received the funding not only to purchase the very best grapes he could lay his hands on but also to build up the enormous stocks of reserve wines required to blend an unprecedented 40 percent of reserve wine from no fewer than eight different vintages into the Brut Réserve.

This was at a time when the norm for reserves was just 10–15 percent from the two or three immediately previous years. The quality of Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve quickly assumed an almost mythical status, not least for displaying its signature hint of vanilla even though it never saw a molecule of oak. And as the years went by, Thibault himself became a living legend as he replicated the style and quality of this Champagne year on year.

The consistency and quality of Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve was recognized even by its major competitors, yet in 1997 Thibault decided to relaunch this Champagne. "If it ain't broke, don't mend it," and the Brut Réserve certainly was not broke. But Thibault did not want to change the cuvée; he just wanted to illustrate the difference that increased aging on yeast can bring to essentially the same Champagne. He renamed it Brut Réserve Mis en Cave (*mis en cave* refers to the date when a Champagne is bottled and cellared) and released three different versions: Brut Réserve Mis en Cave 1992 (bottled in 1992, thus 1991-based, plus 40 percent reserve wine), Brut Réserve Mis en Cave 1993 (1992-based), and Brut Réserve Mis en Cave 1994 (1993-based). This was audacious. No house had ever marketed three versions of its own Non-Vintage. The problem was the small oval Mis en Cave label bearing the year of bottling. This was located on the front shoulder, in exactly the same place where many wines display their vintage. Not surprisingly, many people mistook the *mis en cave* year to be a vintage year. Journalists did their best to inform otherwise, and sommeliers at the best restaurants understood, of course. But even in the Champagne region, some less clued-up restaurants had these wines listed as Vintages. If it was not fully understood in their own backyard, Charles Heidsieck realized that the *mis*

en cave concept was bound to cause confusion in the wider world, though there was never any confusion over its quality. After Thibault died in 2002, he was succeeded by Régis Camus, who two years later removed the small *mis en cave* and sensibly transferred the information to the back label; even this mysteriously disappeared on bottles disgorged in 2010 through to the beginning of 2011.

The all-new Brut Réserve cuvées

Mis en Cave was an intellectual marketing exercise, not a new cuvée, so the Brut Réserve built by Thibault back in the late 1980s remained the bedrock upon which the reputation of Charles Heidsieck continued to rest. This time, however, the cuvée itself has changed. If they get this wrong, the reputation of Charles Heidsieck could implode. But if the initial blends are anything to go by, Charles Heidsieck's new winemaker Thierry Roset has not only got away with mending something that clearly was not broken, he has also successfully reinvented the wheel. Charles Heidsieck did not need to re-establish its reputation, yet that is exactly what the new Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve will achieve.

I was privileged to taste these new Champagnes at this year's *Decanter* World Wine Awards, where Charles Heidsieck had slipped them in unannounced. Judged under blind conditions they both received unanimous gold medals, and the Brut Rosé Réserve went on to win the Non-Vintage Rosé Champagne Trophy. Yes, they are that good.

To appreciate Roset's efforts, we need to put him into context with Régis Camus, who, as director of vines and wines for both Piper- and Charles Heidsieck, recently put this enologist in charge of Charles Heidsieck production. Camus retains oversight, of course, but he handed over day-to-day control so



Charles Heidsieck's Thierry Roset, who has overseen the successful reinvention of two great NV Champagnes

that he could personally concentrate on Piper-Heidsieck, the production of which is eight times larger than that of Charles Heidsieck. I have known Camus since he was *chef de cave* at Jacquart, where he showed great promise. But although he learned so much more under Thibault between 1994, when he arrived at Piper- and Charles Heidsieck, and 2002, when his mentor died, I was not alone in expressing concern about whether he could fill Thibault's shoes. Well, he not only maintained the great man's extraordinary standards for Charles Heidsieck, he also raised the quality of the Piper-Heidsieck range.

If Thibault was vulnerable to any criticism, it was for the economic cost of his quality regime. As he presided over the soaring reputation of Charles Heidsieck, so the house suffered diminishing sales, dwindling from the 3.5 million bottles immediately prior to its acquisition by Rémy Martin, to barely more than 1 million bottles. It is even less today, perhaps just 800,000 bottles. What his critics often missed was the big picture. Neither Thibault nor Rémy Martin was stupid; they knew that the

combination of building up massive stocks of reserve wines and producing a radically higher-quality Non-Vintage could only be achieved at the expense of sales. This was why, while Thibault was busy weaving his magic at Charles Heidsieck, Rémy Martin set its sights on acquiring Piper-Heidsieck, which it did in 1988. So, as the critics eyed the decrease in sales of Charles Heidsieck, they failed to notice Piper's sales rise from 4.5 million bottles to 7–8 million. Piper became the cash cow that fed Thibault's voracious appetite for Charles Heidsieck's quality. Thibault left some stunning Vintage and Rare (older vintages) of Piper in the pipeline, but Camus has improved the quality of the Piper Brut so much that only age stops it being in the same league, which for the size of its production is amazing.

Since the new owner, EPI, has little experience of wine and absolutely none of Champagne, the company hired Cécile Bonnefond, the former head of Veuve Clicquot. Bonnefond has the unstoppable drive of Carol Duval, the fearsome intellect of Christine Lagarde, and the passion for quality displayed

by the *grande dame* Lily Bollinger and all the great women of Champagne. She knows perfectly well, I'm sure, that just two obstacles stand between her and establishing Charles & Piper-Heidsieck as one of Champagne's most lucrative groups: the price of Piper and the volume of Charles. With the volume that Piper boasts, the smallest increase in price can have a significant effect on profit margins, which is why she wants Camus to concentrate his efforts there. A steadily increasing price for Piper is vital, and she knows that the slightest hiccup in quality can set back the brand's positioning by years, so Camus is key to price. The price of Charles is good but nowhere near as good as it should be for such outstanding quality. Furthermore, it requires the demand for a certain volume and the visible resistance of the temptation to exceed that volume, to achieve a significant premium in price. Roederer has demonstrated that 2.5 million is a safe cap for the top end of quality volume, while Joseph Henriot has demonstrated that it was possible to sell 3.5 million bottles of Charles Heidsieck at a relatively inexpensive price in a global market that was just two thirds of the volume it is now. From this, Bonnefond can deduce that selling 2.5 million bottles of Charles Heidsieck at a significantly increased price is doable, and I cannot imagine anything or anyone stopping her from achieving that target within the next five years. This is why Charles Heidsieck would want to reinvent the wheel and explains why Roset already had the new cuvées in the works when EPI took over.

New cuvées, same quality and style

Although they are, indeed, totally new cuvées, it has always been Charles Heidsieck's aim to keep the quality and style exactly the same. Roset has been involved in the blending of every cuvée of Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve since 1992, when the very first Mis en

Cave was bottled. He, therefore, has a clear sense of what the house style is and describes it succinctly as “a balance between complexity and generosity.” Over time, Roset believes he has worked out how to create the “same wine” with fewer crus and slightly older reserve wines. The Brut Réserve has always comprised between 110 and 120 crus, but Roset’s tweaked version contains just 60 crus, and in this *assemblage* there is even more emphasis on Oger (for Chardonnay), Ambonnay (for Pinot Noir), and Verneuil (for Meunier)—the three crus that have always been the heart and soul of this Champagne. There is still a huge 40 percent of reserve wine, but the reserves now go back more than ten years (actually, 15 years for the first release) instead of the previous norm of “just” eight years (though in some blends this went back ten years). The Brut Rosé Réserve receives only 20 percent reserves, and for both cuvées the reserve wines are exclusively Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Meunier is integral to the Brut Réserve style—but for part of the wine’s freshness, not as an aged component. The color of the Brut Rosé Réserve is achieved by the addition of 6 percent red wine from Ambonnay, Bouzy and Les Riceys. The final proportion of grape varieties has not changed, there being 40 percent Chardonnay, 40 percent Pinot Noir, and 20 percent Meunier in the Brut Réserve, and 35 percent Chardonnay, 45 percent Pinot Noir, and 20 percent Meunier in the Brut Rosé Réserve.

The squat bottles used for the new blends are known in-house as *crayères*, because their shape is reminiscent of the cross-section of the Gallo-Roman *crayères* (chalk cellars) that are found in Reims. This type of bottle is becoming a popular choice for Champagne producers who are relaunching individual cuvées and sometimes an entire range. However, whereas the main body of this style of bottle is squatter than a traditional Champagne bottle—lending it, according to the marketing people, some sort of additional gravitas that can be translated into a higher price bracket—the neck is far more slender



than on a regular Champagne bottle and this serves a solid technical purpose. The narrower the neck, the smaller the head space, and the less room for oxygen—thus, the slower the rate of evolution. The Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve neck is slightly narrower than the new Bollinger bottle, which Mathieu Kauffman claims benefits from a 10 percent reduction in total package oxygen, 5 percent reduction in the oxygen transfer rate before disgorgement, and 5–10 percent reduction in the oxygen transfer rate after disgorgement. Charles Heidsieck should therefore benefit by at least the same margins.

Since presentation is very much part of the package for these two new cuvées, I feel compelled to comment on the labeling, something I seldom bother to do because all that really matters is the quality of the wine inside the bottle. The new labels are not bad as such, but they do look very much like works in progress. They do not possess the class of the previous labels, particularly the old pastel-colored Brut Rosé Réserve label. It is probably much too early for artistic criticism to be well received, but when those involved are sufficiently removed from the combined effort to get these new cuvées from the cellar to the shelf, I hope that they will be able to recognize that the front label was a step backward. The back label, however,



gives Champagne critics much of what they have been arguing for over the past ten years—namely both the bottling and disgorgement date. Now consumers are able to find out how old the wine is and how much post-disgorgement aging it has had, while those who do not understand or care about such information (which is most Champagne producers’ excuse for not supplying the information) won’t bother to look for it. The month of disgorgement would have been better than just the year, since there can be almost 24 months between a January disgorgement one year and a December disgorgement the next, and a three-year gap between bottling and disgorgement can be as little as two years if January to December, or as much as four if December to January. But I should not be churlish, since this level of information is hard to find elsewhere.

What do they taste like?

I tasted both cuvées in plain sight and side by side with the last release of the “old” Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve (2006-based, bottled 2007, disgorged 2011) and the first release of the previous “old” Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve (2005-based, bottled 2006, disgorged 2009) to see if the new Champagne blends live up to Roset’s seemingly contradictory claim of being the same but different.

Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve (12% ABV; bottled 2008, disgorged 2011)

This (2007-based) cuvée is lighter in color than either of the two releases of the “old” Brut Réserve. This is only to be expected: Although the most recent of those releases was also disgorged in 2011, that wine was 2006-based and thus one year older. It is also crisper and younger, with the Chardonnay element slightly more dominant than it would be in the “old” Brut Réserve at the same age. This gives Roset’s new blend more focus and less mellowness, but it is not all top and no bottom, since the additional age of reserves builds up more richness and intensity in the background. The balance and extreme precision of the acidity is a clear match, and the new cuvée still has some of the peppery-spice complexity (the precursor to vanilla in Charles Heidsieck Champagne) of the “old” style, though it does not yet have the haunting hints of toast found in the 2006-based Brut Réserve or the mellowing toasty aromas and fleeting vanilla glimpses of the 2005-based. Inspired winemaking.

Charles Heidsieck Brut Rosé Réserve (12% ABV; bottled 2008, disgorged 2011)

Essentially the same wine as the Brut Réserve with only half the reserves, but with 6 percent red wine, which gives the wine Charles Heidsieck’s signature pale-salmon

color. This is a Champagne that looks so perfect in the glass that you know it is going to blow you away, and it does. No wonder it won the Non-Vintage Rosé Trophy at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards. The reduced reserve-wine content gives the Brut Rosé Réserve its sustained freshness of fruit on the palate, but 20 percent reserves is not insignificant, particularly considering the age of those wines, and the red wine adds a degree of instant mellow complexity that is not yet present in the Brut Réserve, despite its double helping of reserve wine. This is a very classy Champagne rosé that continues to build in the glass. It is very similar in style to both “old” cuvées of Brut Rosé Réserve, yet it has immediately outshone those that have gone before.

Conclusion

Occasionally, some blends of the “old” Brut Réserve gave me pause for thought when they were first released, only for those very same blends to show their true class after a little more bottle age. By increasing the age of the reserve wines, Roset seems to have resolved that minor issue through more immediate gravitas in the new Champagnes. Only time will tell, of course, but these new cuvées feel as

though they have been built to evolve at a slower rate. The narrower neck helps, of course, but the reduction in oxygen has less effect compared to the intrinsically slower aging potential of the wine itself, and it is Roset’s honing of the crus, particularly the increase of Chardonnay from Oger, that has achieved this. He has retained the essential style and character of the old cuvées, but there is more intensity at the heart of the new Champagne, and consequently the aging process of these wines takes longer to move through the gears. This really is very clever indeed, because Roset has fashioned these Champagnes to perform brilliantly however fast or slow they might sell. Should sales be sluggish, the new Brut Réserve and Brut Rosé Réserve will retain their freshness, but if Charles Heidsieck starts flying off the shelf, the greater age of the formidable reserve wines will paper over any cracks if they have to rush shipments on to the market. In short, Roset has given Bonfond the perfect ammunition.

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