

(underground)

2000–2011 CHAMPAGNE

LOOKING BACK TO THE FUTURE: WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

Because Vintage Champagne releases are always staggered, it can be difficult to get an accurate impression of any particular vintage, let alone consecutive vintages over a decade. But with privileged access to yet-unreleased wines at several top houses, Tom Stevenson is able to give unique insights into the quality and style of every vintage back to 2000, as well as to highlight some of the greatest treats in store

In theory, a Vintage Champagne need only be three years old when it is sold, but in practice, the norm is closer to six, and many are much older than that. When reviewing the next Champagne vintages to be released, therefore, we must take into account all years over the past decade or so.

I spent a week in Champagne, looking back in order to taste forward. It is one thing to taste advance samples of Champagne that will be released in a few months, but quite another to make sense of Champagnes that will not be sold for several years, which is the job I do and have done, on and off, for the past 35 years. When I started specializing in Champagne, I tasted vertically everywhere, because it was only through experiencing a number of previous vintages that I was able to assess the quality, style, and consistency of individual producers. I still do this, and I enjoy it immensely, but I must confess that I am less obsessed with the past than I used to be. I am now far more interested in what the future holds and how Champagnes make the journey that only the *chefs de caves* normally witness, so that I can predict how they will develop once released and follow the commercially disgorged products to see how they actually perform.

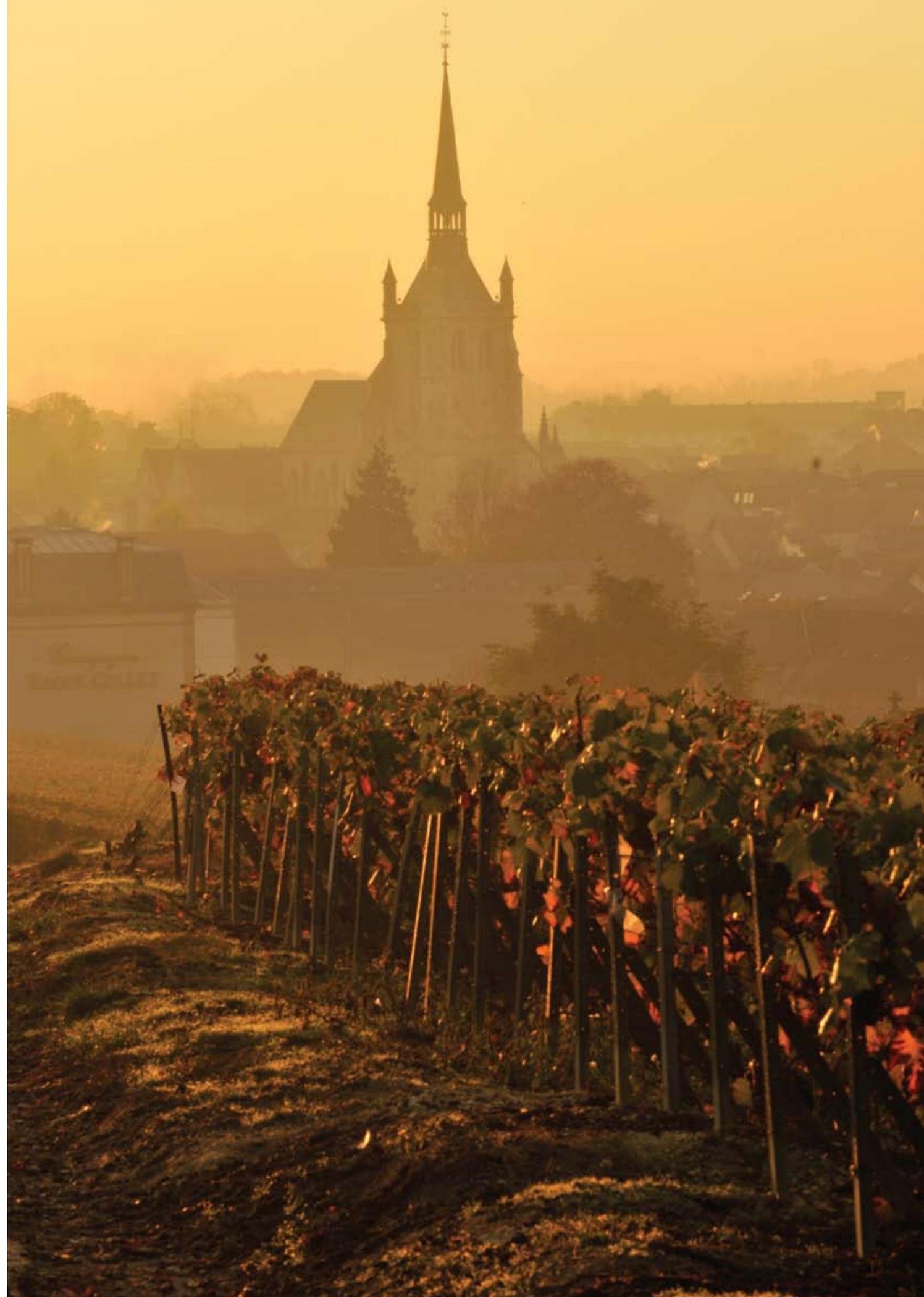
I am fascinated by the myriad routes a Champagne can take through the often stormy seas of autolysis, by the many different paths that can sometimes lead to the same place, and, bizarrely, by the very similar paths that can sometimes lead to very different places. To discover which aromatics to be wary of and which ones merely indicate a difficult developmental stage in the process. To see where these aromatics will lead, and discover why very similar aromatics can result in opposite outcomes for different Champagnes. To study how all of this is transformed by the oxidative shock of disgorgement, how autolysis and *dosage* are key to the complex aromatic changes created by Maillard reactions during the early stages of post-disgorgement aging, and to

discern which Champagnes will benefit from shorter or longer post-disgorgement aging. To recognize how every Champagne can be pigeonholed into two basic categories of production—oxidative and reductive (both terms used in the most positive of senses)—and to accept that the resultant styles can be stood on their heads by the timing of their disgorgement and the conditions of their post-disgorgement aging. To witness time and again how exactly the same Champagne can develop very differently, depending on when it was disgorged. And how, after 35 years, I can recognize when the first window of opportunity arises for disgorgement, yet remain at a loss when later windows of opportunity occur, even though it is obvious from variable performances of later releases of the same Champagne that the timing of late disgorgement can have either a positive or negative effect on the known quality of the primary release.

Disgorgement

A Champagne can benefit from being disgorged at various intervals over its lifetime, but the first window of opportunity is the most critical one. Get this first window wrong, and the producer releases the majority of its production when the Champagne is not showing well. Get later disgorgements wrong, and it will affect only a tiny proportion of the production, probably long after the Champagne in question has already established its reputation. How long any particular window remains open is unpredictable, but typically there seem to be several windows—and consequently, they must each be of finite length. Champagne does not become ready for disgorgement and remain available for disgorgement for the rest of its useful life. As Champagne passes through one developmental phase to another (typically but not exclusively from floral to fruity, then creamy, toasty, and

Photography by Jon Wyand, from Michael Edwards, *The Finest Wines of Champagne* (Fine Wine Editions / Aurum and University of California Press, 2009)



on to various types of complexity, of increasing mellowness and intensity, according to its varietal composition, terroir, and vintage), there will be a finite period of time during which the Champagne will showcase all the best attributes of each phase. Although it is perfectly possible for the first disgorgement opportunity to arise as early as nine months on yeast for a Non-Vintage Champagne (even though 15 months is the legal minimum) and as early as 18 months for some Vintage Champagnes, most serious-quality Champagnes require three to five years, possibly more, whether they are Vintage or not. I would cite Mumm's Cramant de Mumm as an interesting example. This Champagne is always produced from a single year but never marketed as a Vintage, and in my experience, it is almost always ready for disgorgement after just 18 months, though Mumm rarely releases it that young. Sometimes, its first window of disgorgement opportunity will remain open through to the time when it is disgorged (often but not always at around 30 months)—thus, it is sometimes effectively disgorged late. This explains, I think, why it can sometimes be disappointing, while at other times it will be one of the most compelling young blanc de blancs on the market and, as some well-timed late disgorgements (for internal use) have demonstrated, certain “years” can age beautifully, whereas others turn out dull or even dismal. Whether the dullards have simply been disgorged at a particularly inopportune moment and the dismal specimens are from an intrinsically lesser (that is, not true Vintage) year, who can say?

This brings me to what happens if a Champagne is disgorged outside any window of opportunity. If a Champagne is disgorged too early, the aromas of its esterification can be so assertive that they seem prickly. With time, the dominance of these esters can calm down and eventually fade, but while some Champagnes disgorged too early can be rescued if given a year or two of post-

Sometimes it requires a “vertical” of disgorgements of the same Champagne to appreciate the difference.

The first window of opportunity is relatively easy to spot and occurs when the wine shifts from an exclusively crisp mode to one that embraces an element of creamy mellowness on its palate. As explained above, this can happen as early as nine months after bottling, but it usually occurs between three and five years, by which time most autolytic activity has ceased. In rare cases, a *chef de caves* might have to wait seven years or more, but although a minute amount of autolytic activity can rumble on for ten years or so, autolysis has very little to do with when the window will open. The creamy mellow note that indicates a Champagne is ready to be disgorged can be quite subtle, and after it has been “dosaged” and allowed to rest, the palate will revert to an exclusively crisp mode on release, requiring a couple of years of post-disgorgement aging before it will once again start to reveal a creamy mellowness on the palate. This is usually the point at which most Champagne aficionados start to drink a Champagne—not on release, but a couple of years later, providing it has been cellared under ideal conditions and has received a *dosage* and sufficient SO₂ to allow a slow, graceful aging.

Access to unready Champagnes

With so many different and often difficult phases that even the greatest Champagnes can go through, it is little wonder that producers are wary of allowing critics to taste an unready Champagne, particularly one that is several years from being released. It is not just that the wine is unready; it is quite literally incomplete. Champagne is deliberately and skillfully made to be unbalanced in a very measured way, because it is only with the addition of its *dosage* that it assumes a perfect—or at least what should be a perfect—balance. To allow a critic to taste a deliberately unbalanced wine is a big enough risk as it is, but when that wine is not



Magnums of Champagne may remain for many months in their *pupitres*, while the sediment is “riddled” down into their necks in preparation for disgorgement

doubts with producers, it is more for my benefit than theirs. I have seen so many miraculous turnarounds that I know a bad note for any unformed Champagne is not necessarily what it seems—and if it has any use, it is exclusively as part of one's own learning curve. Unfortunately, this learning curve is not a smoothly chronological one. Each experience does not build upon the other but could enhance one or more other experiences that I might have previously built up or could need to be logged into the database for a future encounter. Tasting is never black and white, but tasting unready Champagnes involves more shades of gray than even the convoluted mind of Jasper Fforde could imagine. Trying to taste such wines objectively involves isolating everything from the uninspiring to the totally unpleasant and recognizing that no negative connotations should necessarily be drawn—though equally they cannot be ruled out either. However, whereas some of the ugliest unfinished Champagnes I have encountered have morphed into beautiful wines once released, I have never come across a Champagne that impressed me in its unfinished state that did not fulfill that promise when released. It is as if in those circumstances the Champagne has been disgorged at a fortuitously calm point in its development, when the essence of what will be is there for all to see. That is why I am happy to publish only positive notes about future Champagne releases. Making this pledge and sticking to it

for more than 30 years has convinced most Champagne producers that they have nothing to lose, even if they agree to show me a Champagne with just a few months in bottle. Gradually, this understanding has ensured privileged access to future releases from all but the most uncompromising *chefs de caves*.

Future vintages

For this report, I tasted forward at Deutz, Lanson, Moët & Chandon, Charles & Piper-Heidsieck, Palmer, and Taittinger. Those wines I have reservations about are not included—for the reasons explained above—and some wines that are included might never see the light of day, because I was given the privilege of tasting some vintages that, for various reasons, will not be released (in which case, all the bottles will be opened and their contents poured into a vat to be refermented as part of a future Non-Vintage blend—a procedure known as *remise en cercle*). When it comes to pre-commercial disgorgements, readers should expect that the younger the vintage, the less specific the characteristics noted will be. At their very youngest, there will be little or no autolysis, and the only realistic references will be structure, balance (albeit incomplete), mousse texture, acidity, and finesse. Even when autolysis comes into play, it is a pointless exercise to identify individual aromas, because they will not be present in the finished product.

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disgorgement aging, many simply become dilute hollow shells of what they could have been. Should a Champagne be disgorged just after the window has slammed shut, it will be dull to one degree or another, losing much of its freshness and finesse, and this is what happens when Champagnes are late-disgorged at inconvenient moments in their life. There are varying degrees to this dulling effect, and it is very hard to discern how much vitality might be missing from a Champagne tasted in isolation, even when the taster has experience of that specific Champagne disgorged on other more appropriate dates.

only unbalanced but also going through the tumultuous biochemical upheaval of autolysis, it is asking for trouble. This is why I always give producers my word that I will publish comments about an unfinished Champagne only if those comments are positive. If I have any doubts about a Champagne that is not commercially released, I will either keep those doubts to myself or discuss them privately with the producer, but I will not publish those doubts. If it's not on the shelf, readers are not missing out, so I have no qualms about censoring my own comments. As soon as a wine is on the shelf, it is fair game. When I discuss my

2000
Picking commenced September 13
Average potential alcohol 9.9% ABV,
average total acidity 7.6g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 11.7g/l as tartaric), pH 3.11

My initial assessment of this vintage was more of a good Non-Vintage year than a Vintage per se, but as I pointed out at the time, with the magical millennium

number of 2000 (albeit that 2001 was technically the first year of the new millennium), it was always going to be declared more widely that perhaps it should have been. Definitely a Chardonnay year—but then every year is a Chardonnay year in Champagne, and it is only when the Champenois say it is a Pinot year that you know they think it is a true vintage. Harvesting Pinot Noir

when it has good Champagne ripeness and is in pristine health does not happen very often in Champagne! Any combination of total acidity below 8g/l and pH above 3.10 is considered lacking in Champagne: 2000 had the third-lowest acidity in a quarter of a century and the second-worst pH, which is why some producers who normally carry out malolactic fermentation did not do

2001
Picking commenced September 22
Average potential alcohol 8.5% ABV,
average total acidity 8.2g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 12.6g/l as tartaric), pH 3.05

One of the largest, wettest crops on record, with unripe grapes and rot in abundance. July and August were very wet and stormy. On July 23, a mini-tornado dropped an inch (25mm) of water on Merfy and Chenay in less than ten minutes, causing erosion and mud slides; while in August, hail

ravaged thousands of hectares in 50 villages across the Aube region. In September, the authorities faced the unenviable task of deciding whether to allow growers to pick unripe, rotten grapes or wait for more ripeness and risk even more rot. Immediately after this harvest, I wrote, “Only an idiot would declare a lousy year like 2001 a vintage,” but I was made to eat my words when Charles Philipponnat told me he would be releasing a 2001 Clos des Goisses. Charles is no idiot, and Clos des Goisses is a very special

vineyard, with the rare capacity to produce Vintage-quality Champagne every year. But Vintage quality in Champagne is always a matter of stricter selection, even in single vineyards. Clos des Goisses is 5.5ha (14 acres) in size and capable of yielding 50,000 bottles annually; but to produce a Vintage quality that reflects its terroir, the production most years is restricted to 10,000–15,000 bottles. In 2001, the production was limited even further, to just 5,000 bottles, primarily by relying on a much more compact selection of

2002
Picking commenced September 12
Average potential alcohol 10.5% ABV,
average total acidity 7.2g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 11.5g/l as tartaric), pH 3.09

The 2002s showed their exceptional structure and purity of fruit from the very start, but the *vins clairs* of all three main varieties tasted much softer than their analyses would have us believe. This might have raised some early concerns over the acidity of this year, but it has turned out to be a true vintage. Not only that, but 2002 is a very special year—the key to the character of which is the *passerillage* that reduced the yield in some vineyards by up to 40 percent. This endowed the wines with the highest natural alcohol level since 1990 (which itself was the highest since 1959). It was the impressive alcohol, structure, and intensity of flavor in the wines that masked the full effect of the acidity at the *vin clair* stage, but after disgorgement, the acidity tends to assert itself, and in a few 2002s it actually ends up tasting greater than the paper value. Generally, the pH is excellent, and in many ways this has more effect on the balance of



the Piper seems so Charles-like. When compared side by side, however, the difference is clear—from the visual, where the Piper is paler, to the palate, where it is significantly crisper, even though Charles Heidsieck 2000 has great acidity. The Piper has richness and toasty notes, but it is more of a structural thing, making the Charles deliciously richer and gorgeously toastier.)

so this year. Some special wines such as Clos des Goisses stood out from the very beginning, but over time the general character of most Champagnes from this vintage has been quite precocious and unduly influenced by a fatness in some of the Chardonnay, which has detracted from their finesse. For Krug, this merely translated as sumptuous...

Impressive forthcoming releases: Charles & Piper-Heidsieck (These are not strictly pre-release Champagnes, but I wanted to taste the two brands together both in historic and recently disgorged formats, because Piper 2000 was definitely a step up from previous vintages, but the leap in quality has taken the style closer to that of Charles. Certainly tasted in isolation,

plots, where natural alcohol reaches as high as 11%. This vintage of Clos des Goisses was launched with the 2002 in late 2011, and the fact that Clos des Goisses is always said to require ten years to show its true potential was probably instrumental in the timing of its release. But although 2001 will drink well for ten years or more, it did not need anything like ten years. With hindsight, the 2001 should have been released much earlier, and the first window of opportunity was still open in 2007. Furthermore, it should have been

launched with the 2003, another oddity, rather than a classic vintage like 2002. Later disgorgements could still show off the longevity of Clos des Goisses 2001 (the Clos des Goisses 1951, from half a century earlier, was also drinking well in 2007), and I think they will also demonstrate that the first 2001 release was disgorged “between windows.” The first release is a good food wine, but from its earlier showing, I do not think it is as quirky as it currently shows. As for other 2001s, I have come across an alarmingly high number—

perhaps because I have sought out this vintage—but most have, indeed, been released by idiots. The non-idiotic 2001s that stood out included Ayala Perle d’Ayala, in particular, followed by Agrapart Venus Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature, Sublime Grand Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs L’Union des Propriétaires-Récoltants, Vilmart Coeur de Cuvée, and Vilmart Grand Cellier d’Or.

Impressive forthcoming releases: None known; the best have been released.

2002 is definitely a Pinot Noir year, with Aÿ-Champagne the most successful village

a wine than the total acidity. This is definitely a Pinot Noir year, with Aÿ-Champagne the most successful village, though there are also some fine Chardonnays, albeit slightly less well structured. In all my future tastings, the greatest 2002 I have come across so far has been, and still is, the Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs; but in a completely different style, the Charles Heidsieck is snapping at DR’s heels.

Impressive forthcoming releases: Charles Heidsieck; Dom Ruinart (In a class of its own, with great finesse and supreme elegance)

Frédéric Panaïotis, chef de cave at Ruinart, which has produced one of the wines of the 2002 vintage

Photography by Jon Wyand, from Michael Edwards, *The Finest Wines of Champagne* (Fine Wine Editions / Aurum and University of California Press, 2009).

2003

*Picking commenced August 21
Average potential alcohol 10.6% ABV,
average total acidity 5.8g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 8.9g/l as tartaric), pH 3.28*

Picking started on August 21, making this the earliest Champagne harvest on record. So early, in fact, that the Champagne authorities had to go on television to plead for growers to return so that the harvest could commence! This was the hottest summer in Europe since at least 1540, according to the World Meteorological Organization, and caused more than 40,000 heat-related deaths. We tend to forget that 2003, such a hot, drought year, started off intensely cold. On the night of April 11, during the vulnerable budding period, temperatures fell to 12°F (-11°C), followed by three days of freezing fog. The freezing fog was not quite as cold, but the combination of lower freezing temperatures and humidity had a devastating effect on the recently emerged, delicate buds, destroying 50 percent of the potential crop and making 2003 the smallest harvest since 1981. Because of the combination of low yield, very hot weather, and lower-than-normal diurnal difference (just 9°F [5°C] in August, compared to the norm of 18–27°F [10–15°C] in September), acidity levels plummeted for the final phase of ripening. Furthermore, this low acidity was accompanied by a disproportionately high pH, which made the acidity even softer in the mouth. Although the average pH was as high as 3.28 (3.0-something being ideal), some wines came in as high as 3.4, which is unheard of in Champagne. The pH in 2003 was probably increased by unusually high potassium levels in the wine. While nowhere near as high as the potassium levels found in 2009s, the wines produced in that year also benefited from exceptionally high tartaric acid, and tartaric acid binds with potassium to prevent the pH rising. The wines in 2003 were low in tartaric acid, thus high in pH. There was a fear in 2003 that the extreme weather would push potential alcohol to unacceptably high levels, but

this did not happen (the 10.6% average is an almost ideal level and only 0.1% ABV higher than in 2002), because temperatures were in fact too high at times, which kept shutting down the vine's metabolism.

Due to the regular occurrence of inclement weather at the time of flowering, a second crop is a common phenomenon in Champagne, but this rarely ripens, and when it does, it ripens far too late, which is why this ancillary crop is known in Champenois dialect as the *bouvreu* ("for the birds"). However, the second crop from buds that formed just after the frost damage in April yielded not only grapes that ripened but grapes that ripened on an extremely rare, region-wide scale; and because they ripened later, these grapes enjoyed more normal diurnal differences, resulting in a better acidity and pH than found in the main crop. Even so, there were, and still are, differing opinions as to the contribution to the 2003 vintage. Some *chefs de caves* believed at the time that a judicious blending provided the most natural boost to acid levels, while others now believe that those Champagnes containing *bouvreu* grapes are intrinsically inferior.

What is not in doubt, however, is that this vintage produced a motley crew of weird and ugly Champagnes, with a rare seasoning of some extraordinary, very special cuvées. The first window of opportunity was so early that it could be measured by months in many cases, and even Bollinger felt obliged to disgorge after barely three years, the legal minimum. If any single producer got this year right, it was Bollinger, who, rather than declare it a Grande Année, marketed this vintage as "2003 by Bollinger." Pricing this Champagne a tad below Grande Année, Bollinger packaged it in a special box illustrated with a snow-laden vineyard to remind us that 2003 was not simply a drought year. This Champagne shone brightly for a brief while before rapidly declining, but the job was done: Bollinger had disgorged at the first window of opportunity and shown off the 2003 at its optimum moment, without damaging the reputation of Grande Année. In general,



The 2003 vintage is remembered for its high summer temperatures, but the cold start to the year also profoundly influenced the quantity and quality of the crop

2003 is not another 1959 or 1947, both of which had much higher alcohol (12% and 11.5% respectively) and yet higher acidity, too (6.3g and 6.1g). Unlike the extraordinary longevity of those two intrinsically great years, the 2003s matured in bottle almost as rapidly as its grapes ripened on the vine. Dom Pérignon 2003 shows a certain gravitas with the right food, but just as Charles Philipponnat missed the first window of opportunity to disgorge the 2001 Clos des Goisses, so Richard Geoffroy kept the 2003 Dom Pérignon beyond its first disgorgement window. Both deliberately, both to demonstrate a point, but ultimately a disappointment to most fanatical aficionados of these two great Champagnes, because they will never experience the fresh, youthful joy the earlier disgorgements

displayed so vividly (although I did manage to show the 2001 Clos des Goisses to a Christie's Champagne Masterclass in 2007). I am sure there are a number of 2003s I have not yet tasted, but of those I have tasted, no late disgorgement was superior to its own historic disgorgement—and the earlier the historic disgorgement, the better. Surprisingly, this vintage seems to benefit more from post-disgorgement aging than prolonged time on yeast. In addition to those already mentioned, the most successful Champagnes from this vintage include Deutz (Vintage Rosé), Palmer (Blanc de Blancs), Louis Roederer (the entire Roederer range is exceptional), Taittinger (Vintage), and Vilmart (Coeur de Cuvée and Grand Cellier d'Or). Most of the 2003 harvest,

however, was used to best effect in Non-Vintage cuvées, almost all of which have long since gone through the distribution system and been consumed. Their sumptuous richness was held together longer and better than most pure 2003 versions, thanks to the structure and acidity of their reserve wines. They also stood out from the norm of Non-Vintage blends due to the textural effect of the 2003's particularly soft and silky mousse. The first Armand de Brignac cuvée was just such a blend, but Cattier found it impossible to replicate its quality or style with later releases based on other years (though that has not stopped this Champagne from becoming a marketing phenomenon). The best advice for anyone intending to buy

2003s is to buy in magnum. A magnum is always the bottle format of choice because, unlike even larger sizes, the magnum is closed by the same size crown cap as a 75cl bottle during its time on yeast and the same size cork after disgorgement—thus its rate of air ingress during both phases of production and maturation is half that of a normal-size bottle; so the wine remains fresher and evolves more gracefully. It always pays, therefore, to buy Champagne in magnums. But for a fast-maturing vintage such as 2003, it should be regarded as obligatory.

Impressive forthcoming releases:

Deutz (Amour de Deutz is very soft and graceful, with a typical 2003 cushiony mousse)

2004

Picking commenced September 22
Average potential alcohol 9.8% ABV,
average total acidity 7.3g/l (expressed as
sulfuric, 11.2g/l as tartaric), pH 3.08

This is the vintage when the very worst of intentions gave birth to the very best of results. Every year, it pays to prune for a larger-than-necessary crop in Champagne because of its location, which is at the very edge of where a commercial scale of viticulture is climatically and economically viable. Champagne is the perfect place on earth to produce the greatest-quality and longest-lived Brut-style sparkling wine in the world. But two of the prices it pays for that privilege are autumn rain that can regularly ruin a crop after an otherwise perfect growing season; and spring frost, which often kills off a proportion of the vines. Because of the threat of frost, all growers—even the most quality-minded—prune for more than they need.

If the danger passes, they should then prune to adjust yields downward—and, of course, the best producers do this. But 2004 came after the greatly

reduced yield of 2003, which encouraged far too many growers to prune for ridiculously high potential volumes as compensation for lost earnings. Furthermore, after the risk of spring frost had receded, very few growers pruned to adjust their yields downward, and even those who did were in for a shock, because the projected yield modeling from the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) turned out to be almost 40 percent off the mark. Never has Champagne yielded so many bunches or such large bunches. The CIVC's modeling program failed to take into consideration the reserves of plant sugars hidden in the roots of vines, which produced very little or no crop in 2003 so boosted the vine's metabolism in 2004, increasing the size of bunches. The summer was cool, and by August there was a widespread fear that so many grapes would not ripen. Had the cool weather continued and September been wet, as it so often is, this year would have been an even worse year than 2001, when the grapes not only failed to ripen but had also rotted on the vine. In 2001, the

2005

Picking commenced September 9
Average potential alcohol 9.9% ABV,
average total acidity 7.0g/l (expressed as
sulfuric, 10.8g/l as tartaric), pH 3.14

Since this is one of the great vintages throughout most of France and the rest of Europe, it comes as a surprise to some that 2005 is much less successful than 2004 in Champagne, and indeed, many of the 2005s have problems of rot. The level of rot was slightly higher than in 2001, but the ripeness, structure, and balance of 2005 are such that the

rot is less of a problem. Relatively few 2005s, however, were released as Vintage Champagne, whereas many 2005s were produced, and through numbers alone this vintage is likely to appear as rot-ridden as 2001. Certainly this was a much more difficult year than many suspected at the time, even though a warm and humid September resulted in about 14 percent gray rot in the black varieties generally, but particularly the Meunier. Worst of all was Meunier from the Aisne, where it averaged almost 29 percent, including some pressings with readings as high as

2006

Picking commenced September 19
Average potential alcohol 10.2% ABV,
average total acidity 7.0g/l (expressed as
sulfuric, 10.8g/l as tartaric), pH 3.15

After a hail-strewn start, July was fearsomely hot, only to be followed by a cool and very wet August. The harvest started out warm and dry but soon

turned gray and rainy, as so often. This is definitely a "Chardonnay vintage," with some excellent base wines from the Côte des Blancs, whereas we have to look to the Aube rather than to the Montagne de Reims for the best Pinot Noir. Although the 2006s possess the same total acidity as the 2005s, with fractionally higher pH—and are thus technically marginally "less acid" than

harvest averaged 17,000kg/ha and was condemned as disgracefully huge—but in 2004, the harvest averaged a staggering 23,000kg/ha. In September 2004, the skies cleared, the days were bright and sunny, and the nights clear and cool, with an exceptional diurnal difference to preserve acidity. *Chefs de caves* told me that if the good weather continued for two weeks, the grapes would ripen and they would have a quality crop—to which I replied that if it didn't continue for two weeks, the grapes wouldn't ripen, and if it rained, quality would be worse than in 2001.

For once, the sun continued to shine and, contrary to the norm, there was no rain; and thanks to reserves of plant sugars residing in the roots, the grapes not only ripened, and ripened evenly, but they ripened at twice the normal weekly rate (by 1.5% ABV rather than 0.8% ABV). Even more amazingly, the berries continued to grow in size as they ripened. A yield of 23,000kg/ha is twice the average—effectively two crops in one year! Officially, the average yield is just 13,962kg/ha, but this is a technical fabrication. Unofficially, the authorities told growers that a blind eye

70 percent. My initial assessment was that this was a winemaker's year, a view supported by Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, the *chef de caves* at Roederer, who told me, "If you are a good blender, one plus one can often equal three. But in 2005, one plus one has to equal four if you are to succeed!" When tasting the *vins clairs*, I found Chardonnay to be by far the best variety, with Le Mesnil-sur-Oger its most successful cru. Pinot Noir definitely has the edge over Meunier, with the best of Verzy and Verzenay standing out. After second fermentation, the 2005s became quite

the 2005s—they are crisper on the palate. This might be counterintuitive, given the numbers, but the 2005s also have a higher proportion of malic acid, and it is the structure of their acidity that gives the 2006s their crisper edge. The slightly higher alcohol also adds a tad more firmness. In terms of quality rather than style, this is a typical vintage, in that selection will be crucial.

would be turned to the size of the crop (23,000kg/ha is the equivalent of 146.5hl/ha, no less than 56.5hl/ha above the maximum yield permitted for *vin de table*) if they harvested every grape but pressed only half the juice. From a qualitative point of view, this was absolutely the right thing to do, and it explains why 2004 has turned out to be such an excellent vintage despite its gargantuan size, since every bottle has effectively been produced not just from *vin de cuvée* but from the *coeur de cuvée*. At *vin clair* stage, it was evident that 2004 was the first vintage since 1998 with classic structure and acidity.

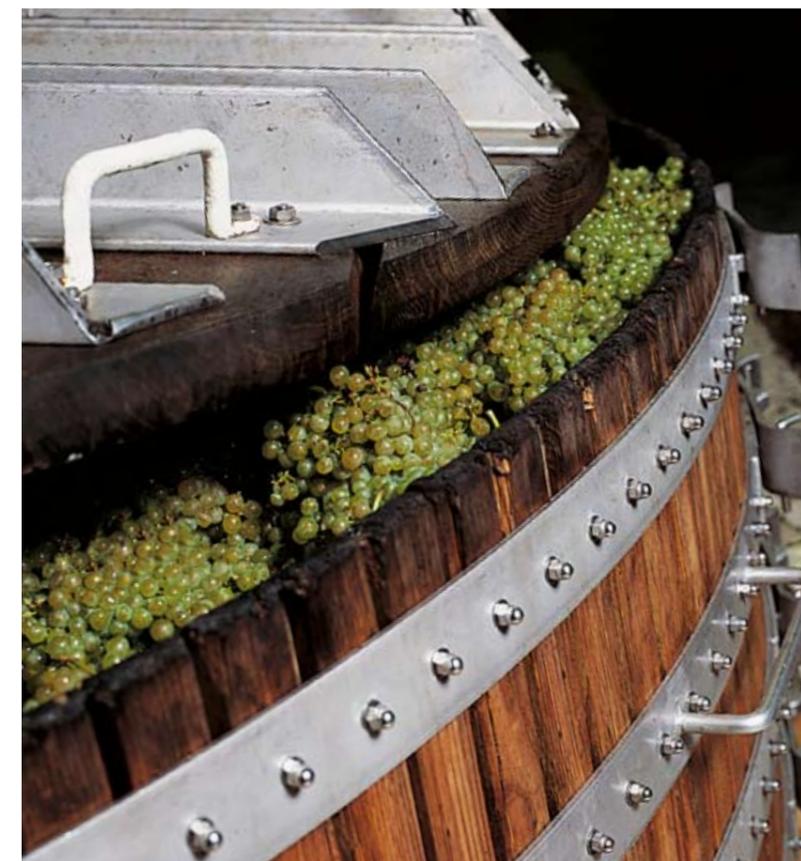
Impressive forthcoming releases:

Lanson (Gold Label has an ultra-fine mousse, lovely finesse, grippy fruit, and strength, while Noble Cuvée has greater vinosity and needs more time); Charles Heidsieck (The Blanc des Millénaires is veering more to Charles Heidsieck's classic Vintage blend than other years of this Chardonnay Champagne, while the Vintage is quite reticent on yeast but in a promising way, with beautifully crisp, lovely, tight citrus fruits; it could be great)

noticeably darker than the 2004s in bottle. At first, there was just the odd one or two cuvées that had a niggling something that might be put down to rot. But as more 2005s were tasted, the more the rot stood out. Even some Champagnes that appeared clean at the *assemblage* stage started to develop a taste of rot. There was talk of a new variant of botrytis being responsible for this delayed action, and since the same theory emerges farther east in Alsace in 2006, it would seem to fit. But a new variant would not be invisible to analysis, and the after-effect of the

Impressive forthcoming releases:

Deutz (The Vintage Brut is gentle and easygoing, with a hint of spice, while the Amour de Deutz has a floral twist to its spice-laden aromatics, which gives the wine its tension, with more spice dominating the palate); Charles Heidsieck (Very fine aromas, a huge amount of autolysis, crisp, pure, and at this very early juncture, more



Despite the high yields in 2004, good producers gained adequate intensity and purity by gentle pressing

2005 rot illustrates that the palate alone is insufficient. However good the *vins clairs* might taste, those with a certain level of gluconic acid should never be put up for consideration at the *assemblage* of any serious-quality Champagne. Lessons were learned, I hope. The best 2005s all share a certain softness and freshness.

Impressive forthcoming releases:

Deutz (This first vintage of Amour de Deutz Rosé, which supersedes Cuvée William Deutz Rosé, the last vintage of which was 2002, is beautifully

Piper than Charles; the Blanc des Millénaires has classic richness, with a softer, sensuous middle); Moët & Chandon (The Vintage Brut is rich and ready for disgorgement, with a softness to the finish that should reappear soon after disgorgement; the Vintage Rosé has barely any red wine added and should make one of Moët's more elegant Vintage rosés);

rich, with a lovely touch of vanilla); Lanson (Gold Label has classic richness and intensity; Noble Cuvée Blanc de Blancs is very floral, elegant, and really quite soft for non-malolactic production, with no evidence of rot); Moët & Chandon (I thought the Vintage Rosé could make an attractive, albeit short, release in magnum only, but *chef de caves* Benoît Gouez clearly made the right decision to *remise en cercle* the Vintage Brut); Taittinger (Very floral autolysis and an interesting touch of bitterness, but no rot)

Palmer (Lovely mousse, very silky and cushiony; the Blanc de Blancs shows lots of autolysis and a floral-spice twist, supported by a lovely mousse of very soft, tiny bubbles); Piper-Heidsieck (Very fine aromas, very fine-crisp, with citrus fruits and a long finish); Taittinger (Charming floral sweetness and fatter, surprisingly, than the 2005)

2007

Picking commenced August 20
Average potential alcohol 9.4% ABV,
average total acidity 8.6g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 13.2g/l as tartaric), pH 3.02

A curious year, with the first buds appearing as early as April 5 and a hot spring encouraging some observers to think that picking could commence on August 14, seven days earlier than 2003, the earliest harvest on record at that juncture. July, however, saw strange weather: dark and brooding one moment, an expected heavy downpour the next, then completely unexpected bright sunshine. Sometimes the sun burst through before the rain had stopped. Even while it was sunny, there was an almost electric tension in the air. And it seemed to rain all night, every night. The summer was relatively cold, dragging out the veraison and delaying the harvest to August 28. The unspoken fact about this vintage is that its grapes were affected by the greatest incidence of rot since analyses began for gluconic acid (various forms of rot convert glucose to gluconic acid, which is not utilized by yeast or bacteria during

fermentation, acting as a measurable indicator for determining the volume of rot in a wine). When tasting the *vins clairs*, though, the most noticeable problem was a reductive tendency in some Chardonnays, with not much indication of rot in many of the wines, although the aromatic effects of rot tend to intensify in bottle, so there could be a problem with some 2007s downstream. My first impression was that this is generally a Non-Vintage year that has turned out better than hoped. Mesnil, Avize, and Villers-Marmery are among the most successful villages for Chardonnay; Aÿ, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, Bouzy, and Verzy showed well for Pinot Noir; Cumières and Villemomagne for Pinot Meunier.

Impressive forthcoming releases:

Charles Heidsieck (This Blanc des Millénaires is more advanced than the 2004 or 2006 but is lovely, with toasty-rich, creamy citrus fruit); Deutz (The firm structure and exceptional acidity, yet lovely soft mousse of the Vintage Brut in magnum almost elevates this lesser year to the level of the 2008, while the pale peach

color of the Vintage Rosé, with its delicious, satisfying fruit, shows such finesse and elegance; the autolytic floral aromas dictate the finesse of Deutz Blanc de Blancs, which has lovely acids and should be superior to the 2004, despite the latter's higher reputation); Moët & Chandon (I have more faith in this Vintage Brut than Benoît Gouez, so it might not see the light of day, but if it does, its rich, citrus fruit will go toasty quite quickly after disgorgement, when it should develop like a firmer version of the 2000 Vintage Brut; the Vintage Rosé has real freshness, nice clarity of fruit, with some cherries, but the color will go orange relatively quickly, which would have been a problem in the 1990s, but the rosé market has matured considerably since then, with collectors not batting an eyelid at mature hues of rosé); Palmer (Lovely mousse, very silky, incredibly intense, yet very lean fruit); Piper-Heidsieck (The Rare is a true Piper vintage, with lovely citrus fruit; possibly as great as the 2002); Taittinger (Fine floral autolysis; typical lightness of Taittinger style belies the great length of this exceptional 2007)

2008

Picking commenced September 15
Average potential alcohol 9.8% ABV,
average total acidity 8.6g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 13.2g/l as tartaric), pH 2.98

With 2009, this is one of the two best vintages since 2002 (possibly earlier), and the choice of which of these two years offers greater quality continues to divide opinion in Champagne. Despite *coulure*, *millerandage*, and localized but extremely fierce hailstorms reducing yields, this vintage still managed to clock up 14,228kg/ha. This

might not be anywhere near the size of the 2001 crop, let alone 2004, but it is still large and should make anyone wonder what the yield might have been had nature's own green-pruning not had such an impact on volume. There was also oidium and mildew, and you don't often get those two together. Although the summer was cool and cloudy, slow ripening will never be a problem for the potential quality of Champagne if—and it's a big if—the weather warms up, stays dry, and the harvest can be carried out under ideal conditions. The "big if" happened, and

the vines enjoyed two weeks of dry, warm, and breezy weather for the second half of September. The result was classic vintage ripeness, with beautifully crisp and poised acidity (51/49 malic/tartaric), thanks to the clear night skies that provided a 29°F (16°C) diurnal difference. This is a true vintage—which is to say not only great Chardonnay, but great Pinot Noir, too, although less exciting for Meunier, except in the Aisne, where Champagne's workhorse matched and occasionally surpassed the Pinot Noir—and there cannot be many years you can say that.

2009

Picking commenced September 8
Average potential alcohol 10.3% ABV,
average total acidity 7.5g/l (expressed as sulfuric, 11.57g/l as tartaric), pH 3.08

Opinion is split between those *chefs de caves* who prefer the elegance and plumpness of 2009 to the classic crisp acid structure of 2008. Many houses

produced excellent examples of both years, but few praise each vintage equally. This year saw the first real summer in Champagne since 2003 (an extreme rather than a real summer), allowing grapes to ripen fully, cleanly, and evenly. On September 4, just a few days before the harvest was due to begin, hail destroyed 15 percent of the crop in Chouilly, Damery, Hautvillers,

and Verzenay—but thanks to the dry conditions, rot did not ensue, and the grapes that were harvested a few days later remained clean and healthy.

Impressive forthcoming releases:

Deutz (The Blanc de Blancs is full of glorious floral autolytic aromas, with lovely length, elegance, and finesse and currently has the edge over the 2008



Benoît Gouez, *chef de caves* at Moët & Chandon, who is reading recent vintages well and resisting the temptation to declare wines he thinks are unworthy

The secret to the Meunier's success was the size of its bunches, which was much smaller than the mathematical models had anticipated, although no one seems to know why. Initially, I gave ripe 2009s the edge over the crisp 2008s, and the *vins clairs* seemed to support this. But after tasting wines as they have developed on yeast, there seem to be more great 2008s than great 2009s. What is certain is that these two years are very different, and the top Champagnes from each will undoubtedly be fabulous wines in their own right.

Blanc de Blancs, but I would not like to bet which one will turn out the better; the Amour de Deutz has exceptional intensity, while the rich, well-structured, yet elegantly poised Amour de Deutz Rosé should prove to be the best vintage yet of this new cuvée); Moët & Chandon (Benoît Gouez definitely prefers the 2009s to the 2008s, and it is easy to see why from the

Impressive forthcoming releases:

Deutz (The Vintage Brut is very intense, with a lovely richness of fruit, fine acids, and great length; the Blanc de Blancs pushes the boat out for elegance, accentuated by its soft, smooth mousse—should be fascinating to follow this and the 2009 Blanc de Blancs; Cuvée William Deutz is still overwhelmed by beautiful floral autolytic aromas, has great length and even greater longevity, promising freshness and finesse for decades); Moët & Chandon (Currently at the height of its autolytic activity, the Vintage Brut has a very fresh and floral

lovely floral autolysis of this elegant Vintage Brut, which has beautiful, gently rich fruit and an immaculate finish; the Vintage Rosé also teems with fresh autolysis, and its lovely bright color has a fixed blue-hued pink color); Palmer (The mousse quickly builds a lovely, slowly dissipating cordon, while the nose yields a fine, elegant aroma, with just a touch of fat to the fruit,

aroma, with lots of rich yet bright primary fruit, which will eventually become one of Moët's great vintages, but it needs lots of time; the Vintage Rosé has a fairly deepish color, but the hue is a really good blue-edged pink that will not go orange for a long time); Palmer (Exceptional aromatics, high yet exquisitely fine acidity, amazing linear fruit, direct and focused—will be very special; the Blanc de Blancs is very rich but firm and crisp, with what the French call great *tonicité*); Taittinger (Very floral, lovely acidity, very grippy, remarkable finesse)

exceptional acidity for the year, and a reassuringly firm structure; the Blanc de Blancs is very fresh and *vif*, with exciting, sherbety fruit that might seem a tad fatter beside the 2008 Blanc de Blancs, but on its own, this Champagne shows it has perfect acidity balance); Taittinger (Typically Taittinger floral twist, soft, generous rather than fat, very smooth mousse)

2010
Picking commenced September 10
Average potential alcohol 10% ABV,
average total acidity 8.4g/l (expressed
as sulfuric, 12.9g/l as tartaric), pH 3.05

Yet another Chardonnay year! The vines luxuriated in a precociously warm start to the year, only to be hit by a cold June, which staggered the flowering, particularly in the Aube, where the Pinot Noir suffered from

millerandage, while the Chardonnay suffered *millerandage* and *coulure*. This is a common occurrence in Champagne, where the yield-reducing effects of *millerandage* and *coulure* can have a positive effect on the region's habitually high-yielding crops. More serious was the summer weather, which was so dry that the vine's metabolism closed down, arresting ripening, with the veraison of black grapes more affected, particularly the Pinot Meunier.

Then, in mid-August, the heavens opened, with no less than three months' worth of rain falling in less than three days. This restarted the vine's metabolism, but it also caused the berries to swell and split. By the beginning of the harvest, the pressure of rot was already high when the heavens again opened and it became a race against time to get the grapes harvested. Although the Chardonnay was mostly clean and healthy, the

Meunier was badly affected by rot. In general, 2010 experienced levels of botrytis that were second only to 2007 (since gluconic acid readings have been recorded, that is), but it could have been much worse. Fortunately, the yield had been artificially set at 10,500kg/ha for economic reasons (the previous year's sales had dropped by more than one fifth, and ironically, the 2010 harvest coincided with the release of the equivalent of over 48 million bottles

of reserves from the 2009 harvest), and with as much as 14,000kg/ha hanging on the vines, there was every incentive to select only the healthiest grapes. It became even easier toward the end of the harvest, when Champagne enjoyed a full week of dry, cool, and windy weather, stopping the rot dead in its tracks. Very little good Meunier was harvested, but there was some nice Pinot Noir, albeit very patchy, and the Chardonnay was splendid, especially

from the Côte des Blancs. For the houses, this is a vintage to test the blending skills of the *chefs de caves*, while for the growers it is the Côte des Blancs that will be the winner. Like 2007 and, particularly, 2005, only time on yeast will reveal which wines have completely avoided any taste of rot.

Impressive forthcoming releases:
All Champagnes of this vintage were just bottled at time of tasting.

2011
Picking commenced August 19
Average potential alcohol 9.3% ABV (est.),
average total acidity 7.4g/l (expressed as
sulfuric, 11.4g/l as tartaric), pH 3.10

With summer-strength heat in March spurring on an early budbreak, the most devastating frost since the 1950s destroyed 40 percent of the crop in parts of the Aube. With high pressure of rot in April and May throughout the rest of Champagne, the most precocious flowering on record, a mixture of blistering heat and chilly days in June, cool temperatures in July, a repeat of 2003's minimal diurnal difference in the final phase of ripening, and a new record for the earliest harvest in Champagne, this was never going to be an easy vintage, let alone an ordinary one. As Louis Roederer's *chef de caves* Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon told me, "Climate change pushed us to do a continental viticulture in spring and a maritime viticulture in summer—the opposite of what we usually do in Champagne." Despite the threat of a very early harvest, 2011 did not cause a repeat of the panic experienced in 2003. Earlier holidays had been arranged industry-wide to avoid any desperate last-minute pleas on national television for growers to cut short their vacation and return home to start the harvest. Furthermore, the large size of the harvest guaranteed that there would not be any of the extreme low-acid problems faced eight years earlier, despite the predictably detrimental effect of minimal diurnal differences of late August compared to the norm of late September. The problems faced in 2003 were so fresh in the memory of

the Champenois that they were well prepared for 2011. If anything, they were too well prepared, and following the rapid decline of the Meunier the year before, they were also too eager to start the harvest at the earliest possible date. With growers returning from their enforced early annual vacation, who was going to tell them that they needn't have bothered to go so early? But the closer it got to the August 19 harvest date, the clearer it became that the crop would not ripen in time. Unfortunately, once the start date has been set by the CIVC (with the consent of growers' representatives), it is locked into the industry's schedule and almost impossible to change, with thousands of pickers contracted from all over the country to turn up on a certain day. The harvest was not due to start everywhere in Champagne on August 19, of course. Dates for the *ouverture de la vendange* are declared on a village-by-village and variety-by-variety basis. When the picking started on August 19, two days earlier than in 2003, it was confined to the villages of Cumières, Damery, and Sacy in the Marne, and Buxeuil, Neuville-sur-Seine, Polisy, and Polisy in the Aube, where only Pinot Noir and Meunier could be harvested. The start date for most of Champagne's best villages came 3–6 days later, and even those turned out to be wildly optimistic. Many producers started and stopped picking on the very first day of their scheduled harvest and waited up to one week before recommencing. Keeping pickers idle was a very expensive decision but one that many made—from the smallest growers, who have to rely on extended-family members,



to the very largest, such as Moët & Chandon, which hires 650 pickers. The physiological oddity of 2011 was that the Pinot Noir and Meunier ripened ahead of the Chardonnay, but it was that later ripening that has made the Chardonnay stand out in terms of

Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, Roederer's *chef de caves*: "[In 2011] climate change pushed us to do a continental viticulture in spring and a maritime viticulture in summer"

quality. However, this phenomenon was by no means uniform. As Gilles Dumangin in Chigny-les-Roses told me, "The Meuniers were extremely clean but not ripe. I had to stop for a full seven days before restarting with

the Chardonnays first, then both Pinots, and I had to do this on a plot-by-plot basis, choosing only the ripest grapes." Rot was not a problem—or at least, nowhere near the problem it was in 2010—with Meunier a very little

above average (as measured by gluconic acid), Pinot Noir well below average, and Chardonnay virtually free of rot. Despite all the oddities of the year, I have no doubt that in some instances 2011 will be a very great vintage. ■