

## Clearly the best

Does the release of Grand Siècle Les Réserves signal a welcome change of policy for Grand Siècle La Cuvée? One of the paradoxes of Laurent-Perrier's deluxe cuvée is that, although it matures exceptionally gracefully, the very information that would encourage collectors to cellar this wine and compare its different releases has always been withheld. Grand Siècle is an *assemblage* of three Vintage years, but the identity of those years has never been revealed on the bottle—until the release of Grand Siècle Les Réserves.

Launched in 2012 to commemorate Laurent-Perrier's 200th anniversary, Les Réserves is a recently disgorged, rerelease of an earlier Grand Siècle cuvée consisting of wines from 1995, 1993, and 1990. I first tasted this particular Grand Siècle in November 1997, when it had barely 18 months on yeast, yet it was immediately impressive. Almost 15 years later, it was even more impressive, with exquisitely fresh, floral aromas, enriched with a thread of juicy-ripe peaches and pears, interwoven with hints of citrus, cream, honey, toast, and acacia. It is long, linear, and pure, the archetypal Grand Siècle, with a slow-building, long-lasting intensity of flavor buffered by the silkiest mousse. Grand Siècle Les Réserves is a totally awesome expression of class and finesse—a Champagne that seems to dance around the palate. Mesmerizing.

The very first Grand Siècle was a blend of 1955, 1953, and 1952 that was launched in 1960, the 300th anniversary of the marriage of Louis XIV, the Sun King, and Marie-Thérèse, his cousin, the daughter of Philip IV of Spain. The solar emblem on the foil represents the Sun King, whose reign was known as Le Grand Siècle because of the unprecedented prosperity he brought to France. Grand Siècle was just one of several possible names on a list that was drawn up by Bernard de Nonancourt, the owner of Laurent-Perrier, in 1957. Unsure what to call his special new Champagne, he sent the list to Charles de Gaulle, who replied simply "Grand Siècle, of course, Nonancourt," and the decision was made.



Tom Stevenson

Prior to tasting Grand Siècle Les Réserves, I saw the recently renovated cellars where the reserve wines for Grand Siècle age at 55°F (13°C) in 14 boutique-sized, state-of-the-art, 110hl, stainless-steel vats. Each tank holds a varietal base wine from a different village: Pinot Noir from Ambonnay, Bouzy, Louvois, Mailly, Tour-sur-Marne, Verzenay, or Verzy; Chardonnay from Avize, Chouilly, Cramant, Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Oiry, or Tour-sur-Marne.

With this new facility, Laurent-Perrier can age Grand Siècle's reserve wines on a cru-by-cru basis for the first time. This will enable Michel Fauconnet, the current *chef de cave*, to scrutinize the evolution of each village, giving him maximum flexibility at the *assemblage*. This obviously provides him with a tremendous advantage over his predecessors, though they did not do so badly from the lineup of selected older cuvées of Grand Siècle tasted before the main event. The 1997/96/95 needed a few more years before it will be ready for a late-disgorgement style, whereas the 1996/95/93 would be fabulous disgorged now, yet even better if rereleased in another 20 or 30 years. In 1997, I described the 1990/88/85 as one of the very finest Grand Siècles ever, and it is indeed a profound wine today, thanks to its super-concentrated 1985 Pinot Noir.

The 1988/85/82 is even greater, however, showing purity, elegance, and great finesse, highlighted with sweet notes of French toast and a lingering finish: sublime! There were niggling imperfections in the 1985/82/81, 1982/79/78, 1979/78/76, and 1975/73/70, which might or might not be present in other bottles. All the wines tasted up to here were from magnums. The 1970/69/66 in a 75cl bottle lacked the elegance and finesse of the best aged magnums, but the 1955/53/52, the very first Grand Siècle, was, and still is, one of the greatest Champagnes ever made, thanks in no small part to a breathtaking pH of 2.90.

I have plenty of Grand Siècle in my cellar, but when I am inspired to open a couple of interesting bottles during a meal, I hardly ever give them a second glance. This is such a pity, but without any means of identifying individual bottles, it would be impossible to engage my guests in a meaningful debate, a point plainly demonstrated by Laurent-Perrier's own tasting. If we had not been told the various chronological compositions, how could we have discussed the wines? The reason always given for not revealing the trio of vintages was the fear that customers might start asking for one trio rather than another, but the logical extension of that would be to stop selling Vintage Champagne for fear that customers might keep asking for the same vintage!

The late, great Bernard de Nonancourt created Grand Siècle, so it is easy to understand why he was reluctant to change it. But he was an incredibly complex mix of tradition and innovation, and had he been born into Alexandra's generation, I suspect he would embrace the transparency of the times and realize the potential and plain common sense of revealing the component years of Grand Siècle to his loyal customers. If the spirit of "Grand Bernard" lives on at Laurent-Perrier, which I am sure it does, it is possible that this *grande maison* might change its mind, because with Les Réserves it has already taken the first step. ■