

Future Baltic strategy required

In 1998, some 2,000 bottles of a remarkably consistent, super-fresh, highly effervescent, and altogether extraordinarily youthful 1907 Heidsieck & Co Monopole Gout Américain were salvaged from the 1916 Baltic wreck of the *Jönköping*. In 2010, a haul of unvintaged Veuve Clicquot, Heidsieck & Co Monopole, and (the long-lost house of) Juglar were recovered from an unidentified schooner that had sunk in the late 1840s, just south of the *Jönköping*, in the waters around Åland, but those Champagnes were foul.

Wines retrieved from most wrecks around the world are usually undrinkable, often because they have suffered from an ingress of seawater, but the *Jönköping* Champagne was of spectacular quality, due to a rare combination of factors found in the Baltic. However, although the Åland Champagne was also from the Baltic, it was in a faulty condition when initially salvaged, and the mistakes made during the recorking operation (which was supposed to preserve the wine) merely served to exacerbate its faults. With more than 1,500 unexplored wrecks cataloged in the Baltic but not yet explored, and up to one third of all the Champagnes shipped across the Baltic failing to reach their destination in the 19th century, it is almost certain that other Champagne-laden wrecks will be salvaged in years to come. It seems only prudent, therefore, to examine what went wrong.

When the *Jönköping* story broke, it was the cold temperature (35–39°F [2–4°C]) and low salinity of the Baltic (averaging just 10 Practical Salinity Units compared to the global oceanic average of 35 PSU) that were credited with the exceptional condition of the Champagne. This environment makes the seabed inhospitable for the types of worms and other organisms that tend to penetrate the corks from shipwrecks in warmer climes and saltier seas. On the *Jönköping*, with the integrity of the cork maintained, the rate of Champagne's maturation slowed almost to a halt under the Baltic's cold, dark storage conditions



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and absolutely zero oxygen ingress. As a result, the 1907 tasted more like a 20-year-old Champagne than a 90-year-old in 1998, and we should not forget that it was already nine years old when the *Jönköping* sank. It had aged barely ten years in almost a century, and you literally had to taste it to believe it. I opened one of the very first bottles and was dismayed that the cork not only offered very little resistance, but made not even the slightest *phut* when it was removed. Convinced it was going to be flat and probably contaminated with seawater, I poured barely half an inch into a narrow Champagne flute, and if I was amazed to see a sugar-white mousse froth up to the very top of the glass, I was flabbergasted by its super-youthful taste.

The Åland Champagne was a completely different story. It stank of horse shit—not horse manure, as has been reported (my words were sanitized elsewhere)—and even the palate was laced with this stench. The bottle I tasted (coded A4) had been salvaged 18 months earlier, and having questioned the only two people to taste every bottle during the recorking operation, it is evident that the compounds responsible for its repulsive odor were present to one degree or another in every single bottle of Åland Champagne. I asked François Hautekeur, the enologist in charge

of Veuve Clicquot's technical team overseeing the recorking, what the A4 bottle had tasted like when it was opened just days after being at the bottom of the Baltic, and he quoted his written note: "Great refinement, extremely long finish, bearable nose." What exactly did he mean by "bearable"? "All of the salvaged Champagnes that were drinkable were more or less cheesy," Hautekeur told me. "Some bottles had such a terrible cowshed smell that we did not taste them." Richard Juhlin, the only other person to taste all the Åland Champagnes, told me, "A few bottles were so terrible that we had to evacuate the tasting room after opening them [...]. When I crawled into bed after a hard day's work officiating, I remembered all too well the stench of manure, swamp, and rotten eggs."

With the undrinkable bottles being quite so disgusting, those with lesser concentrations of the compounds responsible might seem "bearable" by comparison, but in isolation, and by all normal quality-control standards, even the best bottles of Åland Champagne must be considered seriously flawed. Furthermore, as bottle A4 showed, the recorking process, which was designed to preserve the Champagne for auction, only made things worse (though not harmful to health). It is likely that the active compounds responsible for the varying degree of stench found in the Åland Champagne include hydrogen sulfide, various mercaptans, and no doubt other volatile sulfur compounds. Furthermore, there might even be indoles, such as skatole, and possibly volatile phenols, too. The precise compounds need to be identified so that we understand how and why they were so noticeable in the Champagnes found in the Åland wreck but not the *Jönköping*, since this will help determine the correct strategy for future salvage operations. Obviously a Champagne house is best placed to direct the required laboratory analysis, but Veuve Clicquot owns only one bottle, which cost the large sum of €12,500 at auction, so it is understandably

reluctant to broach this solitary relic. The salvage team got a fixed finder's fee, leaving the Åland government as the sole owner of all of the remaining Champagne and the exclusive recipient of the revenue stream these bottles have generated at auction and will continue to generate on an annual basis. (This year's auction had to be postponed because of a legal challenge by a student of law and archaeology over the right of the Åland government to sell artifacts from a wreck.) The revenue is for a good cause—the government's own maritime preservation charity—but if anyone is morally obliged to identify the chemical compounds polluting the aroma of such hugely expensive Champagne, it must surely be the vendor.

Although the condition of the Åland Champagne suggests that 160 years in a totally reductive environment at the bottom of the Baltic is probably far too long, whereas 80 years could infuse the *Jönköping* Champagne with an immortal-like youthfulness, time was not the only factor responsible for the polarizing differences in quality found in these two wines. The *Jönköping*

be more surface-light penetration, which would create more dimethyl disulfide (responsible for the "light-struck" aroma). Again, not that much more, but over 160 years the difference would certainly mount up.

We must hope that future salvaged Champagnes will be more like those from the *Jönköping* than the Åland wreck, but even the most mercaptan-laden bottle of the latter will command a high price at auction from collectors who would be fascinated to taste a wine produced before the Charge of the Light Brigade or the American Civil War. To ensure this experience is as pleasurable as possible, the Champagne houses that were most heavily involved in the export trade to Scandinavia and Russia throughout the 19th century should agree best practices to preserve salvaged Champagnes in the future. These would no doubt include:

- Secure the original corks on the shipwreck before taking the bottles to the surface, where there will be no pressure of depth to force the corks to retain a tight seal.

should be carried out only in a sealed, temperature-controlled chamber, under six atmospheres of CO₂ pressure, and at wreck temperature. This is the most important of all the essential recommendations made here.

- Shrink-wrap the bottles in black plastic that is impenetrable to light, and keep them stored at wreck temperature.
- When auctioning, guarantee provenance up to point of sale, and explain why it is vital to keep the bottle at wreck temperature until just before opening and consuming. Offer a no-expense-spared delivery service in order to maintain the wreck temperature, from storage facility to successful bidder, via a global logistics specialist. Anyone willing to spend thousands on a bottle of liquid history is very likely to pay the high price demanded by such a service once they know how a change of temperature will compromise the quality and freshness of their historic Champagne.

With more than 1,500 unexplored wrecks cataloged in the Baltic but not yet explored, and up to one third of all the Champagnes shipped across the Baltic failing to reach their destination in the 19th century, it is almost certain that other Champagne-laden wrecks will be salvaged in years to come

wreck was at a depth of 210ft (64m), where the temperature was just 35–39°F (2–4°C), whereas the Åland wreck was at a shallower depth of 160ft (48m), where the temperature was slightly higher, at 39–43°F (4–6°C), meaning more mercaptans would have been produced. The difference of a few degrees is small, thus the increase in the rate at which the mercaptans were produced would be tiny, but even a minuscule increase over as long a period as 160 years would become significant. At the Åland's lesser depth, there would also

- Transfer the salvaged bottles to chilled and covered portable baths, to maintain the temperature of the wreck and to keep the Champagnes in darkness, both on the salvage vessel and at the storage facility.
- Analyze two or three different bottles to assess the condition of the cork, the quality, and pressure of the wine, and to identify any faults.
- Based on the analysis, decide whether to reinforce the original cork seal or to recork.
- If recorking is necessary, this

Had these practices been applied to the Champagnes of the Åland waters, they would at the very least have remained "bearable" for a reasonable period, and the best might have been closer to the quality of the *Jönköping* Champagne. If neither the salvagers nor any of the Champagne houses associated with the find are prepared to go to the trouble and expense of taking these necessary precautions, then they should leave the wines where they are. We can do without any more horse-shit-smelling Champagne, thank you. ■