

Two 2006 Champagnes: One for the cellar, one already deliciously rich, smooth, and ripe

Tom Stevenson previews the two new 2006 releases from Mumm and Perrier-Jouët, and reflects on their potential development in bottle after tasting flights of older vintages from both houses

Mumm *chef de cave* Didier Mariotti showed the recently released Mumm 2006 Vintage twice in four months; the first time was in June at The Ritz in London, the second in October at Reims. I have been following this vintage in-house for quite a while and it had always seemed promising, but when it made its first outing a year ago as a fully commercial disgorgement for a *WFW* tasting in September, 2012, I found it a bit rustic. My colleagues then, Michael Edwards and Simon Field MW, were similarly unexcited: Edwards said the “flavors [are] variegated”; Field described it as “lacking requisite harmony.” All this pointed to insufficient time between disgorgement and tasting, and I explained this to Mariotti when he later asked me why I thought it had not shown well. Prior to that discussion, this vintage had been slated for a January, 2013 release, but this was later postponed to June, when it showed fairly well at The Ritz. At that juncture the wine was much brighter, with citrus fruit, some minerality, toastiness just beginning, and a smooth, creamy finish. In Reims it was more creamy, even on the nose, but with less citrus and minerality. A blend of 36

percent Chardonnay from Cramant, Avize, and Oger, plus 64 percent Pinot Noir from Verzy, Mailly, Verzenay, Aÿ-Champagne, Bouzy, and Ambonnay (6g/l residual sugar, disgorged in November 2012). Nearly 12 months of post-disgorgement aging would normally be plenty for a Mumm Vintage, but anyone with a good cellar would be well advised to keep this vintage for at least another 18 months.

Mariotti also opened up a couple of Vintages with the most similar alcohol and acidity balance to suggest how the 2006 might evolve. The first was the 1989 (4g/l RS, disgorged July, 2013), which started off with a very odd and not particularly pleasant aroma, but improved in the glass and after a few minutes that unpleasant aroma had completely disappeared, leaving plums and lilies on the palate. Next came the 1961 (4g/l RS, disgorged July, 2013), which had oxidizing, Sherry and tea-leaf aromas, but was much better on the palate, although the toasty fruit was spoiled by a mushroom taste (magnum without the fungi fusion, this vintage of Mumm can be awesome). The real treat, however, was a trial disgorgement of Mumm 2002 Cuvée R Lalou, the third vintage of this resurrected prestige cuvée. The commercial release in 2014 will probably have a different *dosage* composition, including another base wine, as this one was too oaky (for Mumm), but this Champagne has classic structure, great poise and minerality. At lunch we enjoyed another treat, a magnum of 1955 Cramant, which was all slowly-built toast and no mushroom. Mind-blowing even for someone who has had his mind blown away more times than he can count

Perrier-Jouët 2006 Belle Epoque

Hervé Deschamps (pictured) celebrated 30 years at Perrier-Jouët by launching the 2006 Belle Epoque to a small group of journalists in Epernay in October,

2013. It was the first Vintage in a selective vertical dating back to 1983, the year Deschamps joined the company. He spent his first decade under the watchful eye of the great André Baveret before assuming the role of *chef de cave* in 1993. The 2006 Belle Epoque (8–9g/l RS) is a blend of 50 percent Chardonnay from Cramant, Avize, and Chouilly, plus 45 percent Pinot Noir from Mailly, Verzy, and Aÿ-Champagne; and 5 percent Pinot Meunier from Dizy. This is a deliciously rich, smooth, and ripe Champagne that is dominated by the ripeness of Cramant Chardonnay, making it not dissimilar to the 2002. Lovely floral aromas and some spiciness on the finish make it extremely easy to drink on release, although it will benefit enormously from several years in a cool cellar.

The older vintages of Belle Epoque shown were an absolute delight, with only one disappointment (which is very rare, as there are usually a few low points in a vertical of mature Champagne vintages). The 2004 was surprisingly rich for the vintage and really quite sappy and sassy, with a very fresh, crisp, and juicy finish. On the other hand, you would expect the 2002 to be rich, a big year that is dominated by the tell-tale richness of shrivelled grapes, but it is so big for a Belle Epoque that it is only a tad short of being fat. Yet Hervé Deschamps somehow managed to retain the elegance of Belle Epoque, never allowing its rich, tasty, and powerful creamy-vanilla Chardonnay to put on too much weight. Quite masterful, and absolutely delicious. The 1998 is delightfully fresh, with breezy-floral aromas and, as much as I adored what went before, it was only as I tasted it that I realized it was the first real Champagne in the tasting. Not necessarily the best, but the first Vintage to establish itself in the bottle, and to reach the stage where true aficionados truly begin to enjoy their Champagnes.



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

The lacework of flavors in the 1998 unfold in the mouth, revealing lovely, juicy, yeast-complexed fruit. Great elegance and finesse. The 1996 was no disappointment, but its gunpowder-fresh toastiness of fruit does seem highly strung, whereas the very rich 1990 did indeed let me down, with its dark, brooding, and oxidizing fruit. Yet it perfectly set up the 1985, which was the most sublime Champagne of the tasting,

A banker when it comes to Belle Epoque, its toasty-coffee fruit was nothing short of extraordinary.

According to Hervé, they were so short of Pinot Noir from the northern Montagne crus in 1985, especially Mailly, that they used far more from the southern Montagne, particularly Ambonnay. The 1983 was not in the same class, of course, but its toasty-peachy fruit had such a fresh, delicate, ripeness

that it was surprisingly good, even for someone who is well aware how underrated this vintage has always been. Too big, they said, and true enough it was a record-sized harvest, but only fractionally larger than the previous year's, which was also a record. But that bumper year was 1982, of course—and back then everyone was swayed by Bordeaux. Ridiculous really, but it still happens today.