

Is Champagne losing its cool?

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As makers and purveyors of the world's greatest sparkling wine for more than 250 years, the Champenois have pioneered the concept of luxury marketing and are now globally acknowledged as supreme masters of their art. With such a pedigree, you might reasonably expect the Champenois to be the most relaxed and self-assured people in the wine world today. But you would be wrong.

There are, of course, exceptions. But collectively, they are as insecure as any group of people could possibly be. They are obsessed by sales statistics. When things are going well, they're on a high, jet-setting around the world with a confidence that might be false but is so infectious that even those who have poor sales figures get caught up in the party mood. Then someone in the trade or press makes a solitary dismal prediction, and they are all doom and gloom again. The Champenois are excited by the very thought of record-breaking sales, even when profits are negligible, but they go into a totally depressive state when sales have declined, even when profits are healthy and the future is rosy.

Backfiring

They regularly shoot themselves in the foot. When Champagne announced an "expansion" of its vineyards, for example, it was after sales had soared so high and for so long that there were endless predictions in the press that Champagne would run dry. Inevitably, this announcement made the Champenois seem greedy and attracted a lot of negative press. Psychologically, it would have been far smarter to announce the start of this process during a declining market. It is not as if it was a new idea. I wrote an entire section about this topic in *Champagne* (Sotheby's), which was published in 1986, when the proposed expansion was already old hat. They therefore had decades to work out the best possible strategy, yet they did not

attempt to clarify that it was not, in fact, an expansion outward, but a consolidation inward; they did not explain that they had already shrunk the AOC in 1951, when sales were in a major decline; nor did they point out that if the new land could be demonstrated to be qualitatively superior to the average that already existed, the only possible outcome would be to raise the future potential quality of Champagne. To do nothing, in other words, would be to fail. It is utterly baffling that an industry that has literally sold chilled Champagne to the Eskimos can put so little thought into selling its expansion program to the rest of the world, but that is what has happened. Furthermore, Champagne continues to exacerbate the situation by failing to confirm the checks and balances for qualitative improvement of its future viticultural potential, let alone provide any means of external check in line with 21st-century expectations of transparency. So, even when all the court challenges to the expansion are over, it will not be finished. Without the requisite transparency, the Champenois will have left enough doubt in some minds to ensure an endless trickle of negative articles containing erroneous facts that will be picked up and reshaped further down the line.

There is definitely an element in the Champagne industry that is losing its cool. While organizing the very first Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships earlier this year, three Champenois I have known for more than 30 years forwarded a copy of an email sent to the president and *chef de cave* of every Champagne house belonging to the UMC (Union des Maisons de Champagne). This correspondence came from David Chatillon, *directeur général* of the UMC, so it was as official as it could get. It singled out this competition only, not once but three times. Chatillon claimed the competition was in breach of three of the UMC's ethical rules:

(1) samples have not been purchased anonymously (like a mere consumer); (2) participation requires a fee; and "especially", (3) wines are not tasted by geographical origin. I explained to Chatillon that the first two points apply to all competitions that almost every Champagne house has ever entered, and the third point was not only misleading but factually incorrect. The first stage of the Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships is by terroir, with Champagne tasted exclusively against other Champagnes, with only the best in class going forward to compete for the world trophies by style, in the same way that the *Decanter* World Wine Awards judge their international trophies.

Point of principle

Although we had received more than 90 percent of our Champagne entries by this juncture, including iconic Champagnes that have never been entered into any competition before, on a point of principle I demanded that the UMC should either send out a second email to the same recipients retracting the warning or send out an identical ethical warning to *Decanter*, the IWC, the IWSC, and every OIV competition globally. Neither happened, of course, but thanks to friends within the industry battling behind the scenes, it was made clear at an extraordinary meeting of the UMC that it was up to individual member houses whether they entered the Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships. Not exactly an apology, but it was the best I was going to get. Champagne remains the greatest brut-style sparkling wine in the world for me, but hopefully the UMC will ask its members why they have ethical rules that not only prevent them from entering competitions but also stop them from participating in magazine tastings (rule one). What's the point? These are bad rules; they make every member a hypocrite and should be revoked. ■