

When to disgorge?

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What would be more beneficial: an extra year on lees or an extra year post-disgorgement aging before a Champagne is released?

If I were to put this question to Richard Geoffroy and Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, two of Champagne's most experienced and naturally gifted *chefs de caves*, I suspect I would receive conflicting answers. Geoffroy is in overall charge of winemaking at Moët & Chandon but has had special responsibility for Dom Pérignon since 1990, whereas Lécaillon presides over the vineyards and winemaking at Louis Roederer, where he is also joint CEO. I have probably learned more about Champagne from these two than from any other individuals in the business.

It is not as if Geoffroy and Lécaillon are of generally opposing philosophies when it comes to the making and appreciation of Champagne. They both produce a reductive style of Champagne; they both avoid oxidative aromas; and they both aim for smooth aging. Indeed, if they were to sit in each other's tasting room and go through all the Vintages to assess how well they had aged, they would come to almost identical conclusions. Yet despite sharing similar reductive philosophies, they make two very different Champagnes. Not that it should be any surprise: They are produced from different varietal proportions, the grapes of which have been grown in different vineyards, and even when the grapes are harvested from the same village, the exposition and harvest dates can differ—in addition to which, the various villages play greater or lesser roles in the final blend. Most importantly, however, one is Dom Pérignon, and the other is Cristal—the difference comes down to that.

Although Geoffroy and Lécaillon tread a very similar path in their quest to produce an iconic expression of the reductive style, there is one area where they disagree profoundly. Lécaillon

believes there is not much to be gained from aging on lees beyond a certain point, whereas Geoffroy prefers aging on yeast for as long as possible, even to the point of making this a prerequisite for every vintage of Dom Pérignon. Furthermore, he believes that the longer a Champagne remains in contact with its yeast sediment, the more resistant it becomes to oxidation, whereas Lécaillon believes that it becomes more sensitive to the oxidative shock of disgorgement.

I side more with Lécaillon on this particular issue, as does science in general, though I do not dismiss Geoffroy's opinion out of hand. The idea that the longer a Champagne has in contact with yeast, the greater its resistance will be to oxidation might conflict with most experiences I have had, but not all. Pol Roger 1914 was disgorged in 1944 and should have been dead long ago—but it isn't, and that has always niggled me, so maybe there is something to Geoffroy's controversial stance. He has probably tasted more, and seen more analyses of, venerable Vintages than anyone else in Champagne. Simply to have worked with Dominique Foulon on the extraordinary *assemblage* of Esprit du Siècle (one third 1995 and 1985, plus two thirds 1983, 1976, 1962, 1952, 1943, 1934, 1921, 1914, and 1911) would give him more intimate experience of these extraordinary vintages than most *chefs de caves* put together. The Esprit du Siècle and some of its constituent vintages rank among the very greatest Champagnes I have ever tasted, so while I might still side more with Lécaillon, I have to respect where Geoffroy is coming from. Besides, it is healthy for Champagne, and good for its consumers, that two great *chefs de caves* of such similar philosophies should have strongly held opposing views on a subject as basic as aging.

If nothing else, it emphasizes the differences in their Champagnes. Dom Pérignon P2 and P3 (formerly

Oenothèque) are the epitome of the multilayered aromatic and textural complexity achieved through extended yeast contact, their very *raison d'être*, while the long-awaited, first ever, late release of Cristal will illustrate the virtues of combining ten years on yeast with ten years of post-disgorgement aging. As divulged by Patrick Schmitt, editor of *The Drinks Business*, Lécaillon believes that a decade on yeast is the ideal period. Schmitt quotes Lécaillon's confession that an extra three years' yeast contact for Cristal "does not make a big difference."

These are, however, extreme Champagnes in every sense of the word—so, what about most others? If I changed the emphasis of my opening question to: "What would be more beneficial for most Champagnes: an extra year on lees or an extra year post-disgorgement aging?," would that focus the mind? Notwithstanding that there are windows of opportunity for disgorging that open and shut, and every Champagne is different—thus no single answer is applicable to all situations—I would still have to say that there is much less to be gained from an extra year on yeast. If we take a Vintage Champagne that is released at between five and seven years of age, I would much rather it received an extra year's aging under the ideal conditions of the producer's own cellars before shipping. This would have a minimal effect on the aging, in terms of either aroma or flavor, but it would have an immense impact on the mousse, making it softer and silkier, and this would result in more finesse. The higher the quality of the Champagne, the slower it ages, thus the longer I would stretch the post-disgorgement aging. The Champagnes sold by most quality-conscious producers would easily benefit from an additional two years, and for Vintages released at eight years or older, as much as three years would impart an even more luxurious texture. ■