

1990 AND 1996 CHAMPAGNE HUMAN ERROR?

At a very special tasting, Tom Stevenson attempted to discover, with the help of Essi Avellan MW and Simon Field MW, why some wines from these two exceptional vintages have not fulfilled their early promise

The first of three long-term WFW tastings set up in 2012 (see Conclusions?, *opposite*), this particular project looks at why bottles of some highly rated 1996s and 1990s have fallen over so quickly and completely unexpectedly. These were two exceptional years, which at the time were widely regarded as two of the greatest Champagne vintages of the 20th century. Some are still as legendary as the day they were released, such as the 1996 Dom Pérignon, but so many great names have nose-dived.

Champagne producers Deutz, Duval-Leroy, Gimonnet, Alfred Gratien, Lanson, Mumm, Palmer, Joseph Perrier, Pommery, Roederer, Taittinger, and Veuve Clicquot kindly agreed to disgorge magnums of 1996 and 1990 in March 2012 and April 2014 or thereabouts, so that we could taste these vintages roughly six and 30 months after disgorgement. The idea was to replicate a normal release with the six-month disgorgement and compare our scores and remarks to those for the 30-month disgorgement, which would represent the same wine with two years cellarage, but under ideal conditions rather than subject to the

vagaries of storage in a collector's cellar. Due to a misunderstanding, Alfred Gratien did not disgorge in 2012 but sent historic disgorgements (2005 for the 1996 and 1999 for the 1990), and these were included for long-term storage contrast, albeit of statistically minimal relevance. We chose magnums and asked for them to be kept at the cellars where they were made in order to give these two vintages every chance of demonstrating the greatest possible longevity. We also allowed each producer to decide how much *dosage* and, importantly, how much SO₂ to use with the *liqueur d'expédition*.

Why are these vintages special?

There might be a question mark hanging over the potential longevity of 1996 and 1990, but there can be no doubting that these years produced two very special Champagne harvests that excited everyone at the time. If anything connects one with the other, it is their exceptional acidity to ripeness, but this was exceptional in two very different, unique, and, one could almost say, opposite ways: For 1990 it was a tartaric phenomenon, while for 1996 it was a mind-boggling malic anomaly.

With 11.1% ABV, 1990 was one of the ripest Champagne harvests on record. It should be understood that these figures represent the regional average. Almost every year in Champagne, most of the producers are able to select the best grapes with a potential alcohol of between 10% and 11% to produce a Vintage cuvée, while chaptalizing the rest of the (inevitably less-than-average-strength) grapes for Non-Vintage blends. This chaptalization of much of the crop contributes to the lean structure we expect from Champagne and serves to illustrate just how exceptional an average of 11.1% across the entire region is. The 1990 harvest was riper than the drought years of 1976 (10.5% ABV) and 2003 (10.6% ABV). A quarter of a century on, we can see that 1990 was the third-ripest Champagne vintage over the past 70 years. Only 1959 and 1947 were riper, but they had typically low acidity. In 1959, for example, the grapes had a not-unexpected total acidity of 6.3g/l, whereas in 1990 the total acidity was 8g/l, a level that might be expected for grapes of 9.5–9.8% ABV and thus truly remarkable for 11.1% ABV. The acidity was not just uniquely high for the volume of sugar in the grapes, it was exceedingly ripe, comprising a record 8.9g/l of tartaric acid, representing almost 59% of the total acidity, which is second only to 1989 (though that vintage had lower sugar, lower total acidity, and lower tartaric by volume). If 1959 and 1947 were two of the greatest Champagne vintages of the 20th century, how great might 1990 be? That was the only question asked in 1990, and it was why there were such hopes for the vintage; the *vins clairs* in early 1991 seemed to confirm the most wildly optimistic predictions.

As for the special attributes of 1996, with an average potential alcohol of 10.3%, the ripeness of this vintage was closer to 1976, except that the grapes also had an amazing acidity of 10g/l. It soon became known as the 10:10 vintage. The 2.97 pH gave a clue to the mystery, because it is almost unheard of for the amount of sugar in these grapes. You have to go back to 1971 to find a similar pH for any vintage in excess of 10% potential alcohol, but the acidity for 1971 was “just” 8.6g/l. This inferred an impossibly high proportion of malic acid for grapes with such high sugar

*With so much data in this introduction, I've gone native, expressing the total acidity throughout as sulfuric acid, just as the French so irrationally do. (Well, there is a logic to their madness, but I don't want to muddy the waters any further here!)

1 KEY DATA FOR THE TOP 12 AND BOTTOM 12 WINES						
Category	Dosage (g/l)	Total SO ₂ (mg/l)	Free SO ₂ (mg/l)	Added SO ₂ (mg/l)	Pre-disgorgement temperature	Post-disgorgement temperature
Top 12	8.1	32.5	6.3	33.3	11.8°C	13.9°C
Bottom 12	2.9	39.8	3.6	8.1	10.0°C	11.5°C

ripeness, yet at 52% that was exactly what was found. Although Champagne harvests average in excess of 53% tartaric acidity and are thus ripe, contrary to popular myth, there are obviously lows as well as highs, and among the lows, 47.5% tartaric is not uncommon. It is usually confined, however, to poor years that are genuinely unripe. About the only exception I can think of is 1995 (47.8%). Without doubt, 1996 is the most unusual and distinctive vintage of the 20th century, and unlike 1990 there were indeed troubled mutterings when the *vins clairs* were tasted in 1997. Already some producers had begun to wonder whether this vintage might not be a bit too distinctive. Did the sugar:acidity ratio make 1996 too much like a New World vintage? Not that they advertised the fact in Champagne. With wine writers all over the world busily writing up 1996 as the “vintage of the century,” what reason did the Champenois have for disabusing them of such a foolish notion? As the years went by, even producers of absolutely classic 1996s that have never wavered started to believe they could have handled this crop differently. Richard Geoffroy of Dom Pérignon is certain that, given the same conditions again, he would wait a little longer before picking, but he also concedes that he had to make a concerted effort to avoid oxidatively prone hyper-concentrated Pinot Noir that ruined so many other 1996s. Had Geoffroy waited longer, the volume of hyper-concentrated grapes would have increased, reducing further his blending options; and having very recently tasted his sublime Dom Pérignon 1996 Oenothèque (disgorged in July 2008), it is very hard to imagine how he could have made a better wine.

So, there we have it: Two very special vintages, and when both were released, most individual Champagnes received rave reviews from the majority of critics. After a few years of cellarage, however, an increasing number of the same Champagnes started dropping like flies. While there have always been reasons why the 1996s might not age well, the decline of the 1990s has always been a puzzle; this phenomenon intrigued the *chefs de caves*, as well as the critics, which helped in the long-term organization of this tasting.

2 WHICH CATEGORIES FARED BEST?

Category	EA	SF	TS
All 1990s	16.1	15.8	15.2
All 1996s	17.3	15.9	16.1
1996, 6 months	17	15.5	15.9
1996, 30 months	17.5	16.3	16.2
1990, 6 months	16.9	16.6	16.3
1990, 30 months	15.4	15.2	14.3
All 6 months	17	16	16.1
All 30 months	16.5	15.7	15.2

3 TOM STEVENSON'S TOP WINES

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1996 (6 months) 19.5
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1996 (6 months) 19.5
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1990 (29 months) 19
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1990 (6 months) 19
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1996 (29 months) 19
Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 (28 months) 19
Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 (6 months) 19
Pommery 1990 (5 months) 19
Pommery 1996 (5 months) 19
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1990 (6 months) 19
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1990 (29 months) 18.5
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1996 (29 months) 18.5

4 AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES

	Average	Range
Tasting	16.5	7-19.5
EA	17	14-19.5
SF	16	12-19
TS	16	7-19.5

Tasting results

Since this project has taken nearly three years to set up and involves a lot of data, even if it is at a rudimentary level, it might be prudent to set out the basics so that others may access it at a later date, either to reinterpret some of the conclusions I have drawn or to examine other factors. The main results table (fig.5, pp.160-61) has been compiled in order of preference by the combined

scores of all three tasters, indicating for each wine: [1] length of post-disgorgement aging; [2] alcohol by volume; [3] type of closure for the second-fermentation pre-disgorgement; [4] *dosage* in grams per liter; [5] total SO₂ prior to disgorgement in milligrams per liter; [6] free SO₂ in milligrams per liter; [7] amount of SO₂ added after disgorgement before the final cork in milligrams per liter; [8] pre-disgorgement storage temperature; and [9] post-disgorgement storage temperature.

Which categories fared best?

All three tasters were unanimous in preferring the 1996s to the 1990s (albeit only marginally for Simon); the 1996 disgorged 30 months over six months; the 1990s disgorged six months over 30 months; and across both vintages, the six-month disgorgements to the 30 months (fig.2, *left*). Note that six months and 30 months are approximate.

Tops and tails

If we remove the two corked wines, which did not come last because of any aspect of intrinsic quality, and the only sample of the Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1996 disgorged 29 months to survive the shipment (which was heavily ullaged and evidently not in the condition it was intended to be), then analyze the average data for the top 12 and the bottom 12, we can see that the *dosage*, total SO₂, free SO₂, and added SO₂ all differ radically. Interestingly, the storage temperature before and after disgorgement are superior (lower) for the bottom 12 (fig.1, *opposite*).

Conclusions?

I am not sure that a rational conclusion can be gleaned from this data about any inherent longevity problem in the 1996 and 1990 Champagne vintages. Does it even exist? Or could the early demise of so many examples from these two vintages be viewed as the early signs of winemaking failures that became symptomatic in the Champagne industry 20 years ago? I thought this project was about two specific vintages, but the clearest differences between the highest- and lowest-scoring wines are low/no *dosage* and low/no additions of SO₂ after disgorgement. They are both matters that have worried me in recent

years, to the extent that the next two long-term tasting projects set up for *WFW* involve the comparison of four different *dosage* levels on the evolution of exactly the same Champagnes from two different vintages (see “An Ambitious Trial,” *WFW* 45, p.50). They are not due to take place, however, until 2015 and 2018. This tasting was never meant to be a prelude to that subject. It did not occur to me that the problem with 1996 and 1990 might in any way be linked to *dosage* or SO_2 . I was thinking of something intrinsic to the years in question, but there is no escaping that *dosage* and SO_2 are the most glaring anomalies in these results.

Is it a coincidence that it also started to become fashionable not to use any SO_2 at disgorgement about 20 years ago? Whether connected or not, the CIVC began studies of the amount of oxygen taken into a bottle and published a ground-breaking paper in 2003, which directly led to the development of a protective system called “jetting” (see *A la Volée*, *WFW* 43, p.34). When done properly, jetting reduces the amount of SO_2 required, but it does not obviate the need at bottling to achieve the right free SO_2 level. Are some producers too reliant on jetting? Get the timing wrong, and that actually makes matters worse. Are some producers mistiming jetting and creating “fall-back,” literally sucking air into the bottle?

I am probably overthinking this: In most cases it probably has nothing to do with ill-timed jetting and everything to do with zero SO_2 after disgorgement. For a few years now, I have been hearing mutterings about the 1998s going over. Why? Is it the next vintage to suffer supposed longevity problems after 1990 and 1996? Are the 1998s also about to drop like flies? Then what—the 2002s? No, I don’t think there is anything intrinsically wrong with 1996, 1990, or any other vintage. The more I think about it, the more likely it is that the failures in these vintages are simple mistakes, as winemakers follow a fashionable trend while their wines know no better than to follow the fundamental laws of chemistry.

Personal reflections

This was not only a fascinating, thought-provoking tasting, it was a truly delightful experience, with my 12 top

Champagnes (fig.3, p.159) absolutely outstanding in quality, while I would be proud of the quality of the next 11 highest-scoring wines if I had pulled them out of my own cellar for guests. The two Alfred Gratiens disgorged nine and 15 years ago should be enough evidence that a number of the other lower-scoring Champagnes could well show like totally different animals after a few more years’ post-disgorgement aging. Take the Lanson 1996, to both disgorgements of which I gave only 14 points—scores I stand by for six and 29 months after disgorgement, yet I have historic disgorgements of this vintage in my cellar. This is the wine I once described as “gargling with razor blades.” I meant that as a compliment to this non-malolactic 1996. I had two cases of magnums but have only one left now. With five to seven years of post-disgorgement aging, the first case has been superb over the past two years, but I will be leaving the second case for a few more years yet.

Without doubt, Taittinger outperformed every other house. It was the only producer to have all four Champagnes in the panel’s top 12 and mine, too. Obviously the relatively high post-disgorgement storage temperature did no harm, and it was also the only producer to use ascorbic acid in the *dosage*. Ascorbic acid (vitamin C) is a far more efficient scavenger of oxygen than SO_2 and really keeps a Champagne fresh, but it has to be used with care because if the free SO_2 runs out before the ascorbic acid, it has the opposite effect: oxidation. *Chef de cave* Loïc Dupont obviously has a safe pair of hands, because I have never had an oxidative Taittinger. I was half-surprised by Duval-Leroy for having three of its four Champagnes in my top 12. Only half-surprised, because I have awarded high scores to the 1990 and 1996 vintages of its prestige cuvée *Femme de Champagne* in the past, but more times than most I have marked it down for being too oxidative, so I shall find out what, if anything, *chef de cave* Sandrine Logette-Jardin did in the disgorgement of these samples that she has not done in the past. Pommery and Palmer both had two Champagnes in my top 12, and Deutz showed what it can do when a certain carrier does not play football with its consignments!

CHAMPAGNE

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs ●
Palmer Blanc de Blancs ●
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs ●
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne ●
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz ●
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne ●
Palmer Blanc de Blancs ●
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs ●
Pommery ●
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs ●
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne ●
Pommery ●
Palmer Blanc de Blancs ●
Pommery ●
Palmer Blanc de Blancs ●
Alfred Gratien ●
Alfred Gratien ●
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne ●
Alfred Gratien ●
Louis Roederer ●
Alfred Gratien ●
Mumm Cordon Rouge ●
Louis Roederer ●
Veuve Clicquot ●
Louis Roederer ●
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz ●
Veuve Clicquot ●
Lanson Vintage Collection ●
Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale ●
Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale ●
Mumm Cordon Rouge ●
Pommery ●
Louis Roederer ●
Veuve Clicquot ●
Gimonnet Vieilles Vignes de Chardonnay ●
Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale ●
Mumm Cordon Rouge ●
Lanson Vintage Collection ●
Gimonnet Vieilles Vignes de Chardonnay ●
Mumm Cordon Rouge ●
Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale ●
Lanson Vintage Collection ●
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz ⁴ ●
Gimonnet “Les Cuvées de l’An 2000” ●
Gimonnet “Les Cuvées de l’An 2000” ●
Lanson Vintage Collection ●
Veuve Clicquot ⁵ ●
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz ⁵ ●

	VINTAGE	DISGORGED	ABV (%)	2ND-FERMENTATION CLOSURE	DOSAGE (g/l)	TOTAL SO ₂ (mg/l)	FREE SO ₂ (mg/l)	ADDED SO ₂ (mg/l)	PRE-DISGORGEMENT STORAGE TEMPERATURE (°C)	POST-DISGORGEMENT STORAGE TEMPERATURE (°C)
	1996	6 months	12	Cork	9.7	40	3	40	12-14	16-18
	1996	28 months	12	Crown cap ³	10	30	15	5	12	12
	1990	6 months	12	Cork	9	35	2	40	12-14	16-18
	1996	6 months	12	Cork	5.7	N/A	N/A	40	11	13
	1990	6 months	12	Cork	6.5	N/A	N/A	30	12	12
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	5.5	N/A	N/A	40	11	13
	1996	6 months	12	Crown cap ³	10	30	15	5	12	12
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	9	35	2	40	12-14	16-18
	1990	5 months	12.5	Crown cap ²	8	25	5	40	10	12
	1996	29 months	12	Cork	9.7	40	3	40	12-14	16-18
	1996	29 months	12	Cork	5.7	N/A	N/A	40	11	13
	1996	5 months	12.5	Crown cap ³	8	25	5	40	10	12
	1990	28 months	12	Crown cap ²	10	30	15	5	12	12
	1996	29 months	12.5	Crown cap ³	8	25	5	40	10	12
	1990	6 months	12	Crown cap ²	10	30	15	5	12	12
	1996	115 months (2005)	12.5	Cork	8	65	10	5	9	12
	1990	186 months (1999)	12.5	Cork	8	65	5	5	9	12
	1990	6 months	12	Cork	5.5	N/A	N/A	40	11	13
	1996	30 months	12.5	Cork	8	65	10	5	9	12
	1990	6 months	12	Crown cap ²	9	31	0	25	11	15
	1990	30 months	12.5	Cork	8	65	5	5	9	12
	1996	29 months	12.5	Cork	4	55	5	13	12	12
	1996	29 months	12	Crown cap ²	10	37	0	25	11	15
	1990	6 months	12	Cork	4.5	30	0	30	11	14
	1996	6 months	12	Crown cap ²	10	37	0	25	11	15
	1996	6 months	12	Cork	6.5	N/A	N/A	30	12	12
	1996	29 months	12	Cork	4.5	30	0	30	11	14
	1996	29 months	12.5	Crown cap ²	3	50	5	13	12	12
	1990	3 months	12	Cork	>5	45 ¹	10 ¹		13	15
	1996	29 months	12	Cork	>5	45 ¹	10 ¹		13	15
	1990	5 months	12	Cork	4	50	5	13	12	12
	1990	29 months	12.5	Crown cap ²	8	25	5	40	10	12
	1990	29 months	12	Crown cap ²	9	31	0	25	11	15
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	4.5	30	0	30	11	14
	1996	29 months	12	Cork	4	35 ¹	2 ¹	<1	9	10-13
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	>5	45 ¹	10 ¹		13	15
	1996	5 months	12.5	Cork	4	55	5	13	12	12
	1996	6 months	12.5	Crown cap ²	3	50	5	13	12	12
	1996	5 months	12	Cork	0	35 ¹	2 ¹	0	9	10-13
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	4	50	5	13	12	12
	1996	3 months	12	Cork	>5	45 ¹	10 ¹		13	15
	1990	6 months	12.5	Crown cap ²	3	54	5	13	12	12
	1996	29 months	12	Cork	6.5	N/A	N/A	30	12	12
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	4	35 ¹	2 ¹	<1	9	10-13
	1990	5 months	12	Cork	0	35 ¹	2 ¹	0	9	10-13
	1990	29 months	12.5	Crown cap ²	3	54	5	13	12	12
	1996	6 months	12	Cork	4.5	30	0	30	11	14
	1990	29 months	12	Cork	6.5	N/A	N/A	30	12	12

Notes: ¹After disgorgement; ²With cork lining; ³With synthetic lining; ⁴Heavily ullaged; ⁵Severe cork (TCA) problems

tasting / savor / 1990 and 1996 Champagne

Note: Bracketed information under each wine name indicates the time between disgorgement and tasting; ABV; dosage; and added SO₂.

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1996 ● | 19.5

(6 months; 12%; 9.7g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Bright, glossy golden color. Stunning nose of gunpowder, coffee, cream, tropical fruit, vanilla. Absolutely pure and exuberant. Full, soft, fruit-packed palate building up superb complexity and depth. Lovely, smooth mousse and fine, refreshing, lemony acid line. Perfectly crafted, all the pieces in place. It all leads to a hugely fruity, sweet, appetizing finish. Not one sign of tiring. | 19.5
SF | Generous color and a nose of measured decadence; truffle, incense, and furniture. The palate is rather too sweet, but this may reflect a relatively recent disgorgement, and there is sufficient class, power, and potential for this rich brew to dazzle further. | 19
TS | Light-medium lemon color. Big gunpowder-toasty aromas, absolutely gorgeous, toast-laden fruit of extreme finesse on the palate. Great acids. Laser-like precision and focus. Fabulous! | 19.5

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 ● | 19

(28 months; 12%; 10g/l; 30mg/l)

EA | Deep bright lemon color. Mild, soft, seductive, coffee, caramel, and pastry-shop nose. It has a caressing, inviting tone to it. Fresh, sweet, fruit-driven palate. Fleshy and zesty, full of exuberant, ripe fruit. Lively, lemony palate and sweet fruity finish. No signs of tiring. | 18.5
SF | Impressive bright color, youthful gold, and then very strong and persistent mousse. The palate does not disappoint; it's lively, energetic, and fizzy, and yet has powerful, truffley, almost gamey notes in deference to its age. Young and old meet and agree to go the same way; upward, paradigmatically, onward, inevitably. | 19
TS | Light to medium lemon color, with gentle toasty aromas seducing on the nose and beautifully elegant fruit on the palate. | 19

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1990 ● | 19

(6 months; 12%; 9g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Deep glossy golden. Superb, up-front coffee, pastry, apricot nose. A candle-waxy fresh disgorgement feel to it still. Ripe and evolving but really healthy and appetizing. Fleshy, mouth-filling but pristinely fresh palate. Smooth, round, velvety, yet comes with positive energy. Delightfully fresh, yet impressive in its grandeur and complexity. | 19
SF | A strident luminous color is matched by a very assertive, oaky nose. Undulled by time, it seems. The palate is strident, almost tannic—a Champagne to take on all comers in the white-wine firmament, and I suspect, one that will invariably win its battles. | 18.5
TS | Such a bright, pale wine for almost a quarter of a century old, gorgeously toasty and delicately rich, with class and style. | 19

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1996 ● | 18.5

(6 months; 12%; 5.7g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Deep lemon-gold color. Delicate, soft, deep nose of great beauty. Coffee, gunpowder, candle wax, tropical fruit, and confectionary: promising but slightly timid. Crisp, lively palate full of delicious fruit. Long and fruit-driven. Not yet shining at its brightest. | 19
SF | Straw-lemon color and a persistent small bead; the nose recalls hedgerow fruit and hints of verberna. The palate is plump and generous in intention; high acidity and relatively recent disgorgement mask the potential inherent in the wine's structural complexity, but the potential is most certainly there. | 17
TS | Light to medium lemon color, with seductive, toasty-peach aromas and heavenly fruit on the palate. Rich and elegant, so long, long, long, with a wonderful peachiness of fruit on the aftertaste. A great wine. | 19.5

Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1990 ● | 18.5

(6 months; 12%; 6.5g/l; 30mg/l)

EA | Deep golden color. Ripe, mature, soft, mellow nose, with sweet fruity and floral notes and botrytis notes piercing through. Rich, yeast-complexed, soft, chewy palate. Really big and expressive. A mouthful. Still with so much energy, power, and unrealized potential left. This is a showstopper. | 18.5
SF | Lighter of color than many of its peers, but not lacking in mousse. The nose is impressive with blossom, spice, and hints of praline all evidenced. *En bouche*, the analytic triptych is resolved with satisfaction; late-disgorged rawness will, in all likelihood, give way to a finely structured and very complete wine. | 17.5
TS | Pale old gold color, mesmerizingly toasty aromas on nose and palate. A super-smooth, classy wine with most of its life still to come. | 19

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1990 ● | 18

(29 months; 12%; 5.5g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Deep golden. Full-on, deep, soft nose. Ripe, sweet, tropical fruit, lovely pastry complexity, opulent toast, and delicious vanilla. Promising. Full-bodied, velvet-textured, sweet palate, full of gorgeous fruit. Creamy mousse and seamless length. A suitably opulent *dosage* that is marrying well. Super freshness. Decadent. Majestic today, but it seems still to be slowly evolving and perfectly harmonious, with its best years still ahead of it. | 19.5
SF | Bubbles are prevalent if a little dispersed; the nose is equally difficult to decipher and the palate has similar heterogeneous qualities; so, not without merit, but hard to value as an ensemble. | 16
TS | Old-gold color, lovely, classy, yeast-complexed aromas dominating the nose, with nothing toasty yet, though the toastiness will eventually show through (and the tardiness of this effect only increases the score). Impressively youthful and fruit-driven. | 19

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 ● | 18

(6 months; 12%; 10g/l; 5mg/l)

EA | Bright golden color. Attractive, mature but healthy, pristinely clean nose. Some restraint, toffee apple, coffee-and-cream nose. Full, rich, mellow maturing palate. Peaceful and at ease. Caressing, soft texture and great freshness fully integrated to the sumptuous, voluptuous body. A sweet dream. Lots of age ahead of it but all ready to go now. | 19
SF | Spanish gold color and a nose of soft spice and orchard-fruit; energy on the palate and hints of praline and quince; held together by acidity and a firm architecture. | 16
TS | Bright, light gold color. Beautifully toasty aromas, super-crisp and super-clean. Lovely, building finesse of yeast-complexed fruit on the palate, with a long, concentrated finish, tapering to finesse. | 19

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1990 ● | 18

(29 months; 12%; 9g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Deep, developing golden color. A soft, fresh mushroom note floating over sweet white fruit. Fruity otherwise, but these aromas show the age. Sweet, opulent *dosage* and richness. Peculiar but not bad, despite the mushroom note. Autumnal and velvet-smooth on the palate. Beautiful, but huge acidity for a 1990. The second magnum is happily missing most of the mushroom notes—still a hint of it there, but not a disturbing amount. Simply delicious. | 18.5
SF | Finely judged in all its elements, this wine juxtaposes the sweet and the savory with beguiling finesse. The palate, to be fair, cedes to the latter with smoky indulgence, but the acidity and innate fruit character ensure that the ensemble is finely composed and nicely integrated. | 17
TS | The first bottle was a touch mushroomy, but the second bottle happily not. The first bottle showed so much potential, but the second bottle was absolutely lovely: rich, smooth, complete, and delicious. | 18.5

Pommery 1990 ● | 18

(5 months; 12.5%; 8g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Deep maturing golden color. Stylish toast and yeast-lined nose. Distinctly mature aromas but pleasurably so. Sweet, chunky, monstrous palate, with good freshness and liveliness to it. Bold and unapologetic, masculine style. | 17.5
SF | A mature yet bright color cedes to a similar nose, its hints of cardamom and pink grapefruit underlining individuality. The palate is equally playful, engagingly, its intimations of tertiary maturity held in check by a freshness that appears to be completely natural and therefore exuberant and welcoming. | 17
TS | Pale to medium gold color, appealing yeast-complexed aromas on the nose, and very clean, elegant, youthful, yeast-complexed fruit on the palate. Has finesse. So much better (even) after it had warmed up in the glass. | 19

ESSI AVELLAN MW'S VERDICT

This was an intriguing tasting exercise of two famous vintages that polarize opinion. Personally, I have always been an advocate of the 1996, hallmarked by a unique combination of ripe, exuberant fruitiness and massive acidity. Still, I have noted significant variation between producers, the less successful Champagnes showing fading fruitiness and ruthless acidity. But I have had even more mixed feelings about the 1990 Champagnes, whose best examples are magnificent, but increasingly many are showing characteristics of premature aging and heaviness.

Happily, neither vintage showed particularly worrying oxidative tendencies in this tasting. My preference was slightly in favor of 1996; of the wines I scored 18.5 or higher, nine were from 1996 and six from 1990. The outstanding performers for me were both vintages of Taittinger Comtes de Champagne and Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne. The 1996 Comtes showed discreetly finer than the 1990, whereas for the Femme my subtle preference was for the 1990. I found it quite logical that these prestige cuvées excelled, because they were predominantly tasted against Vintage Champagnes. Of the Vintage wines, it was the Palmer & Co Blanc de Blancs that was closest to the high level of the above-mentioned prestige cuvées. I found the 1996 Palmer to be fractionally superior to the 1990. Beyond these top-performers, I found stronger vintage preferences for the other Champagnes. For the Louis Roederer wines, I greatly preferred the 1996s, as I did for the Lanson and Alfred Gratien. Then again, the 1990 vintage was my favorite for Veuve Clicquot and Deutz (though the 2012 disgorgement of the latter was corked so cannot be taken into account).

The acidity levels of the 1996s did not really bother me, but then again I do have a palate for great freshness and linearity. It was only in some of the cuvées from Lanson, Pierre Gimonnet, and Louis Roederer that it felt extreme. For the best wines, the acidity's effect was only positive, giving nervy tension, length, and succulence to the wines. I found the frequent fatty, weighty character of the 1990s

much more worrying, several wines feeling older than their age, even melancholic in their oxidative tone. The freshest 1990 wines, like the Comtes de Champagne, Femme de Champagne, Palmer Blanc de Blancs, and Cuvée William Deutz had none of that but were rather superbly fresh and vibrant.

When it comes to the different disgorgements, the results are tougher to interpret. In general, the differences were not drastic: I was expecting more notable differences in the expressiveness of the wines, since the fresh disgorgements were only six months old. The most noticeable differences, however, were in the perception of the *dosage*, which seemed poorly integrated in a number of the most recently disgorged wines. I actually found greater differences between the producers than between the 2012 and 2014 disgorgements. For Taittinger, Palmer & Co, and GH Mumm, for instance, my preferred cuvée was always the 2014 disgorgement, whereas for Veuve Clicquot and Pommery I consistently assessed the 2012 disgorgements to be superior. But the differences are hardly significant. We had some older disgorgements for Alfred Gratien and Joseph Perrier, but these did not stick out in any particular way.

The greatest value of this tasting came from assessing similar disgorgements from ideal, magnum-sized bottles that came straight from the Champagne houses' cellars. The longer the time since the launch of the vintage, the higher the risk of bottles damaged by poor storage conditions, and the harder it is to make a proper assessment of the wine. Neither 1996 nor 1990 was particularly disappointing as a vintage, but they do now appear to be polar opposites, despite sharing the common denominator of ripe, opulent fruitiness. My personal preference for 1996 was reconfirmed by the tasting, as I greatly enjoyed the drive, explosive fruitiness, and raciness of these Champagnes. But for both vintages, caution is certainly in order, because the Champagnes are not performing uniformly well. Based on this tasting, many of the Vintage cuvées have already peaked, but the best prestige cuvées still possess great potential.

TOP WINES

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1990
(29 months) **19.5**

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs
1996 (6 months) **19.5**

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1996
(6 months) **19**

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 (6 months) **19**

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs
1990 (6 months) **19**

Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1990 (6 months) **18.5**

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1990
(6 months) **18.5**

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1996
(29 months) **18.5**

Alfred Gratien 1996 (30 months) **18.5**

Lanson Vintage Collection 1996 (29 months) **18.5**

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1990 (6 months) **18.5**

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 (28 months) **18.5**

Pommery 1996 (29 months) **18.5**

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs
1990 (29 months) **18.5**

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs
1996 (29 months) **18.5**

**Taittinger Comtes de
Champagne Blanc de Blancs
1996 ●**

(29 months; 12%; 9.7g/l; 40mg/l)

18

EA | Bright, deep lemon color. Beautifully toasty and sweetly fruity nose: singing. Coffee, gunpowder, tropical fruit, vanilla. Superbly in line with the delicious nose is the crisp, vivacious, fruit-forward palate. Zesty acidity, bright fruit, energetic mousse. A magnum full of life and pleasure. Plentiful in every sense. **| 18.5**

SF | Fine mousse and a vigorous lemon-gold hue. The wine has a nose of spring flowers, almond, and tobacco. The palate is effusive, almost precocious, an embarrassment of gustatory benevolence; the acidity is a little bitter on the finish; more time is required for the wine to harmonize in its post-disgorgement phase. **| 16.5**

TS | Bright, medium-deep lemon color, with big gunpowder toastiness on the nose and intense fruit on the palate. Nectarines and crunchy red-fruit coulis, intermingled with lovely gentle toasty aromas. Long, very fine finish. Great acids. **| 18.5**

**Duval-Leroy Femme de
Champagne 1996 ●**

(29 months; 12%; 5.7g/l; 40g/l)

17.5

EA | Deep lemon color. A charming nose, with beautiful fireworks: peach, marmalade, and orange blossom. Cheerful, playful palate full of energy. Zesty acidity, but it is in line with the crisp, pristine fruitiness of the wine. Seamless and soft, still coming with real drive. Pleasurable and building its way to the top. **| 18.5**

SF | Mute color but with quite impressive mousse; the nose is closed, but flint, acacia, and bath salts are evident; the palate is more extrovert, but only a little; one suspects that recent disgorgement masks the potential here. The ingredients are of a good quality, but they are not completely entwined. **| 15.5**

TS | Light to medium lemon color, with one of those noses that just exudes class and finesse, and so long, smooth, and succulent on the palate. **| 19**

Pommery 1996 ●

(5 months; 12.5; 8g/l; 40mg/l)

17.5

EA | Bright golden. Deep, open, maturing spice and apple nose. Quite nuanced and particular. Full-bodied, really rich and impressive. Even, oily body and such ripeness that the acidity does not stick out to any degree. Fruity, seamless, and long. **| 18**

SF | Deep burnished color; the bubbles are quite persistent, and the nose has hints of crystallized fruit and pastry. The palate has a little too much late fall apple and not enough tertiary interest to engage fully. But better on the second reading. **| 16**

TS | Light to medium color, with a lovely, fine, refined aroma and lovely, fine, fluffy fruit—so very fresh. Light, yet long. Shows class. **| 19**

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1990 ●

(28 months; 12%; 10g/l; 5mg/l)

17.5

EA | Deep golden color. Soft, mellow nose with real appeal to it. Lovely pastry, nut, and biscuit

complexity. Really deep nose, strong on mature fruit aromas such as dried apricot and honey.

A light mushroom whiff. Big, fat palate, with plumpness and overwhelming exuberance. Powerful but not really detailed. | 18

SF | Bold of color, with small, luxuriant bubbles. The nose is lactic and citric at the same time, not completely integrated but fascinating nonetheless. The mouthfeel is expansive, ambitious, with secondary and tertiary notes regimented in the name of complexity and a capacity to seduce. | 17

TS | Yellow-gold color, some toasty aromas but essentially fruit-driven and extraordinarily youthful for a mature wine on the palate. Broad-brush Chardonnay strokes providing richness and creaminess. One of the few wines that did not improve as it warmed up in the glass, not that it went rapidly downhill, either. | 17.5

Pommery 1996 ●

(29 months; 12.5; 8g/l; 40mg/l)

17.5

EA | Deep golden color. Soft, mellow, promising nose of depth and character. A coffee hint over plush, ripe apricot fruit. A real go-getter palate with fleshiness and succulence. The acidity goes finely hand in hand with the energetic, sumptuous fruitiness. Long, fruity, sweet finish, where the *dosage* still feels slightly unintegrated. But this is so healthy and pristinely crafted—a glass of sheer pleasure. | 18.5

SF | Subtle straw-gold color and an equally subtle nose of barley sugar and poached pear. *En bouche*, the wine is still quite acidic and raw, any recent disgorgement having presumably impeded an ambulatory progress—so much so that the racing acidity dominates and throws one, self-consciously, into a futuristic vortex of uncertainty. | 16

TS | Pale to medium lemon color. Lovely toasty-fruit aromas. Delicious fruit, with acids building on the finish. Needs more time! Can be enjoyed now, but will be even better with another few years post-disgorgement aging. | 18

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1990 ●

(6 months; 12%; 10g/l; 5mg/l)

17.5

EA | Deep golden color. Generous, aged nose with sweet coffee, honey, and dried-fruit aromas alongside a minor mushroom whiff. Full-on, rich, mature, age-mellowed palate. Oily and round, mouth-filling and impressively muscular. A big boy, and with plenty of age, too, but not really tiring or oxidizing. | 18.5

SF | Luminous golden hue, then mature savory aromas; the mouthfeel is generous, edgy, smoky, and fascinating. A vinous quality intrudes but does not pervade; the finish is finely judged but just a little “dusty.” | 16

TS | Lovely old-gold color, with an intriguing toast, coffee, and raspberry-confiture aroma; a snapshot in time. | 17.5

Alfred Gratien 1996 ●

(115 months; 12.5%; 8g/l; 5mg/l)

17

EA | Deep golden. Fresh, beautifully evolved, ripe, fruity nose, with a gentle toast and *viennoiserie*

SOFT, GENTLE, PASTRY AND YEASTY NOSE, WITH PERFECTLY RIPE, OPULENT FRUIT. FULLY HEALTHY, BIG AND BRIGHT. SWEET FRUIT-LADEN, ROUND AND VISCOUS PALATE. COMPRESSED, INTACT, EXPRESSIVE, AND READY TO BLOOM SHORTLY. WHAT A 1990 SHOULD BE LIKE!

note. Soft vanilla and caramel undertone. Super, crisp palate with bright, accentuated acidity. Plenty of fruit left but in danger of being hidden behind the big acidity. No oxidative notions, but a ripe character. Long, driven, linear, dry length. | 18

SF | Lemon-straw color, aromas still quite precocious, flint and hints of iron; the palate wears its *dosage* with pride, citric and praline notes, finely etched, honeyed, and eloquent, with hints of nougat on the back. A hint of dust on the finish detracts a little. | 15.5

TS | Pale lemon color, gunpowder aroma, very fresh mix of tropical fruit and coffee on the palate. Fine mousse and acidity tapering to a long, elegant finish. | 18

Alfred Gratien 1990 ●

(186 months / 12.5% / 8g/l / 5mg/l)

17

EA | Bright, maturing, golden color. Fresh, deep nose, still holding something back. A sweet, almost botrytis tone to it: candle wax and honey. Really sweet, oily, cloying palate, too. As opulent and luscious as it gets. Full of fruit still; no trouble with oxidation; a monster. | 18

SF | Measured in color and weight of mousse, a quality echoed on nose and palate alike. Crystallized fruit and tobacco vie for attention; mature but not lacking spirit. | 15.5

TS | Beautifully bright medium gold color, completely revitalized fruit-driven nose, exquisite fruits, a complete mixture, but berry-dominated, in different formats (fresh, confiture, coulis). So very fresh and long. | 18

Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1990 ●

(6 months; 12%; 5.5g/l; 40mg/l)

17

EA | Deep golden. Soft, gentle, pastry and yeasty nose, with perfectly ripe, opulent fruit. Impressive depth. Feels slightly reserved for the time being, but fully healthy, big and bright. Sweet fruit-laden, round and viscous palate. Compressed, intact, expressive, and ready to bloom shortly. Will still improve. This is what a 1990 should be like! | 18.5

SF | Evolved color, with slightly diffuse mousse.

The nose is unusually reticent for a wine of its age, yet on the palate there is surprising energy and a distinctive red-fruit character. Vinous and intriguing; certainly aging very well. And getting better, he adds as a post script, with a second tasting... | 16.5

TS | Deepish old-gold color, rich fruit aromas, piquant balance, very fresh, with the fruit very much alive. | 16.5

Alfred Gratien 1996 ●

(30 months; 12.5%; 8g/l; 5mg/l)

17

EA | Bright lemon-gold. Big nose of bold toffee and apple fruit, wax and oriental spices. Zesty, succulent palate, with great drive and linearity despite unapologetic, plush ripe fruit. Sweet, almost sugar-coated finish: not yet perfectly integrated *dosage*? Full of ambition and held-back power. Explosive and exuberant but not one of the most refined examples. The acidity is really mouthwatering and verging on tartness: not to everyone's liking, I suspect. A fine, pencil-shavings finish. | 18.5

SF | Baking-powder nose, but with very small, impressively regimented bubbles. In the mouth, the *dosage* is domineering and overpowers any potential for harmonious integration. I'm not sure that time will help much in this instance. Having said that, a second tasting after a mere 10 minutes, reveals a certain *Glasnost*. | 15.5

TS | Medium lemon color, with lovely toasty aromas and richness of fruit. The *dosage* seems substantial, but nicely integrated, not at all syrupy. Would love to taste this in 10 years' time. | 17

Roederer 1990 ●

(6 months; 12%; 9g/l; 25mg/l)

17

EA | Medium-deep lemon-gold color. Restrained, so one cannot get much out of it, other than mature, gently oxidative, apple fruit. Plump, obvious palate, on the heavy and sweet side. Feels poorly integrated for the time being. Nervous mousse but fading fruit. | 15.5

SF | Energetic of mousse and color, the wine shows its age, in a good sense, on the nose, with hints of mushroom and gunflint. The palate surprises with its sweetness, indicative perhaps of a need for longer post-disgorgement aging. I am sure that the underlying quality of fruit would more than justify further anticipation. | 18

TS | Lovely pale lemon-gold color and just so fruity on the palate. Not enormously complex, but surprisingly fresh and young. Nice now, but this will be the talk of the town in 20 years. | 17.5

Alfred Gratien 1990 ●

(30 months; 12.5%; 8g/l; 5mg/l)

17

EA | Deep golden color. Full, rich, sweet nose, distinctly lifted. Obvious, chunky, sweet palate. *Dosage* is not yet fully integrated. Alive alright, concentrated and fresh, but very much on the winy side, with aromatic, spicy, ripe, botrytis characters coming through. Curiously reminiscent of Alsace. | 16

SF | Deep of color and with very persistent small bubbles, this wine captures the ripe heart of the

vintage, with exotic fruit tempered by crisp acidity and tertiary notes promising pleasure rather than decay. The fruit is sweet but evolved, its architectural framework Baroque in construction yet Rococo in intent. | **17.5**

TS | Very rich, very fruit-driven style. Lovely yeast-complexed fruit aromas and flavors. | **17**

Mumm Cordon Rouge 1996 ● | **17**
(29 months; 12.5%; 4g/l; 13mg/l)

EA | Bright golden color. Fresh, slightly waxy, peculiar nose, with apple fruit. Surprisingly tame and muted. Fruit is fading on the palate, too, which still has a zesty, crisp character to it. The mousse has a coarseness to it. Short, drying length. Not much capacity left. | **16**

SF | Golden core, the rim a little watery; a Turner dawn. The nose is a little mute; yellow fruit and hints of hedgerow. On the palate the acidity is still writ large, with hints of exotic fruit, hazelnut, and a nicely shaped finish. After a couple of minutes, it settles down nicely, finely honed and beautifully chiseled. | **16.5**

TS | Pale lemon plus color, nose a bit broad-brushed, with creamy caramel aromas developing as it warmed in the glass. The fruit on the palate also gained with time in glass, as toast begins to melt into the white fruits. Fine acidity, gentle mousse. | **18**

Roederer 1996 ● | **16.5**
(29 months; 12%; 10g/l; 25mg/l)

EA | Deep golden. Glossy, bright fruity, articulate nose. Layers and layers of gentle soft aromas. Ripe white and red fruit; opulent, but still has subtlety to it. Smooth palate, approaching oily in texture. Linear, focused palate, with a fine mellowness to it. Has the feel of some age, but is maturing gracefully. Long, succulent, fresh, spicy-fruity finish. | **18**

SF | A vinous, almost Burgundian nose; hedgerow, mocha, and hints of peat. The palate is an impressionistic sketch, its shape either to be defined by patience or time, or forsaken to the memory of a long-since consumed cousin, which was disgorged according to protocol. | **15**

TS | Lovely, pale, old gold color. Lovely toast aromas, but rather stark fruit at colder temperatures. Softens out nicely with time and temperature in glass. | **17**

Veuve Clicquot 1990 ● | **16.5**
(6 months; 12%; 4.5g/l; 30mg/l)

EA | Deep golden. Mild, peculiar, punch-reminiscent nose, with a woody note to it and low fruit intensity. Fresh, lively palate, on the lighter side compared to the others. Nutty mature wine expression, with a brandy-barrel finish. One would think this is older than 1990, though. Hanging in there, but somewhat advanced in its development. | **16.5**

SF | A mature coloration should not undermine the very small bubbles. Beauty before age, in this case... On the palate, the maturity and complexity conspire with great success. Harmonious, rich, wise, and mature, this is a worthy ambassador

of a very fine vintage. | **18.5**

TS | Medium gold color, a touch oxidative, but not that intrusive. | **15**

Roederer 1996 ● | **16.5**
(6 months; 12%; 10g/l; 25mg/l)

EA | Developed golden color. Mild, soft, ripe, fruity nose in a youthful form, rather inexpressive for the moment. Ripe apricots, yellow apple, and apple jam. Full-bodied, generous palate, with expansive fruitiness. The high acidity is well in line with the exuberant fruitiness. Long, developed, mellow length. Aging gracefully, with plenty of substance left. | **17**

SF | Burnished gold color and a nose of late-season apples; the palate is fat, slightly oily, and clumsy. Well meaning, but a little gauche in this company. | **15**

TS | Pronounced color, not deep or dark, but starting to show. High acids dominate the palate from the off, plum and dry mango fruit, a puckering texture when too cold at first, but softening up beautifully in the glass, as the good, healthy mousse dissipates—everything in wine is a trade-off. The strong aftertaste that dominated the wine also melts away into something more beautiful. | **17.5**

Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1996 ● | **16.5**
(6 months; 12%; 6.5g/l; 30mg/l)

EA | Deep golden. Evolved, rather mature nose in full bloom. Sweet apricot and fig notes lined with delicious pastry, ginger, and toffee-apple aromatics. Slightly lifted. Sweet, succulent palate, which is already mellow and peaceful. Wide and fleshy, with plenty of fruit and nicely integrated crisp acidity. Long, opulent finish, with licorice and dried-fruit notes. | **17.5**

SF | Gentle gold color and an equally gentle nose: primary on the brink of secondary; still youthful after all these years. The palate is more evolved, with hints of mushroom and vanillin underlining age. The ensemble wears its age without too much artificial embellishment. | **15.5**

**CAPTURES THE
RIPE HEART OF THE
VINTAGE, EXOTIC
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BY CRISP ACIDITY
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PROMISING PLEASURE
RATHER THAN DECAY.
ITS ARCHITECTURAL
FRAMEWORK IS
BAROQUE IN
CONSTRUCTION YET
ROCOCO IN INTENT**

TS | Medium-deep lemon color; some green, leafy vegetal aromas on the nose and chunky fruit on the palate. Really quite rich and tasty, but it could do with a little more finesse in the presentation of that fruit. | **16**

Veuve Clicquot 1996 ● | **16.5**
(29 months; 12%; 4.5g/l; 30mg/l)

EA | Deep golden color. Tiring old-wine nose, bruised apple and forest floor. A light oxidative character. Big, bold body, wide and appearing as the nose suggested. Low on liveliness and elegance. | **16**

SF | Burnished gold coloring is matched by a big oaky nose, with distinctive red-fruit notes to the fore and hints of savory expectation. The palate is smoky, rich, and magnificently decadent; its acidity and latent power all promise well for the medium to long term. Most impressive! | **18**

TS | Deep gold color; oxidative, creamy-caramel aromas, but with a fairly good richness of fruit on the palate. | **15**

Lanson Vintage Collection 1996 ● | **16.5**
(29 months; 12.5%; 3g/l; 13mg/l)

EA | Deep golden. Soft and deep beautifully biscuity nose, with ripe red apple, vanilla, and baking spices. Big, tart palate with voluptuous, succulent fruitiness and plenty of power. Linear and fleshy at the same time—feels lighter than it really is due to the extreme acid line. Unusual but it works. A fruity, intense, long finish, full of energy. A long way to go for this one. | **18.5**

SF | Straw to lemon coloring, with an attractive nose of early-morning patisserie and apple blossom. The palate has energy, flinty acidity, and a real sense of purpose; *dosage* hitherto a little disharmonious; totemic of the vintage maybe. | **16**

TS | Medium lemon color. All acid and no fruit for now. I'm sure the Heidsieck & Co Monopole 1907 must have been like this at one time. Wait another 60 years? Scored for today! | **14**

Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale 1990 ● | **16**
(3 months; 12%; >5g/l; NA)

EA | Medium-deep golden. Straightforward, particular nose, with apple and spice but also unexpected aromas such as tar and wood. Sweet palate, where the *dosage* does not feel somewhat loose. Fleshy and mouth-filling but low on refinement and depth. | **16**

SF | Classic lemon-gold coloring and a nose of the powder room. The palate is a little clumsy, its savory elements a little awkward in the presence of crisp acidity—itsself, of course, indicative of further aging capacity. | **15.5**

TS | Pale to medium gold, with coffee-leafy aromas, and high acids dominating the palate. Long on the finish. | **16.5**

Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale 1996 ● | **16**
(29 months; 12%; >5g/l; NA)

EA | Deep golden color. Deep maturing apple

nose, disappointingly singular. Rich, wide palate that starts sweet but finishes very dry. Aged fruit character but still very crisp palate: a bit of a contradiction. Fully alive but aromatics are quickly developing. Gains an oxidative character quickly in the glass. | 16

SF | Fine, civilized color and a pleasingly youthful nose of wet pavements and early harvest time. The palate juxtaposes ancient and modern pleasingly, the acidity still holding sway over the weight of fruit, which will probably win over in the end. | 16.5

TS | Pale lemon color, *dosage* peeping through on the nose and rather syrupy on the palate. Might pull together, but a somewhat unhappy marriage at this juncture. | 15

Mumm Cordon Rouge 1990 ● | 16
(5 months; 12%; 4g/l; 13mg/l)

EA | Deep golden color. Sweet, lifted, botrytized nose, with honey and dried fruit to the fore; clearly aged but not oxidized. A mouth-filling, voluptuous palate that is generally healthy but feels older than 1990. The *dosage* is heavy-handed and not yet fully integrated. Plenty of exuberant fruit. | 17

SF | A deep yellow/gold color is accompanied by a nose of hawthorn and iodine: all very intriguing. The palate takes one a little off course, such is the vestigial sugar, which seems to undermine the subtle intent hitherto rehearsed. Still a little unsettled, methinks. | 15.5

TS | A wine that did not speak to me, no seductive whispering in the ear, but nothing upsetting either. Alcohol dominating the aroma now, but a clean and good brut finish, and it did not deteriorate in the glass. | 15

Pommery 1990 ● | 16
(29 months; 12.5%; 8g/l; 40mg/l)

EA | Deep golden. Soft, age-mellowed nose of pastry richness and appeal. Ground coffee, vanilla *vienniserie*, and apricot tart. Round, generous, wide-open palate ready to impress. Mature but healthy fruit expression; you can feel the age, but in the healthiest of ways. Long, concentrated, fruit-laden finish. Starts to fade rather quickly in the glass. | 18

SF | A big generous color and a distinctly lactic nose. The palate is plump, but not completely clean, it seems, which is a shame, because there is clearly generosity here and no shortage of ambition. | 14.5

TS | Warm old-gold color and clean, sweetish fruit make for a healthy survivor, but there is not so much class or complexity. | 15

Roederer 1990 ● | 15.5
(29 months; 12%; 9g/l; 25mg/l)

EA | Deep golden in color but with a browning hue. Reserved, mature nose, with very little fruit showing—this is more on the earthy-woody side. Full, rich, sweet, and viscous palate—better than what the nose initially suggested. Even so, it is touched by oxidation and has lost its primary fruity appeal. | 16.5

SF | Deep color, almost amber; a nose of toffee apple and brioche finds favor with a palate that matches patisserie notes with those from late-harvest orchards. Just a little bitter/raw on the finish, indicative of slight overaging. A shame, because there is much to like here... | 15.5

TS | A deep color, with oxidizing aromas; this wine picked up a little as it warmed up in the glass, but not much. | 15

Veuve Clicquot 1990 ● | 15.5
(29 months; 12%; 4.5g/l; 30mg/l)

EA | Deep golden color. Mature old-wine nose, low on fruit. Earthy, spicy, and spirit notes prevailing. Good freshness on the firm, focused palate. Not too tired, just getting low on fruit. Long and succulent. Enjoyable today but not much keeping potential. | 17

SF | Deep of color, the wine has charming savory aromatics, fine balancing acidity, and a rich elegant palate. | 16

TS | Deepish gold color; this was okay but not impressive. Touch of oxidation, with toffee on the aftertaste. | 14

Gimonnet Vieilles Vignes de Chardonnay 1996 ● | 15.5
(29 months; 12%; 4g/l; <1mg/l)

EA | Bright golden. Soft, refined apple pie, vanilla, and spice nose with a charred undertone to it. Full, rich, powerful palate, with slightly nervous, youthful mousse. Ripe, exuberant palate, seamless but rather singular. The acidity stands out. Maturing but has kept its freshness. | 17

SF | Rather modest mousse and flat color, a state of affairs that does not improve on the nose. The palate has an intriguing, slightly torrefied character, vinous and a little heavy. | 15.5

TS | Pale lemon color, youthful fruit-driven aromas, but a touch aldehydic on the palate. | 14

Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale 1990 ● | 15.5
(29 months; 12%; >5g/l; NA)

EA | Deep golden color. Particular, apricot and waxy nose, with sweet floral-spicy notes. Full-bodied, explosive palate, but without much classiness or details. Tiring fruit expression. Long, sweet, singular finish. | 16

SF | Deep Spanish gold color and a nose of acacia, oatmeal, and Mirabelle plum. The palate has a hard, slightly smoky character, which may soften with time or may indeed harden further. One is supposed to be certain on such occasions, but sometimes doubt reflects more accurately the workings of time. | 15.5

TS | Old-gold color, with leafy-vegetal aromas and a touch of oxidation. The fruit on the palate is a bit straightlaced and unforgiving, even after warming up in the glass. | 15

Mumm Cordon Rouge 1996 ● | 15.5
(5 months; 12.5%; 4g/l; 13mg/l)

EA | Very deep golden. Mature, mellow nose, with evolved, singular fruit profile. Apple, spicy, with

SIMON FIELD MW'S VERDICT

When Tom organizes a comparative Champagne tasting, one can be sure of several things, not the least of which is the significance of all the variables. In this instance, the first key variables were a ripe, much-loved vintage, 1990, and what is increasingly perceived as a "difficult" vintage, 1996. But this was also an analysis of stylistic differences between two disgorgement dates. For me, the event was not only an opportunity to taste on home ground, as it were, at Berry Bros & Rudd but also to taste with the two foremost Champagne experts of their generation. And the wines did not disappoint. Overall, however, the conclusions, beyond all the superlatives and gasps of appreciation, did not demonstrably favor one combination of variables over another. The hard facts point to a marginal preference at the top for 1996 over 1990, while of the most celebrated examples, more were disgorged in March 2014 than in 2012. Beyond this cursory observation, though, there appears to be little correlation between the age of the wine and any "preferred" disgorgement date. Any worries about high vestigial levels of acidity, for example, in the 1996s, exacerbated by the "shock" of a relatively recent disgorgement, did not come to much. Indeed, such anxieties canceled each other out with the *victor ludorum*, the monumental 1996 Comtes de Champagne, disgorged in March 2014. Cares were spirited away in a display of peerless alchemy, with both the relatively high acidity and the more obvious residual sugar actually proving beneficial to the ensemble, which seemed at once fantastically mature yet amazingly fresh and exuberant. Such qualitative potential explains the rigors of the brief—which was more than vindicated by my highest set of marks for any WFW tasting. Yet even they proved parsimonious next to those of my fellow tasters!

TOP WINES

Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1996 (28 months) 19
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1996 (6 months) 19
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1990 (6 months) 18.5
Veuve Clicquot 1990 (6 months) 18.5
Roederer 1990 (6 months) 18
Veuve Clicquot 1996 (29 months) 18
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1990 (6 months) 17.5
Alfred Gratien 1990 (30 months) 17.5
Lanson Vintage Collection 1990 (6 months) 17.5
Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne 1996 (6 months) 17
Palmer Blanc de Blancs 1990 (28 months) 17
Pommery 1990 (5 months) 17
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1990 (29 months) 17

a brandy-barrel whiff to it. Full, round, weighty palate, where the acidity is not accentuated. Bold and ripe style, beautifully balanced, even if not very complex at this stage. | **16.5**

SF | Modest color and a nose of elderflower and baking spice; honest and quite concentrated. The palate is powdery, a little peppery and dusty; purity is an engagingly relative absolute, and this wine is so near and yet so far from its apogee. | **15**

TS | Medium lemon color. Chunky, with a puckering texture that needs more finesse. Some oxidative notes appear on warming. | **14.5**

Lanson Vintage Collection

1996 ●

(6 months; 12.5%; 3g/l; 13mg/l)

15

EA | Deep golden color. Mature, withdrawn nose, holding it back. Evolved, ripe red-fruit aromas. Baked apple, spice, rather singular. Fresh, tart palate with a drying finish. There is not enough fruit for long-term keeping, but it's hanging in there and probably gains some complexity under cork. The acidity is searing. | **16.5**

SF | Modest color, and a slightly reticent nose; gunpowder and bruised apple. The orchard-fruit character is carried on to the palate where the rapier acidity defies any potential intimation of rounded development. | **14.5**

TS | Medium lemon color, with aldehydic aromas dominating the nose and high acid ruling the palate. Quite ribby, lacking expression of fruit. | **14**

Gimonnet Vieilles Vignes de Chardonnay 1996 ●

(5 months; 12%; 4g/l; <1mg/l)

15

EA | Deep lemon-gold. Overt, musty, bruised, dusty nose with spice. Zesty with overwhelming acidity compared to the low fruitiness. Weak and fading. Strange. | **14**

SF | A very generous bacchanalian mousse refuses to dissipate; is this a good sign? The nose is disinclined to judge; then the palate is raw, woody, and seems far too young for a wine approaching its second decade. The jury were out and now they have returned with a "guilty" verdict. Those who like the woody styles may allow a stay of execution. | **14.5**

TS | Sorry, smells like a refermenting wine! Aldehydic, but not acetaldehyde. Bitterness spoils the palate. The second bottle has a similar aroma but is much smoother on the palate, without any bitterness. | **16**

Mumm Cordon Rouge 1990 ●

(29 months; 12%; 4g/l; 13mg/l)

15

EA | Deep developed golden color. Peculiar, aged nose, tough to grasp. Unexpected aromas of aniseed, orange marmalade, and waxy-earthiness. Full, rich body, mouth-coating and chunky. Vinous and big but has little finesse or liveliness. | **16**

SF | A gentle luminosity is matched by a developed nose, echoed in the mouth where the undoubted quality of the raw materials have now been compromised, dulled a little. The potential is evident, but alas it is mainly to be located in the past... | **15.5**

TS | Deepish gold color, some oxidative notes on the nose, and caramelized, toffee-tinged fruit on the palate, but finishes quite well. Toffee increased with time in glass. | **13**

Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royale

1996 ●

(3 months; 12%; >5g/l; NA)

14.5

EA | Deep golden color. Evolved, slightly oxidative nose of simple, lifted apple fruit. Apple jam, bruised apple, and woody notes. Fading fruit on the firm palate, a degree of austerity. Long, severe finish. | **15.5**

SF | Small bubbles and a distinctive almost savory nose; the palate is slightly less easy to read, vestigial oak a reliable impediment to nature's intention. | **15.5**

TS | Medium lemon-gold color, with a sort of *vin ordinaire* aroma and palate. | **13**

Lanson Vintage Collection

1990 ●

(6 months; 12.5%; 3g/l; 13mg/l)

14

EA | Deep golden color with a brown hue.

Distinct, aged, old-wine nose, low on fruit.

Floral with dried-fruit and earthy notes. Tiring on the palate, too, with little fully mature fruit left. Still some concentration and acidity but only remains of what it once used to be. | **15**

SF | Very fine mousse, very subtle color and very impressive truffle nose. The sensation in the mouth does little to challenge these compliments, though the style is vinous, smoky, and decidedly mature. Not even a venal sin for a wine of this age, I dare to suggest. | **17.5**

TS | Deep gold color with, possibly, mercaptan or DMDS aromas on the nose, an acidic palate, and a slightly bitter finish. Lacks fruit. | **10**

Deutz Cuvée William Deutz

1996 ●

(29 months; 12%; 6.5g/l; 30mg/l)

14

EA | Deep golden. Maturing, uneventful nose, with appley fruit but also a mild musty cellar note. Big, weighty, wide palate, which feels slightly unintegrated from the tart acidity. A degree of rusticity and fading fruitiness. | **16.5**

SF | The color is less than bright, and the nose far from forthcoming; *en bouche*, there is improvement, though the wine is a little monolithic in its construction and is unlikely to be judged favorably by subsequent analysis. | **15.5**

TS | Medium lemon color. Oxidative-aldehydic aromas on the nose, with high acids, yet the *dosage* is quite separate on the palate and finish, where it even becomes a bit syrupy. | **10**

Gimonnet "Les Cuvées de l'An 2000" 1990 ●

(29 months; 12%; 4g/l; <1mg/l)

14

EA | Deep mature golden color. Pungent, lifted nose of apple, uninviting to taste. Winey and lifeless on the palate, with a melancholic spirit to it. Still plenty of fruit and sweet richness, but misses out on elegance and vivacity. | **14**

SF | Deep mature coloration and small, very discreet bubbles. The nose is mature and a little oxidized; green apples and plum. The palate is slightly phenolic, with bitter notes undermining the ensemble a little. | **15**

TS | Deepish old-gold color and some volatile acidity on the nose. | **13**

Gimonnet "Les Cuvées de l'An 2000" 1990 ●

(5 months; 12%; 0g/l; 0mg/l)

13.5

EA | Deep golden color with a brown hue.

Unpleasantly lifted, gluey nose topped up with a dusty finish. Fruity and fresh on the palate but singular. Spoiled by the predominant varnish character. The second bottle is slightly better. Feels even alcoholic! | **14**

SF | A strident apply nose, late-harvest, rich and over-indulgent. Sulfury, overworked, and altogether hard to like! | **12**

TS | There are reductive and oxidative Champagnes, the two basic styles of Champagne, both of which are legitimate when correctly and cleanly produced, as indeed this is; but within correct parameters, Champagnes can lean this way and that, and this one leans the reductive way. Too far for some, including me (because it makes the fruit banal for me), but not for others, who will revel in the extremity. | **14**

Lanson Vintage Collection

1990 ●

(29 months; 12.5%; 3g/l; 13mg/l)

13

EA | Deep golden color with a browning hue to it. Strange, aged floral-waxy nose. Full-on, rich, fatty palate. Concentrated and long but low on finesse. Getting old. | **15**

SF | Developed color with a hint of amber; then a nose that has elements of Marmite and last week's baking. On the palate, there is disharmony and surprisingly raw acidity. The second bottle is half a point better, just... | **14.5**

TS | Medium gold color, oxidative aromas, scarce and ribby fruit, short finish. Second bottle worse, bitter even. | **9**

Veuve Clicquot 1996 ●

(6 months; 12%; 4.5g/l; 30mg/l)

11.5

EA | Deep, dark golden color. Strange, old, oxidizing apple and raisin nose. Unclean, weak feel to the fruit. Bad, drying finish. Has not stood the test of time well. | **15**

SF | A generous slightly caramelized nose, with hints of *jambon cru* and leather. The palate is tired, maybe a little faulty... | **12**

TS | Deep gold color, with oxidation issues on the nose, with a cloying finish, but the second bottle was badly corked. | **7**

Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1990 ●

(29 months; 12%; 6.5g/l; 30mg/l)

NS

EA | Corked. | **NS**

SF | TCA. | **NS**

TS | Corked; no second bottle. | **NS** ■