

Bollinger

Tom Stevenson



Etienne Bizot, the son of the late Christian Bizot, who used to run Bollinger and who was, I like to think, more than just a colleague I knew, liked, and respected for many years, has told me that I would still be welcome when I am in Paris. But I have been told in no uncertain terms by Jérôme Philipon, the CEO of Champagne Bollinger, that I am no longer welcome at Maison Bollinger.

In my *À la Volée* column in *WFW* 43 (p.34) I focused on oxidative Champagnes, a subject that had stirred up a bit of a hornet's nest when I condemned the oxidative style of Anselme Selosse on wine-searcher.com. In that wine-searcher piece I had also criticized Giraud and Bollinger. This is not something I enjoy, particularly when I have a long and friendly history with the producer in question, but I cannot in all conscience avoid it, and I don't think any wine critic should. I would rather spend my time focusing on what wines to recommend than avoid. I could spend my entire lifetime listing wines not to buy, but that is about as useful as advising people not to walk in front of a bus or jump off a high building. What's the point? Sometimes, however, an article or column covers a much bigger subject—such as the oxidation problem that is prevalent in Champagne—and how can you do that without naming names?

It is not as if my concern about the oxidative issue at Bollinger was unknown to Philipon. By 2011, it had reached the point of such concern that I had asked for, and started to receive, two samples of Bollinger Special Cuvée from every shipment to the UK. This was so that I could be as well informed as possible on the quality of Bollinger, by tasting one bottle and keeping the other for when, hopefully, the situation improved and I could do a “vertical” of this Non-Vintage cuvée. There seemed to be an improvement with the very last shipment of Special Cuvée in the

traditional bottle, but the first shipment in the new bottle was significantly more aldehydic, which was ironic given that the new bottle was supposed to reduce oxidation by 10 percent. Coincidence or not, Bollinger were going to install “jetting” technology in December 2012, but this was delayed until January 2014. It will not resolve Bollinger's self-inflicted zero SO₂ at disgorgement, but it certainly will do no harm.

Without any SO₂ after the oxidative shock of disgorgement, a Champagne can shine brightly and beautifully for a limited period of time, during which it can be fabulous, but it will deteriorate if cellared, quickly picking up aldehydic aromas and stripping the fruit of body on the palate. So, it should not be surprising that I gave the 1998 Vieilles Vignes Françaises a perfect 20 points in our Blanc de Noirs tasting (*WFW* 34 p.171). Yet when I tasted it at a complete vertical of Vieilles Vignes Françaises in Helsinki in September 2014 (well, being *persona non grata* at Bollinger itself, I have to travel much farther to taste the wines these days!), it stank of mercaptans, and I could not put it inside my body. Yet at the same event, we drank a superbly fresh, creamy, and delicious magnum of Special Cuvée (EU lot number L1412551). Presumably it was jetted, but I would still drink it while I knew it was fresh. Most of the bottles at the vertical were in poor condition, but apart from the three that were corked, I cannot blame Bollinger any more than I can blame the collectors for purchasing mature vintages on the open market, since it is almost guaranteed to end in tears. Five bottles were suffering from mercaptans (typical of too high a storage temperature); two sherrified; one Madeira (Boal) type rather than maderized per se; one mushroomy (typical of corking an overly full bottle); and a number that really were not too bad; but the real star was the 1973, despite its lack of mousse: extraordinarily pale in color for a

41-year-old Champagne, with fine, delicate, and exquisitely focused Chablisien fruit that carried on and on, thanks to its beautifully pure acidity. The 1973 and magnum of Special Cuvée were worth the journey alone, as was the hospitality of Essi Avellan MW and her partner Frey, not to mention all the friendly but rather too trusting Baltic collectors who buy on the open market.

Presumably I am also welcome at the homes of the Montgolfiers and the Hautefeilles, two other Bollinger owning families. I understand why they feel they must support the CEO they have chosen, but he has presided over the company when other senior management have felt they can no longer

The real star was the 1973: extraordinarily pale in color for a 41-year-old Champagne, with fine, delicate, and exquisitely focused Chablisien fruit that carried on and on

stay at Bollinger, and the family chose most of those, too. When in 2013 Mathieu Kauffmann became the first *chef de cave* in Bollinger's history to resign (and he resigned with immediate effect), he was by no means the only person at this prestigious family-owned Champagne house to walk out. Stephen Leroux, the marketing director, resigned in 2011, and Hervé Augustin, the CEO of Bollinger's subsidiary company Champagne Ayala, “retired” in 2012 (though it was a short retirement, in that he has since been hired as export manager by Champagne De Castelnau). At one time, a job at Bollinger was a job for life, but some nine senior personnel have left in a very short time under Philipon's rule. Can they all be wrong? Champagne needs a strong Bollinger with an impeccable reputation almost as much as Bollinger does. ■