

Roederer 2006 Brut Nature: Starck Raving Sane!

Tom Stevenson welcomes Roederer's first new cuvée since 1974 and one that is radically different from the rest of its range

In collaboration with artist Philippe Starck, Champagne Louis Roederer has released its first new cuvée in 40 years—and it is the most sane and rational recipe for a *brut nature* I have encountered. It is crisp and curvaceous. Everything about this wine shouts class. Even the look of Louis Roederer's 2006 Brut Nature is mesmerizing. All wines should be bright and clear, but this is diamond-cut brilliance. I'm not a big fan of the non-*dosage* style—not because I do not like Champagne without *dosage* but because the climate in Champagne is seldom right to produce such a style. Well, here is one that works, and its winemaker, *chef de cave* Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, agrees about the climate. Lécaillon is adamant that he needs a “continental” year—one that is not just warmer, but one when the continental land mass dominates the weather patterns more than the Atlantic does. Such a year for him was 2006. This was the harvest when Roederer's biodynamic vineyards in Cumières produced the ideal grapes for a *brut nature* Champagne. At first, Lécaillon believed he would need a very low *dosage*; with time he began to realize that he could go totally *dosage*-free, but this was not his original intention just for the sake of it.

What is it?

- 20% Chardonnay, 55% Pinot Noir, 25% Meunier
- 100% Cumières (mostly) and Hautvillers
- 10ha (25 acres) of southeast-, south-, and southwest-facing slopes on cold clay
- 80% biodynamic (which Lécaillon claims increases potential alcohol and lowers pH compared to conventional viticulture; take it from me that Lécaillon is not a “believer” but practices biodynamic, organic, and conventional viticulture and meticulously records the relevant statistics every year)
- The same wine today would be 100% biodynamic
- All grapes picked on a single day: September 20, 2006—a “fruit day” according to the biodynamic calendar
- All grapes pressed together as a field blend, no *assemblage*
- Very little settling
- The juice was deliberately oxidized for 48 hours (to build resistance)
- Reduced SO₂
- No malolactic fermentation
- 50% aged in large, 9,000-liter oak casks, with 10 months' aging on primary lees
- Bottled in mid-July 2007
- Disgorged six months prior to release

Why I rate it

- The wine in the bottle is at a pressure of only 4.5 atmospheres, compared to the traditional 6 atmospheres; this gives the mousse a softness it could not possibly have if consumed as fresh as this style demands.
- Vintaged: For critics and consumers, this means that we know when the next *brut nature* cuvée arrives and can judge it for ourselves without fear that a new Non-Vintage blend (as most others are) is being foisted on us; Roederer can wait for the next appropriate vintage without feeling forced to produce its next *brut nature* cuvée.
- Non-malolactic: This provides a crispness that is ideal for the freshness and purity of the *brut nature* style.
- Most important, it is so moreish! The purity and concentration build in the glass without you noticing, and before you know it, you are opening another bottle. Lécaillon emphasizes its suitability as a versatile food wine rather than as an apéritif.

