

Dom Pérignon Blanc de Blancs

HAVE YOU TASTED IT YET? No? Well, I'm not surprised. No one has. It doesn't exist. But if it did, Dom Pérignon Blanc de Blancs would excite some interest.

So why hasn't Moët spun off Champagne's most iconic brand to form its own lucrative range of cuvées? Some 20 or 30 years ago, I might have answered that question saying that Dom Pérignon had to be kept in-house to prop up Moët's reputation, but it no longer needs that crutch. Its Brut Impérial is one of the most consistent Non-Vintage cuvées going, and if cellared for an additional 12 months, it quickly gets toasty and can be surprisingly good. What makes Moët able to stand on its own two feet in the 21st century is the sea change in its attitude to Vintage Champagne. Moët's vintaged Brut Impérial has always been underrated, but since the 2000 vintage, the winemaking team has been given license to interpret each vintage according to the idiosyncrasies of the year rather than adhere primarily to house style, and this has given Moët's image a considerable boost. Moët Vintage is now a smart choice in restaurants.

If Moët can stand alone, then clearly Dom Pérignon should be put to more productive use. Imagine the impact of not only Dom Pérignon Blanc de Blancs but, say, a single-vineyard cuvée, too. And, who knows, a carefully crafted, super-premium Non-Vintage might be the most interesting proposition of all: a blend of, say, three vintages, identified on the back label. I want a case already!

The really cool thing would be for Dom Pérignon to have its own winery, with all the vineyards that are currently earmarked for its production formally associated with the new house. This would render all its cuvées domaine-produced, and—here's a radical thought—it would then be able to apply for *récoltant-manipulant* status. This might sound like turning the whole political structure of the Champagne industry on its head, but it needs a bit of a shake-up, and the houses have already stolen a march on the growers by pioneering and dominating the market for single-vineyard cuvées.



Tom Stevenson

The idea of a Champagne house making and selling wines from only its own vineyards under a *récoltant-manipulant* label is not new. It was first mooted in 1991 by the late Christian Bizot, then head of Bollinger, after I revealed to him the results of a poll I had conducted of every member of the Syndicat de Grandes Marques. I asked them if they believed that being a *grande marque* was a declaration of superior quality; if they did, should membership be subject to any sort of quality criteria; if it should, shouldn't membership of the *grandes marques* be open to all producers who meet such criteria; and if any existing *grande marque* failed to meet the criteria, shouldn't they be kicked out? Almost everyone answered yes to the first part and no to all the rest. Bollinger was one of just three houses to answer yes to all parts, and Bizot was so appalled by the arrogance and hypocrisy of his colleagues that he told me: "I feel more in common with the growers than other houses." He wondered whether he should revert to being a *récoltant-manipulant* and apply for membership of the Syndicat Général des Vignerons. When I asked if that would be possible, he replied that Bollinger could survive using its own vineyards, since they represented 70 percent of production (67 percent now), and it would then be impossible to refuse Bollinger *récoltant-*

manipulant status. He added that relying on his own grapes would increase Bollinger's profit margin and that reduced production could only increase demand, which, with the allure of a domaine-bottled *grande marque* Champagne would probably drive up prices, further increasing profits.

It was an intriguing idea, but in the end Bizot was too loyal to the growers to throw in the company's position as a *négociant*. Instead, he launched Bollinger's Charter of Ethics & Quality to distance himself from his less ethical colleagues. But the model of a *récoltant-manipulant grande marque* remains a commercially attractive option that others could follow. Indeed, with economic worries, climate change, and the constant threat of speculative growers, it could be the most effective way to ring-fence Champagne's most valuable assets. Louis Roederer could downsize to an even more money-spinning Domaine Louis Roederer, switching all of its bought-in grapes to its Théophile Roederer label. Devotees might argue for something similar with Charles Heidsieck and Piper-Heidsieck. Philipponnat, on the other hand, should immediately convert its prestigious Clos des Goisses to *récoltant-manipulant* status. Taittinger could certainly spin off and expand its Comtes de Champagne cuvées, and possibly Pommery could do the same with Louise Pommery. Taking the route that Bizot talked but did not walk would make a quality-enhancing distinction between domaine-bottled and blended Champagnes (even though great Champagnes are also produced by houses that own not a single vine, such as Gosset and Alfred Gratien).

More domaine-bottled Champagne would enhance *récoltant-manipulant* status. Furthermore, it would allow representatives of the houses to sit in on the Syndicat Général des Vignerons committees—and maybe, at long last, a little bit of integration may help bring the two sides closer together. Whatever you might read about cooperation between houses and growers is, like Champagne itself, all *bulles*. ■