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Moët back to a poignant 1914

Tom Stevenson

We have now had so many extraordinary tastings at Christie's annual Champagne Masterclass that trying to come up with the next theme can be quite daunting. Ever since I pulled the Clos des Goisses 2001–1951 tasting out of the bag, there has been a constant expectation that I will deliver something equally special.

The Clos des Goisses vertical was a last-minute arrangement. It was in 2007, when I had been sidetracked by two books and had not managed to give much thought to my annual masterclass. Christie's Wine Education, however, had dutifully sold all of the places. I think people wondered what the mystery was about and persuaded themselves that they were in for something special, but with just two weeks to go I hadn't any idea myself. Charles Philippinot came to the rescue, even attending the masterclass himself, which was a bonus. We deliberately started and finished on "lousy" vintages to demonstrate the unique terroir of Clos des Goisses. It was a fantastic success, but it set the bar very high. In 2012, we tasted Dom Pérignon back to the 1966 Oenothèque, mostly in magnums, and it was one of the thrilling verticals of my life. In 2013 I persuaded Dominique Demarville, *chef de cave* at Veuve Clicquot, to disgorge unreleased magnums and drive them over as the ultimate proof that the "magnum effect" plays a significant role before post-disgorgement aging takes place. (This remains the most "instructive" tasting according to Orsi Szentkiralyi and her team of sommeliers at my masterclasses.)

At last December's masterclass, we tasted 12 vintages of Moët & Chandon back to 1914, all direct from its cellars. If the objective was to blow the collective mind of the masterclass, this was duly achieved. The seeds for the masterclass were sown in 2011, when I tasted 1911 Moët and thought it would be amazing for a future masterclass to experience a perfectly preserved 100-year-old

Champagne. It struck me that we were just a few years from 2014, the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I, and I remembered how special 1914 Moët was when I last tasted it. Three years later, I was at the 2014 masterclass with six mouthwatering flights (*see box*).

People had flown into London for this masterclass from all over the world (Texas, China, Japan, Australia, Lithuania, Switzerland), including quite a few serious collectors. Everyone reckoned it was well worth the cost of any long-haul flight just to taste the last two historic vintages; and of course, the 1914 resonated deeply for many reasons. The War to End All Wars, with hapless soldiers on both sides being assured they would be home for Christmas, and here we were 100 Christmases later still surrounded by war and violence.

Honoring *les petits enfants*

On September 5, 1914, Champagne was at the heart of the first Battle of the Marne. By September 21, the grapes were ready to be harvested and children volunteered to do the picking. At first, it was a bit of fun, a game—to squeeze through vines and bring back the grapes without exposing themselves at the end of rows. But by October 11, when the last of the accessible grapes had been picked, more than 20 children had been killed by sniper fire and indiscriminate shelling. The quality of the 1914 vintage one century later does honor to the memory of *les petits enfants*. It is without doubt one of the greatest and longest-lived vintages of the 20th century, though the most experienced Champagne tasters in the masterclass could discern that the 1921 was the stand-out from a purely qualitative perspective. The 1921 has always been a "banker" at Moët, and while its context might lack the resonance of the 1914, it does nonetheless have a very intriguing history (*see WFW 40, p.50*).

Strangely enough, while there were other far more mature vintages than the

2000 that excelled, our "apéritif," from magnums, was one of the most memorable Champagnes of the night. Its gorgeously rich mango and guava fruits were so surprising for Champagne, yet so pure, fresh, and full of vitality. What other 14-year-old classic wine of comparable quality can you still buy in magnum for just £150?

Full tasting notes of all 12 vintages will be available in April in my column at champagnesparklingwvc.co.uk ■

Apéritif

- 2000 (magnums) disgorged April 2008

Flight 1

Mid-1990s; fairly recently disgorged

- 1996 (bottles) disgorged February 2012
- 1995 (bottles) disgorged October 2008

Flight 2

Almost a quarter of a century old, with 10 years' post-disgorgement aging

- 1992 (bottles) disgorged February 2004
- 1990 (bottles) disgorged October 2003

Flight 3

A trio of mid-1980s, with 10 years' post-disgorgement aging

- 1988 (magnums) disgorged October 2003
- 1985 (magnums) disgorged November 2002
- 1983 (magnums) disgorged May 2001

Flight 4

More than 50 years old; recently disgorged

- 1962 (magnums) disgorged February 2013
- 1959 (magnums) disgorged February 2013

Flight 5

Over 90 years old; recently disgorged

- 1921 (bottles) disgorged February 2013

Flight 6

100 years old; recently disgorged

- 1914 (bottles) disgorged February 2012