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## Answers to the fizz quiz

### Tom Stevenson

**A**fter 35 years of upsetting and embarrassing the major players in the Champagne industry for every wrong move they have made, I almost gave up and retired when I read Jill Mott's letter in *WFW* 48 viewing me as "an ambassador for the bigger houses."

A quick Web search revealed that Jill is a young lady who is not only a qualified sommelier but also has hands-on viticultural and winemaking experience in Spain, Oregon, and Central Otago. So, Jill ticks a lot of boxes for me. But her judgment of my ethical position can only have been based on a myopic view of a few fairly recent pieces. My track record demonstrates that I am not an ambassador for the bigger houses. For me, that would be as mindless as being an ambassador for the growers. I am not and never have been beholden to any sector of the Champagne industry.

She did not attend university until 1997, so Jill's passion for wine must have been born long after I published *Champagne* (Sotheby's Publications, 1986). Consequently, she might not realize that I was the first English-language writer to shine a light on grower Champagnes, since it contained a directory of more than 500 growers. In the Champagne supplements of *Wine* and *Wine & Spirit*, I constantly encouraged the growers to use their specificity of terroir to carve out export markets, but barely a handful had any interest in achieving this until the mid-1990s. In the end, it would be quality-focused, entrepreneurial importers who would entice smaller growers to ship their wines, initially to the United States but eventually globally. It is thanks to their efforts that Champagne now boasts a new generation of truly dynamic growers, but although the importers were instrumental, they knew nothing about the growers before *Champagne* and various Champagne supplements were published. As Terry Theise put it in his

catalog: "I went there because Tom Stevenson wrote Vilmart was the best grower in Champagne." Indeed, it would not be untrue to say that Vilmart has lived off one of my quotes ("poor man's Krug") for almost a quarter of a century, and good luck to them.

#### Sloppy winemaking

If Jill read any annual edition of *Wine Report* (Dorling Kindersley) between 2004 and 2009, she would have known that I continued recommending growers in the first decade of the new millennium, and as the single-vineyard Champagne tasting in this issue (pp.158–71) illustrates, I still do so today. The problem is that over the past five to eight years, I have noticed that a growing number of once-pristine Champagnes have, within just 12 months of recommendation, developed coarse aldehydic aromas. When I look at who those producers happen to be and discover they are almost all growers, what am I supposed to do—ignore it? No, I have to draw attention to the fact and begin digging into what the cause might be, even if the pieces I write while doing this earn me an erroneous anti-grower tag.

The rapid degeneration of some Champagnes into an oxidative—sometimes highly oxidative—state is a very serious problem. It is Champagne's equivalent to Burgundy's "premoxy" problem, and I refuse to shy away from being severely critical, no matter how famous or cult-iconic the producers of those Champagnes are. This has nothing to do with me coming up against a new style I happen to dislike because the wines are simply not made that way (see the "Caveat emptor" paragraph, p.161). It is merely sloppy winemaking by misguided fundamentalists at the single most critical operation of the entire *méthode champenoise* process. If the Champenois face up to the truth as Burgundians finally had to, it could quickly be resolved.

#### No commercial compromise

Jill asked why *WFW*'s "unworldly experiment" of different dosaged Champagnes involves only "the top, corporate names owned by purse companies and magnates." For clarification, growers are always invited to *WFW* tastings, but participation in this one involved no fewer than 32 magnums of Vintage Champagne occupying six years' cellar space, thus it is not unreasonable to assume that the growers felt they could not afford it.

What really takes the cake, however, is to be accused of being "an ambassador for the bigger houses," when I have meticulously avoided crossing the line of commercial compromise, whereas some of my colleagues promote individual brands for money, and one supposed champion of the growers has even embarked on a world tour to promote a *grande marque* deluxe cuvée. Moreover, I have consistently criticized the Champagne industry on ethical issues, ranging from trading *sur lattes*, to the use of *boues de ville* (neither of which had even been mentioned prior to me raising the issue). I was instrumental in the demise of the Syndicat de Grandes Marques when it refused to open up its club, and I uncovered "the law that never was," which Moët had used to justify selling South American fizz under the Champagne name. I refused to visit Mumm until it cleaned up its act (which it did), and I am not currently welcome at Bollinger. Perhaps most embarrassing of all, I published the balance sheet of profit, loss, and level of indebtedness of the 40 largest Champagne houses, which has made me unwelcome at almost all of them at one time or other. But over 35 years, the Champagne industry has recognized the consistency of my position, particularly on ethical matters, and now opens its doors to me. Name me any other internationally renowned Champagne critic who has ever taken a moral stand against the Champenois. ■