

## Cristal Milestones

Tom Stevenson gives a warm welcome to the latest releases of Roederer's prestige cuvée—the greatest Champagnes he has tasted from the challenging 2007 vintage—and explains why they mark another important stage in both the biodynamic conversion of the estate and the evolution of wines that now seduce earlier and longer than ever



When Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon took over as *chef de cave* at Champagne Louis Roederer in 1999, he stepped into the shoes of an exceptional predecessor, Michel Pansu. French-Moroccan by birth, Pansu not only introduced air-conditioning as the final nail in the coffin of TCA, which had plagued part of Roederer's cellars, but he also famously introduced his non-Champenois humor, marking casks *grand, bon, and peut mieux faire* ("could do better"). If there was any problem with Cristal back then, it was that it would often be too tight and restrained on release and yet could tire rather quickly. There were glorious exceptions, of course, but for one of the greatest deluxe Champagnes, Cristal's peak was far too ephemeral. In Lécaillon's time, however, the quality and longevity of the entire range has not rocketed, but most remarkably of all, the drinking window has been stretched at both ends. Not only do Roederer Champagnes live much longer, but they are also seductively accessible at a much earlier age. This is most evident in Cristal, which is no longer tight and restrained on release but is almost moreish and yet still retains a level of finesse and class that few other Champagnes can approach. I have seen this phenomenon occur unintentionally in one-off Champagnes, but never on a vintage-after-vintage basis. I can imagine Michel Pansu saying, *Je ne pouvais pas mieux faire moi-même!*

### 2007: the vintage

A very early bud-break and flowering threatened rampant growth, which would have had a negative impact on the structure and acidity but for a cool summer, which slowed down the veraison to a classic 95–100 days between flowering and picking, and the dry north wind during the harvest. These factors are key to the paradoxical composition of 2007 Champagnes. The grapes had a more or less average ripeness of 9.3% for Chardonnay and 9.5% for Pinot Noir, plus an extraordinarily healthy acidity and pH of 12.9g/pH3.01 for Chardonnay and 13.5g/pH3.02 Pinot Noir. These figures are more reminiscent of a crisp September or October harvest of 30 years ago than they are of any other August harvest of the 21st century. The biggest problem with this vintage is that the incidence of rot, which was the

Photography courtesy of Champagne Louis Roederer



highest since gluconic acid readings began. But due to a combination of low yields, leaf-plucking, the north wind, and selection, there has been no trace of rot detectable in either Cristal.

#### Cristal: the stepping stones

Having tasted future releases of both Cristal Brut and Cristal Rosé up to and including the extraordinary 2012 vintage, it is clear where the recently released 2007s fit in. Starting in the vineyard, Domaine 3 (which is reserved for Cristal Brut) was partly under conversion to biodynamic principles at the time, whereas the smaller Domaine 6 (Cristal Rosé) was fully converted. In 2007, the Cristal Brut is 20 percent biodynamic (if purists can forgive such imprecise terminology), and the Cristal Rosé is the very first Cristal of any color to be 100 percent biodynamic (all vintages of Cristal Rosé are 100 percent biodynamic as from 2007). Lécaillon told me, “The more biodynamic fruit I have, the less MLF I need.” This scientifically minded *chef de cave* may well be interested in the measurable effects of biodynamic viticulture, but he is not a believer in the hocus-pocus of so-called metaphysical powers that are supposedly its underlying principles, according to its founder Rudolf Steiner. Furthermore, even for Lécaillon, the impact of biodynamics is far

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more complex, both viticulturally and enologically, than the one percent by volume of additional ripeness that he has meticulously recorded in his converted vineyards. Yet this elevated ripeness, which enables Lécaillon to reduce his legendary and already minimal *à la carte* application of malolactic, is at least tangible evidence of how biodynamics affects the development of Cristal and why 2007 must be considered a milestone for Cristal Rosé.

In the winery, 2007 was the first harvest to go through Roederer’s new pumping facility, where blending a single *cuvée* can be achieved in one highly accurate metered pumping, rather than two or three previously. Gone are the days when massive blending tanks would be required or a *cuvée* had to be juggled between two or



three vats. All the Roederer wines in 2007 thus benefited from less aeration, and this directly increases longevity. The proportion of oak-fermented wine in Cristal has increased since Lécaillon took over, rising from 10–15 percent since 1999, and 20–25 percent since 2002. The 2007 contains approximately 22 percent of wine fermented in gohl tronconical oak *foudres*, all well used and originally with a white-burned *bousinage*. All of the wines for Cristal Brut and Cristal Rosé are aged on their *gros lies* for a variable period (depending on the vintage, which in 2007 was seven months), when it undergoes weekly *bâtonnage*. It is the introduction of this texture-building practice that has probably stretched Cristal’s drinking window at both ends.

#### TASTING

##### 2007 Cristal Brut

58% Pinot Noir, 42% Chardonnay

A blend of Pinot Noir from the grands crus of Aÿ, Beaumont-sur-Vesle, Verzenay, Verzy, and Les Clos, a *lieu-dit* in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, bordering Aÿ itself, plus Chardonnay from the grands crus of Avize, Cramant, and Mesnil-sur-Oger.

A beautiful, star-bright pale-gold color, with invitingly fresh and ready creamy-pastry aromas, spiced with notes of candied peel, this is both complex and immediately harmonious. The entire ensemble continues on the palate, which is fine and elegant to an exquisite degree, with a soft yet energetic mousse of minuscule bubbles and the purest of acid lines carrying delicately reductive, yeast-complexed fruit to a long and tapering finish. Drink now or in 5–10 years, if perfectly cellared. Certainly one of the finest 2007s I have tasted.

##### 2007 Cristal Rosé

56% Pinot Noir, 44% Chardonnay

A blend of Pinot Noir from the grand cru of Aÿ, plus Chardonnay from the grands crus of Avize and Mesnil-sur-Oger.

With such a gorgeously pale peach color and bronze highlights, this looks like Roederer before the glass even reaches the nose. The aromas are beguiling, with perfumed floral notes, dried fruits, and hints of orange-flower water. Delicate and mouthwatering. On the palate, the fruit is fresh and light, yet intense and complex, with delightful hints of satsuma, redcurrant, and juicy-ripe morello cherries, supported by fluffy, lighter-than-air mousse, with a lovely grip on the finish. Truly amazing finesse. Drink now or in 10–15 years, if perfectly cellared in total darkness. This is the greatest 2007 I have tasted.