

A matter of transparency or numbers?

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In issue 45, I asked what would be more beneficial: an extra year on lees or an extra year after disgorgement. Recently, however, one producer has warned against revealing such information to consumers. Is he right?

When Antoine Malassagne of Champagne AR Lenoble announced “the release of new back labels across our entire range of wines (featuring specific information about grapes, *dosage*, villages, base years, bottling dates, and vinification techniques) as part of our continued commitment to transparency in both the vineyard and the winery,” he added the proviso that “we’ve made the deliberate decision not to include disgorgement dates. This is not because we are unable to do so but because we are choosing not to do so,” and went on to explain that “the recent obsession with disgorgement dates is reducing the winemaking process in Champagne to insignificant numbers which are not understood by most of the people talking about them. [...] People who have never made a bottle of Champagne are now dictating what they think the ‘right’ amount of post-disgorgement time is supposed to be.”

The case for disgorgement dates

I respect Malassagne’s right not to reveal whatever non-obligatory information he likes, but I think he is wrong about disgorgement dates being a recent obsession, he is wrong about it reducing winemaking to numbers, and he is wrong about anyone dictating anything.

Recent obsession? Calls for the date of disgorgement on Champagne go back more than a quarter of a century in the British wine trade press.

Reducing winemaking to numbers? There have been times when I have been told that a Champagne is 60/40 Pinot/Chardonnay, and yet had I been told 40/60 I would not have batted an eyelid, because a 60/40 Pinot/Chardonnay Champagne can taste more Chardonnay

than Pinot and vice versa. It could be due to the origin of the grapes, the selection at *assemblage*, the effect of reserve wines, the base wine used for the *dosage*, or a stage of its evolution in bottle. So, what is the point of knowing numbers that do not necessarily inform us of anything? For most consumers, it is just nice to know. It paints a little background, and that is part of what makes the subject of wine so fascinating. For true enthusiasts, the ones who actually bother to read and digest back labels, varietal percentages are part of the learning curve, and the more they deviate from the norm, the more they reveal. That is why this question is more about transparency than numbers. However, the one number Malassagne refuses to reveal, the disgorgement date, is quite possibly the most important when it comes to making a more informed choice, since it tells something about the condition of the Champagne. Some consumers might like a younger, more recently disgorged Champagne, while others prefer the mellowing and complexing effect of more post-disgorgement aging. Others might want to collect both, so they can cellar the different disgorgements and follow them as they do different vintages.

Who is dictating? I have never come across anyone “dictating what they think the ‘right’ amount of post-disgorgement time is.” I know that some critics refuse to review any NV Champagne without knowing the base year and disgorgement date, but that is merely pragmatic (to avoid recommending, say, a toasty Champagne and the critics’ readers buying, say, a fresher, younger disgorgement) and has nothing to do with dictating any set amount of post-disgorgement time.

I would like to see some Champagnes given more time between disgorgement and shipping, so that they might benefit from having this extended aging under ideal conditions in their own cellars. However, there is no such thing as

one size fits all, and there are other Champagnes that I would like to see disgorged earlier or given less post-disgorgement aging. The producer is responsible for presenting his or her Champagne to the market with enough post-disgorgement time to make it drinkable and (for those who are sufficiently knowledgeable and have the requisite facilities) to demonstrate its potential if properly cellared. The producer does not decide definitively the “right amount of post-disgorgement time.” Only the consumer can do this. Post-disgorgement, freshness and fruit are traded off for mellowness and complexity. The perfect peak in this trade-off varies not only from *cuvée* to *cuvée* but also from consumer to consumer, because it is a matter of personal appreciation. Most Champagne aficionados have multiple points of appreciation, which is why they buy by the case and follow each wine.

Benefit of the doubt

I would ask Antoine Malassagne to accept the logic of my argument that disgorgement dates do not “reduce the winemaking process in Champagne to insignificant numbers” and to reconsider. He has had no problem providing disgorgement dates when submitting wines for *WFW* tastings. If this has been because he recognizes how knowledgeable *WFW*’s readership is, I would ask him to accept that most people who read back labels are also knowledgeable. I would also ask him to consider including the date of shipment, so that we may know how much of the post-disgorgement time has been carried out under ideal conditions in AR Lenoble’s own cellars. Most of those who are not knowledgeable do not read back labels; and if they did, they would not understand the disgorgement or shipment dates any more than the E-numbers on food products—which do not seem to impair sales at all. ■

Illustration by Dan Murrell