

Multivintage: usage or abuse?

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The term “multivintage” was coined by Rémi Krug during an exchange of correspondence following the publication of *Champagne* (Sotheby’s Publications, 1986). In that book, I suggested that he was playing with words when alleging that Grande Cuvée was not Krug’s house Non-Vintage brut. Rémi retorted, “If Grande Cuvée is a basic Non-Vintage, then a Rolls-Royce is just a car and the Pope but a priest!”

Grande Cuvée could not be compared with Rolls-Royce, because Rolls-Royce is a brand and Grande Cuvée is a product. It would be legitimate to compare Krug with Rolls-Royce, but Grande Cuvée could only be compared with a model in the Rolls-Royce range, and that would have to be the entry-level model (or the Krug Rolls-Royce delivery van, because at that time Rémi drove to Krug events in a 1979 Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow converted into a refrigerated van!). The Pope, on the other hand, is evidently not just a priest; he is the head priest and thus top of that particular range. There was no need to explain this to Rémi, who was fully aware of the flaw in his own argument. But as he meandered around the topic of what to call a Non-Vintage without actually calling it Non-Vintage, he hit upon the concept of a multivintage.

In the end, I came to accept Rémi’s insistence that Krug Grande Cuvée should be treated differently from other entry-level, Non-Vintage Champagnes—not for Krug’s sake, but for the sake of everyone else, because they were at a huge disadvantage when pitching their regular Non-Vintage Champagnes against the super-deluxe-priced Krug Grande Cuvée. Besides, if Krug wanted Grande Cuvée to be ranked as a prestige cuvée rather than a Non-Vintage, then it would have to accept that its entry-level cuvée should compete exclusively against other prestige cuvées in competitive tastings. This it has happily conceded to for the past 30 years, and I have to say that Krug Grande Cuvée has

performed brilliantly over that period at the very highest level.

Slowly but surely, however, other brands have caught on to the term “multivintage,” and so many have now jumped on this bandwagon that it has lost any special meaning. If producers of even the most modest Non-Vintage Champagnes routinely describe them as multivintage blends, then the question has to be asked, what is the difference between Non-Vintage and multivintage? Obviously, there is no difference. The terms are completely interchangeable, and the majority of those who use the multivintage term today tend to justify their preference by claiming that Non-Vintage has a negative connotation. This is incorrect. “Non” is simply a prefix, and it depends on the word it is attached to and qualifying whether it ends up with a negative, positive, or neutral connotation. Very few “non” words are in fact negative. Many are intrinsically positive (such as non-addictive or nonviolent), but most are neutral (such as non-aligned or, of course, Non-Vintage). Non-Vintage merely means “without vintage,” and that or “without year” is the literal translation of the French term *sans année*. Dig beneath the irrational negative-connotation argument, and you will find an industry that has become embarrassed by the fact that the vast majority of the world’s greatest sparkling wine is sold as Non-Vintage. By rebranding it as multivintage, its producers hope to be taken more seriously and that this new upmarket name will justify its Champagne price. There was no need, of course. No other region in the world produces mostly Non-Vintage; no other region has a near-mythical reputation for the blending prowess of its *chefs de caves* when assembling a Non-Vintage; and no other region can demand and receive such high prices for its Non-Vintage. This was the case well before anyone in Champagne started to get paranoid

about the Non-Vintage term. Non-Vintage worked. It was not broken and did not need mending.

Abusage

By all means add in the “multivintage” term, but it should mean what it says. The problem is that now it is widely misused, and this can only confuse consumers. In many instances, it is more abuse than misuse, with consumers being more misled than confused—deliberately misled in some cases. Why? Because unlike Non-Vintage or *sans année*, “multivintage” explicitly denotes a blend of Vintage years, and most multivintages are not. Champagne is not the Wild West, it is part of France, which is the founding father of the *appellation contrôlée* system that forms the core of EU wine law. As such, Champagne has more of a duty than most to control any misleading terminology used to describe its products. It is high time that the CIVC formed a committee to investigate the use of “multivintage” and to prepare the way for its legal definition and enforcement, both on the label and in the marketing literature.

At the very minimum, a multivintage should be defined as a blend of two or more Vintage years (whereas, legally, a Non-Vintage may be from a single year, providing that year is not indicated) and those Vintage years must be Vintages that the producer has released. There are other requirements that could usefully be enshrined in law, such as making it obligatory to indicate the Vintages on the back label—an existing example would be Cattier’s Clos du Moulin. It might be prudent to distance the multivintage concept from Non-Vintage by limiting the number of Vintage years that may be used, such as a minimum of two and a maximum of five. This would make multivintage a standalone limited blend, rather than a primary base year to which reserve wines are added, which is the traditional concept of Non-Vintage. ■

Illustration by Dan Murrell