

## Vintage Champagne

### Tom Stevenson



**W**hen do Champagne's *chefs de caves* draw a line in the sand and start thinking that they might have a Vintage on their hands?

For an exceptional terroir such as Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses, with its so-called south-south-facing slope, the line in the sand could be drawn every year. It is also possible to produce a Vintage of a truly great prestige cuvée like Cristal or Dom Pérignon every year, since they have exclusive access to an abundance of impressive vineyards and a no-expense-spared budget to cream off only the very best. These are, however, exceptions. When, then, is a line drawn in the sand by most Champagne producers?

Some cynical critics might suggest when it's a Pinot Noir year—and this is not entirely a joke. Whoever claims any specific year to be a Chardonnay year is simply stating the obvious: In Champagne almost every year is a Chardonnay year; even Non-Vintage years are Chardonnay years! It is not just easier to ripen Chardonnay than Pinot Noir; it is easier to ripen two or three times the yield of Chardonnay. Yields are key. If you go for high yields of Pinot Noir in Champagne, it is difficult to ripen; but if you go for low yields and get rain at harvest time (as so often happens), rot can be rampant. When clean, healthy, and ripe, Pinot Noir is a dream variety in Champagne, but it is not the easiest of grapes to get right—so, whenever there is a general consensus that a particular year is a Pinot year, it will surely be a very special Vintage year.

The most widely accepted yardstick for a potential Vintage year is when the average natural potential alcohol hits double digits. There are exceptions, of course, but if anything defines just how extraordinary the Champagne terroir is for producing sparkling wine, it is the fact that achieving an alcohol level that is barely in double digits can be a definition of its superior quality.

Almost anywhere else, a Chardonnay with just 10% ABV would be considered

unripe, yet most Champagnes are made from grapes between 9 and 9.5% ABV. Unfortunately, these naturally low alcohol levels have fueled the myth that Champagne is made from early-harvested grapes that are unripe. But picking starts later in Champagne than Bordeaux, and Champagne grapes are rarely anything but definitely and definitively ripe.

#### The acid test

Just as there are degrees of unripeness, so there are degrees of ripeness, the first being when birds start eating the grapes. Ask anyone who used to park beneath the trees in the now-pedestrianized Place Druet d'Erlon, and he or she will tell you that the birds eat a lot of grapes at harvest time in Champagne. (I parked a blue car there one night, and it was white in the morning.) Not only are there different degrees of ripeness, but they are essential for different styles of wine. Wines cannot all be made at the same level of ripeness. Those winemakers who taste the grapes and look at the color of its seeds are not seeking a universal indicator of ripeness; they are seeking the moment when the grapes are ripe enough for their own particular wine.

It is true that sparkling-wine grapes require a lesser degree of ripeness than still white wines; but it is also true that white wines require a lesser degree of ripeness than red wines, and within each category of wine the degree of ripeness varies according to the grape variety, location, and the winemaker's own style. However, the lesser degree of ripeness required for Champagne, whatever its grape variety or stylistic ambitions, can seldom be described as unripeness.

One of the most fundamental measurements of ripeness is acidity. As most *WFW* readers will know, malic acid decreases in the ripening process, which in turn increases the proportion (but not total content) of tartaric acid. For acid ripeness, the lowest threshold is

when tartaric acid represents half the total acidity. If you take this to its logical conclusion, the lower the potential alcohol, the harder it is to achieve 50% tartaric acid—for example, 50% at a potential 12–14% is easy, but at 2–4% it is impossible. To achieve 50% tartaric acid at 9–9.5% explains why Champagne is such a special place for sparkling wine, and over the past 25 years Champagne grapes have averaged 9.7% with more than 53% tartaric acid! Even the average production of chaptalized Non-Vintage Champagne has to be classified as acid-ripe.

With acid ripeness kicking in well below 9.7% ABV, there is a significant shift in the degree of ripeness by the time Champagne grapes reach double digits, which is why *chefs de caves* draw their line in the sand at 10.

Although an average ABV in double digits might be a first sign, it is not the definition of Vintage Champagne, as past great vintages with average alcohol levels below 10% illustrate: 1975, 1979, 1982, 1988, 1995, 1998, and 2008. Despite the low alcohol, 1998 was a super-ripe vintage with almost 56% tartaric acid.

Only one thing defines Vintage Champagne, and that is selection. Every Vintage Champagne is the product of selection—selection of the best base wines available to its producer, however good the individual year is and whatever characteristics that year might possess. For this reason, a Vintage Champagne is seldom, if ever, chaptalized—unlike most Non-Vintage blends. Vintage Champagnes thus have a different structure, with more body, greater viscosity, increased mouthfeel, and longer yeast-aging. They are also specifically designed for aging and ideal for magnums. This leaves me wondering why Champagne producers find it so easy to sell at its two extremes—Non-Vintage and prestige—yet struggle to move Vintage, which must surely be the best value of all? ■

Illustration by Dan Murrell