

Champagne Charlie is my name... Tom Stevenson



In a previous *À la Volée* (WFW 31, p.36), I mused over how much Roman Abramovich had invested in Chelsea Football Club (more than £600 million, closer to a billion now) without making a penny profit in ten years and wondered whether there might be any Champagne-loving Russian oligarch prepared to invest much less for the opportunity of making a mega-profit within a decade.

Such a deal would come with the type of global glamour that only a *grande marque* Champagne house could bring, and as I wrote at the time, “*Grandes marques* are seldom up for sale, and *grandes marques* of this caliber are as rare as hen’s teeth.” I was, of course, referring to Piper- and Charles Heidsieck.

There had been rumors for many years that Rémy-Martin wanted to sell these two houses, but the asking price was too high. In 2011 the asking price was understood to be €450 million, but this was negotiated downward, with the new owners paying €412 million. The bidders, however, were French, not Russian. EPI (originally known as *Européenne de Participations Industrielles*) was established in 1974 by Jean-Louis Descours and remains fully family-owned today, with grandson Christopher Descours at the helm.

Descours moved swiftly and with precision, appointing the redoubtable Cécile Bonnefond as CEO of both houses. Her time in charge was always going to be limited. A tough cookie who had headed Veuve Clicquot successfully, Bonnefond was a safe pair of hands to ensure that EPI would hit the ground running. She was there to go through the inventory, books, and staff with a fine toothcomb, to fit Piper and Charles into the EPI structure and ensure that everything was as it should be, to devise a brand-repositioning strategy, and to guarantee that no unwanted surprises were lurking beneath the surface.

One of the first things she did was to recognize Thierry Roset. Anyone who

knew anything about these two houses understood that Roset had been Charles Heidsieck’s de facto *chef de cave* since 2003, not 2012. When the legendary Daniel Thibault snatched Régis Camus from Champagne Jacquart to train as his successor, Thibault was one of the few *chefs de caves* in the limelight, and it made little difference whether each house had its own publicly known winemaker. By 2012, however, when Bonnefond set Roset’s winemaking position in stone, Champagne had changed, and *chefs de caves* were internationally traveling representatives of their brands. Bonnefond understood that Charles Heidsieck had to have its own *chef de cave*, even if technically he would be under Camus, who is still head of viticulture, approvisionnement, and winemaking for both Charles and Piper.

When Roset passed away just two years later, his contribution to Charles Heidsieck would, I fear, have gone unreported, but for Bonnefond. Thanks to her appointment, however, Roset received the recognition he deserved in widely published obituaries, and the world now knows that he was the one who restructured Charles Heidsieck’s Brut Réserve. Roset achieved with 60 crus what it took Thibault 120 crus to create, and Bonnefond’s recognition of Roset’s role since 2003 explains why and how he could do that five years before his official appointment as *chef de cave*.

Charles and Charlie reborn

With Roset’s death in October 2014 came the task of finding his replacement, and Cyril Brun, the winning candidate, was probably no surprise. Brun was one of Dominique Demarville’s three senior assistants at Veuve Clicquot, so somebody whose résumé the ex-CEO of Veuve Clicquot must have known inside out. He was hired in May 2015, and the next month Bonnefond considered her troubleshooting role complete, passing the baton to Daniel Faurie.

Faurie put the day-to-day running of Charles Heidsieck in the hands of Stéphane Leroux, who left Bollinger for Louis Roederer before moving to Charles Heidsieck in 2013. Together Leroux and Brun have the vision to make Charles Heidsieck great again. In the aforementioned column, I proffered a 13-point business plan to achieve just that. One small part of that strategy was to “reinstate Champagne Charlie as the prestige cuvée (a large part of Dom Pérignon’s success is that even people who do not drink Champagne have heard of Dom Pérignon, something that can also be said of Champagne Charlie)” —and in February of this year Leroux announced that this would be happening. He confirmed that the wine had already been made, but it would not be ready to release for another five or six years.

In the meantime, as part of Leroux’s slow-burn plan to create reemergent brand awareness, significant volumes of mature Charles Heidsieck will be auctioned in London (December 7) and New York (December 8–9), including every released vintage of Champagne Charlie, all with impeccable provenance, having never left the cellars prior to the auction. Christie’s London and New York each has more than 40 different lots.

Having just acquired a copy of the London catalog, I am impressed by how reasonably they have been estimated. Check out lot numbers 460–470, and you will find Champagne Charlie 1979, 1981, 1982 (magnums), and 1983 in original six-bottle cartons or original three- and six-magnum wooden cases, as well as the 1985 in original 12-bottle wooden cases. Most carry a high estimate of between £566 per bottle and £750 per magnum. This is history in a bottle, and it’s a steal. Any serious collector must surely be interested in acquiring every single vintage of Champagne Charlie prior to purchasing the reincarnation of this great prestige cuvée when it is launched. ■

Illustration by Dan Murrell