

2012 Charles Heidsieck: The dangers of a great vintage

Tom Stevenson tastes the house's latest impressive Vintage release
in the company of down-to-earth *chef de cave* Cyril Brun

Cyril Brun, the *chef de cave* at Charles Heidsieck, recently described his newly launched 2012 vintage as “dangerously drinkable,” which is more typically tabloid than *chef de cave* speak.

Forty years ago, *chefs de caves* were unknown outside Champagne itself. Even their identities remained a mystery to the external wine world, let alone consumers, and very few journalists interviewed them. These days, however, *chefs de caves* are so sought after that many of them spend more time traveling as global brand ambassadors than they do in the cellars working as winemakers. But traveling has been cut short by this year's Covid restrictions, of course.

Although today's *chefs de caves* are used to the limelight, they usually come across as more technical, reserved, or, God forbid, poetic than Cyril Brun. He is obviously not your regular *chef de cave*. He can be as technical as the next, if primed with the right questions, but usually he prefers the lingua franca of ordinary people, which makes him so “dangerously employable” as a *chef de cave* in the 21st century.

Background to the vintage

Meteorologically, this is a characteristically complicated Champagne year. Qualitatively, it is so good that it could ultimately be declared the greatest vintage of the past 30 years. Comparatively, 2012 is clearly reminiscent of 2008.

Both 2012 and 2008 were classic September harvests. Over the past 60 years, 70 percent of Champagne's harvests have started in September, and until 1985, all the rest began in October. Between 1985 and 2002, every year was a September harvest. In 2002,

Champagne experienced its first August harvest, and ever since then, more than 40 percent of Champagne's harvests have begun in that month.

September is therefore Champagne's classic harvest month, even if its dominance is being eroded by August harvests. Classic it may be, but it is capable of bad vintages, as well as good. It is still true to say, however, that most of Champagne's best vintages have been from September harvests, whereas most of its worst vintages have been from October harvests. August harvests are generally fatter vintages.

Even the best September vintages can be divided into two contrasting categories: one when relatively ideal conditions lead naturally to a September harvest; the other when dry and sunny weather rescues a crop from the jaws of

disaster, with the outstanding 2012 and 2008 vintages belonging to this latter category.

The seven plagues of 2012

Sometimes it is the meteorological disasters that define a great vintage. Check out Bordeaux 1961—they don't come more iconic than that. Well, in Champagne, the disasters came along so thick and fast that they were known as “the seven plagues of 2012.” Winter frosts (nine days at 14° to -4° F [-10° to -20° C]), spring frosts (early and late, 3,000ha [7,400 acres] lost), torrential rains (April to July, worst since 1994), thunderstorms and hailstorms (early June, 1,000ha [2,470 acres] lost), cold snap and excessive rain (worst disruption of flowering since 1994), and finally, water stress at the harvest (due to no rain from mid-July).

By the middle of July, as Brun revealed, “most of the *vignerons* were expecting a disaster like 1984,” but thankfully a combination of relatively low temperatures and brisk northerly winds prevented that likelihood.

From mid-July onward, the torrential rain stopped dead in its tracks, only to be replaced by drought conditions. At this point, the weather was cold and cloudy, but, as Brun recalls, “nature is totally independent, and in the middle of August, it offered us the super gift of 2012,” with almost perfect weather up to and including the harvest.

Harvesting under water-stress conditions is unusual in Champagne because the vines sit on a vast chalk reservoir, but it is not unknown, and in fact, the low humidity of the subsoil at 8, 16, and 24in (20, 40, and 60cm) in 2012 was similar to that in 2009.

