

MYTH OR MAGIC? PRESTIGE CUVÉE CHAMPAGNE

Essi Avellan MW introduces a round-table open tasting shared with Hugh Johnson OBE, Simon Larkin MW, and Anthony Rose, in which they reflected on the quality and range of the current releases of the region's top wines

Champagne has perhaps the highest luxury:money ratio of all things. A bottle at any price has the remarkable ability to create atmosphere and deliver enjoyment, both gustatory and emotional. But as the elitist image slowly evaporates and Champagne becomes everybody's drink, there is a challenge in preserving its carefully cultivated mystique. As major branding tools, the prestige cuvées represent super-luxury, with perfected contents and exquisite packaging—not to mention extravagant pricing. They may well have started as product-line extensions, but their importance has been increasing ever since. In these economically sound times, with many new image-conscious markets opening up, demand for these luxury cuvées far outstrips supply. Production is generally rising, but most houses prefer to remain secretive about the total volume. Scarcity does, after all, increase desirability.

At our round-table tasting we sampled a comprehensive range of major houses' prestige cuvées currently available on the market, including some older releases. Our emphasis was on understanding the wines and vintages rather than on ranking them. After all, most



of these Champagnes made it—as they should have—into the 17-to-19-point range. With such superb wines as the top luxury cuvées, enjoyment was as good as guaranteed.

I always find tasting Champagne blind one of the most challenging exercises. But tasting these luxury cuvées open proved to be an even tougher task. Champagne has always been one of the most strongly branded fine wines, and it is impossible to let go of one's past experiences or present perceptions. I, at least, struggled to neutralize my palate from previous encounters and preconceptions. In an open tasting of prestige cuvées, the status of each wine will always play a role, no matter how hard we try to be objective. Another issue to bear in mind is the commentary of one's fellow tasters, whose views will inevitably affect one's own—or at least those to which one gives voice. I did not agree with the majority of the panel on a few of the wines but chose to remain silent, since the opinion of the rest appeared unanimous. The conclusions drawn toward the end of this introduction are largely mine, but I have also attempted to summarize the consensus.

Illustration by John Spencer www.centralillustration.com

Process and place

The tasting included both blended Champagnes and single-vineyard wines, which highlighted the issue of terroir. Champagne is an elaborate wine in which the fermentations add layers of complexity over the fruit, as does prolonged bottle aging on the lees. The addition of sugar (*dosage*) dilutes the aromatics, while residual sweetness hides delicate nuances as well as masking imperfections. It is therefore quite reasonable to ask whether a (positive) *gout du terroir* can be perceived in such a highly processed product. But at our tasting, Jacquesson's most recent single-vineyard launch, Corne Bautray 2000 Non Dosé, and Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses 1996 both afforded a striking vindication of the terroir concept in Champagne. Krug's Clos du Mesnil 1995 and Cattier's Clos du Moulin were comparative disappointments in this respect, failing to deliver either the expected quality or suitable terroir expression. Rémi Krug has repeatedly stressed that "Clos du Mesnil is always different but never better than the other Krugs." We agreed that the Champagne was by no means bad, but taking into account both its price (£470 a bottle from Berry Bros & Rudd in London) and its reputation, it failed to charm the panel. It is a good example of scarcity's effect on price, since only some 8,000 bottles are produced in vintage years.

Age, information, and style

Champagne houses have long encouraged the notion that a bottle is ready to drink when launched on to the market. This has contributed to consumption but at the same time hindered the perception of Champagne as a "serious" wine. After all, a significant emotional value is derived from wines that continue to improve with age. Moreover, many prestige cuvées work against the entire category if launched too early. Cristal and Salon are classic examples of wines that require long aging. Cristal, happily, is gaining an extra year of bottle maturation from the 2002 vintage onward, but Salon's tendency has been the opposite. The Salon 1996 is only now starting to approach maturity, showing, as Hugh Johnson put it, "purity, simplicity, and class." But the most

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problematic wine to me was Dom Pérignon. It is undeniably a great wine, but even though the 1998 has developed markedly since its launch, it is still a *vino d'arrivo*. It only makes me wonder whether all the people who drink it now can really enjoy the taste, or whether its prestigious image is able to hide its premature state. The first Dom Pérignon vintage, 1921, was launched in 1936—at 15 years of age. And based on the Oenothèque 1992 tasted by the panel, 15 years seems to be the earliest reasonable drinking age for this famous wine.

The multivintage luxury cuvées—Krug Grande Cuvée, Laurent-Perrier Grande Siècle, and Piper-Heidsieck Rare—share the positive attributes of being ready to drink while retaining significant aging potential. But while the multivintage nature of these wines fits in well with the blending philosophy that will always prevail in Champagne, they somehow lack the kudos of their vintage rivals. The Krugs insist that Grande Cuvée is as great as any wine in their range—but why then is it priced the lowest? Connoisseurs, in particular, value the authenticity and variety seemingly vouchsafed by vintage. Lack of communication regarding the age of the wines in a non-vintage Champagne (especially in luxury cuvées) is a controversial topic—and, to me, a major mistake. I can appreciate that buying Champagne is made easy for the consumer who has no knowledge of vintages. But for the connoisseur with a deeper interest in the wine, then its age, *encépagement*, and so on are of great interest. Champagne is one of the world's great wine styles—the greatest in my opinion; therefore, one would like to see a shift to a more serious focus on the wine per se and an increasingly connoisseur target. How easy would it be on the Internet to let those of us who are deeply interested know more about these great bottles?

Returning to the question of the optimum age for Champagne, we were treated in the tasting to some late-disgorged wines: Jacquesson DT 1989 and 1990, Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1992, and Bollinger RD 1996. These were the wines that swept me, at least, off my feet. I hope that this category will thrive in the future, because at a more mature age, Champagnes are able to reveal their



This article originally appeared in Issue 15 of *The World of Fine Wine* magazine. The article may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

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Veuve Clicquot LA GRANDE DAME *Champagne*

1996 showed its class in riveting style. Its acidic backbone, concentration, and ripeness make it the vintage of the decade, if not of the century. Most 1996s were just starting to drink

full personality and potential. However outstanding the RD 1996 is now, it still seems too early a launch for this special style, resembling more closely than it should the regular Grande Année, which compromises the RD concept.

The tasting included only three Rosé Champagnes, but they were enough to generate lively conversation on the quality of these wines, particularly in relation to their premium pricing. Hugh Johnson articulated his view that Rosés are fashion items first and foremost, whose high prices cannot be justified. I agree with Johnson's view regarding the standard NV and Vintage wines. But the best luxury cuvée Rosés show a different, more vinous style, which some Champagne lovers will welcome. The best of this admittedly outrageously pricey but wonderful style was exemplified by the outstanding Dom Ruinart Rosé 1990. Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon 1998 was stylish, as usual, but not up to the great 1996. Lanson Noble Cuvée Rosé NV was considered a disappointment by the panel, with inadequate intensity and lack of character and charm.

Vintages

The tasting demonstrated the full range of recent vintages. The Bollinger Grande Année 1999 was a delightful wine, as was the second bottle of Cristal 1999 (the first one likely suffered from very light cork taint, which dampened down the fruit). The high level of ripeness in 1999 was evident in both, but without the correspondingly low acidity that afflicts many wines of the vintage. The most represented year was 1998. Fine wines, undoubtedly, but the high yields must be responsible for the slight lack of fruit intensity and finesse: a very good vintage rather than a great one. The 1997 had the misfortune to follow the superb 1996: no greatness, but some good wines for mid-term drinking. The 1996 showed its class in riveting style. Its acidic backbone, concentration, and ripeness make it the vintage of the decade, if not of the century. Most 1996s were just starting to drink, with Dom Ruinart and Salon showing the elegant, tight-knit mineral side, whereas Billecart-Salmon Grande Cuvée, Jacquesson, Philipponnat Clos des Goisses, and Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill demonstrated the vintage's exceptional power and structure. Luckily there are still some available, and it is wise



to stock up on them for the years to come. The 1995s were rich, weighty, and drinking extremely well. Henriot's Cuvée des Echanteleurs was a positive surprise, with its classy ripe fruitiness and richness. The Krugs were as good as ever, the Vintage leaving no doubt of its excellence and future potential. The Clos du Mesnil divided opinion and was viewed by some as inferior in quality to the Vintage due to a less complex and less harmonious nature. The fine 1990 vintage showed its balance and positive qualities in both the Dom Ruinart Rosé and the Jacquesson DT.

Conclusions

All in all, the tasting let us compare the qualities of the major houses' prestige cuvées side by side. The Krugs were consistently great, as was Cristal, with its powerful roundness and edgy personality leaving no room for doubt. Among the others, Jacquesson did exquisitely well, being able to show both personality and fine terroir characteristics. Billecart-Salmon's phenomenal cleanliness and technical perfection combined to great effect throughout the line. The lesser-known top cuvées that charmed with character and elegance were Gosset's Célébris and Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses, both counting for some of the best bargains on offer. Clear disappointments were Cattier Clos du Moulin, Lanson Noble Cuvée Rosé NV, Lanson Noble Cuvée Blanc de Blancs 1997, Mumm Grand Cru NV, Perrier Jouët Belle Epoque Blanc de Blancs 1999 and, to a lesser degree, the Belle Epoque 1998. One wine that stood out was the Henri Giraud Fût de Chêne 1998, with its high oak maturation influence and intensely vinous style. This highly atypical Champagne has great structure, and the style doubtless has its fans.

This tasting demonstrated the great range of quality and style among prestige cuvée Champagnes, as well as the variety of the region's vintages. These qualities should be used even more persuasively to strengthen Champagne's position as a serious fine wine. At the same time, Champagne's big business interests, easily saleable image, high-profile marketing, rising grape prices, and supply shortages all pose a threat to the future quality of some of the mass-produced prestige cuvées. So the gap between the best and the rest will surely widen.



PRESTIGE CUVÉE CHAMPAGNE

Flight 1: Non-Vintage

Jacquart Brut de Nominée NV
Piper-Heidsieck Cuvée Rare NV
Cattier Clos du Moulin NV
Mumm Grand Cru NV
Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle NV
Krug Grande Cuvée NV
Lanson Noble Cuvée Rosé NV

HJ: I hoped this would be a question of coming up with 40 synonyms for scrumptious.

SL: I thought this first flight ranged from the correct and refined to the more characterful.

AR: Yes, very mixed. My favorite for now was the Cattier, which had great complexity, and I said more about it in my notes. I liked its sourdough-yeast quality, nicely evolved brioche aromas, and apple fruit richness. But the Krug was also classic, pretty spot-on...

HJ: Oh, I think the Krug stood out. The Cattier also stood out for me, but not for such good reasons.

SL: I agree it was distinctive, evolved, and a little oxidative on the nose, but more pristine on the palate.

HJ: I wrote brown apple...

AR: I wrote Bramley apple...

HJ: A shortcut to excellence in Champagne rather than the real thing. Slightly too much sugar, too.

AR: For me it had complexity and real personality.

EA: I agree it had personality, but it lacked pedigree, and I was left wanting more depth and length.

AR: For me the most commercial wines were the Jacquart and the Mumm; the Jacquart with a slight plastic/plasticine character on the nose and a finish that was a bit sweet; the Mumm with a rather aggressive acidity, making for a fresh, citrusy style, but not particularly complex or long.

EA: I agree the Jacquart was the most commercial, but the Mumm was powerfully reminiscent of Pinot Noir for me: masculine, powerful, and vinous, if missing grace and style, with a promising structure.

AR: Yes, I preferred it of the two.

HJ: I don't think the Mumm quite hit the spot, a bit low key.

SL: No great shakes. An aggressive bite, darting acidity, little generosity, leaving an unappealing, lean impression.

HJ: Not short, though, and it had some qualities: It was pleasant and lingering. And I would defend the Jacquart: If that's commercial, good for commercial. It had the advantage of being the first glass of Champagne, and I was dying for a glass of Champagne. But it was very nicely put together, with shining almond blossom on the nose and a clean finish—very long and fine.

EA: I agree it had an attractively toasty nose, but the bubbles foamed too much in the mouth. I found it a little rustic, a little short.

HJ: It had character. What about the Piper-Heidsieck? For me this had a soft, unexciting nose. It started out quiet... and went on quiet... but then there was some fine acidity and an appley finish, quite long.

AR: Yes, a vanilla, almond/marzipan sweetness on the nose, with a nice feeling of evolved reserve wines, but still very youthful. A slightly aggressive mousse and tartish acidity, finishing a little angular and pointed, but goodish quality and length.

EA: Stylish. A broad, bready, but cleanly elegant nose, beginning to broaden into brioche, dried fruit, nuts, and toast. A finely made, Chardonnay-dominant blend of several vintages.

SL: Creamy and rich, certainly, on the nose. No great complexity, but mouthwatering, ripe acidity, and an apéritif lift to the palate. Good length.

AR: Unlike the Laurent-Perrier, which was a bit unexciting. I would have thought Non-Vintage. Quite shy on the nose, also a little strange, with a slightly toasty element. Nicely balanced, with notes of toast and honey, but not overcomplex or long.

HJ: The shortest of all of them. It didn't go anywhere.

EA: I liked it because it was ready to

drink. A soft and caramelly nose, harmonious and well put together, with a well-integrated mouthfeel.

SL: Gently bready nuances, yes, but still an appley, tangy nature to the fruit. Compact rather than expansive, but a lively, mouthwatering, pristine style, with good depth and length.

HJ: I thought the Krug was an absolute knockout.

AR: The Krug and Cattier were top for me. The Cattier needs drinking now, but the Krug will last a long time...

HJ: Twice as much flavor. The nose is absolutely arresting, like a Paris perfume for men: musk, almond, vanilla. So brisk and fresh on the palate, but mouth-coating.

AR: Mmm. Nice, rich, mouth-filling mousse with some toasty evolution, creamy texture, almost a touch of marmalade, good acidity, and a distinct touch of honey on the finish.

SL: Very ripe acidity, I agree; nothing edgy or nervy, and so well knit to the wine. In some of the others the acidity seemed too perky for the fruit. Here the fruit was very ripe, too, with a hint of red berry. Complex, lingering, lovely purity, but bready, toasty—this really is very complete.

HJ: Absolutely. Don't you feel you're as much in Burgundy as in Champagne with Krug? The question is whether it's white or red Burgundy. It's Burgundy plus, plus, plus. Wonderful wine.

EA: A classic, very stylish, successful Krug blend, with perfect balance. The mouthfeel fulfills the promise of the nose—mouth-filling, broad, winey, brought to perfection by the gentle bubbles. After a few slight disappointments, the last two Grande Cuvées have again reached the near-perfect level typical of Krug.

AR: The fact that these have all been NV suggests they should be drinking.

EA: Yes, but the Krug can still age. After it, the Lanson Rosé was in a tough spot...

SL: I'm afraid it did struggle there, and seemed a little bit lackluster.

AR: It was quite delicate—surprisingly delicate—with good berry-fruit acidity and freshness, though perhaps not quite at cuvée-prestige level.

EA: I also found it delicate on the nose, with cherry and strawberry fruit and no discernible autolysis aromas. Fruity palate with slight bitterness and refreshing acidity. Comparatively long, with a pleasing bubble structure.

HJ: I thought the nose gave room for imagination. With the whiff of Pinot Noir, I could see the Montagne de Reims.

SL: I just kept wondering whether it was worth the higher price as a Rosé...

HJ: I don't know why anybody pays extra for Rosé. It's a complete rip-off.

AR: It would be interesting to know how much more it costs to make.

EA: It does require the best grapes and is the most difficult style to make.

HJ: I still think it's a complete scam.

Flight 2: 2000, 1999

Jacquesson Corne Bautray 2000
Non-Dosé

Perrier Jouët Belle Epoque Blanc de Blancs 1999

Bollinger La Grande Année 1999
Roederer Cristal 1999

AR: I love the Jacquesson. Lovely finesse on the nose, subtly yeasty and winey; slightly smoky, too, with a hint of bitter aloes. Very nicely textured, creamy mousse, full-flavored, with good length; bone-dry on the finish, not austere but rather classic and mineral, with good potential.

HJ: Is it not austere? I said austere, slight brown apple/*bonbon anglais* nose. A 2D severity on the palate, brisk, super-clean, with a strong finish, but no special fun.

AR: I just love the balance.

EA: Balanced, yes, though the wine is totally dry. The nose has old wooden barrel and light oxidation, true to the house style. But this is also a terroir wine at its best—a tightly mineral Chardonnay that is just opening. Ripe

fruit, a touch of nut and steely fresh acid structure. Worth aging several years in bottle.

SL: A very tight coil, certainly, fine, minerally cut, lean and precise, though, like Hugh, I noted a bruised-apple quality on the nose, and I can't help feeling this is a bit stripped down, even though the terroir does shine through. A gastro-Champagne?

HJ: Exactly, it needs food.

AR: I find it beautifully creamy, but it would also be palate-cleansing before a meal. I'd be happy to have it as an apéritif as well.

HJ: I still think it's severe. There's not much fun in it; it's not made for joy, as Champagne should be.

EA: There certainly couldn't be a bigger difference between these first two Blanc de Blancs...

AR: I'm disappointed by the Belle Epoque. After the finesse of the Jacquesson, I found it a bit coarse on the nose, pongy, rustic...

HJ: Absolutely. A boudoir nose, faint cheese... *merde*... All human life is there. Better on the palate. Fine, penetrating, fairly simple flavor, with a good, long, fresh finish. All in a high register, though: needs bass.

SL: No real drive or purity. Soft, a sweet accent on the fruit, cream-soda touch.

HJ: Don't you think it would be better with other grapes? Its legs are bare.

EA: It reminds me of not-very-good Chablis, with its gunpowdery, strawy nose. A tightly mineral Chardonnay still almost undrinkable due to its young age. The promise of an interesting future, however: elegant structure combined with a long, tight, and concentrated taste.

SL: As on the Jacquesson, I get a very bruised-apple note on the nose of the Bollinger—almost a little cinnamon and Brazil nut as well. Full, rich, not really together on the palate at this stage, but lovely intensity nevertheless, and good length. Very Bollinger.

EA: A wonderful nose, charmingly spicy, and I also got cinnamon. Austere

and tightly winey palate, but the acidity brings juiciness as well as balance and personality. No hurry to open this for years to come.

AR: Full-flavored Bollinger personality, yes, and an intriguing iodiney evolution on the nose, with baked apple, smoke, ginger, cinnamon, and tobacco spice.

HJ: I think Marmite, a brown character typical of Bollinger, on the nose. But a real wake-up entry, the marshmallow taste at a tangent, leading on to slightly green oak. Dry, unfinished. Keep.

SL: Yes, still very young, still not fully knit. Promising, but does need time.

AR: As does the Cristal, which I find the tightest of the first four in this flight, seemingly with the structure and texture for aging, and showing elegance in a tightly wound package, but elemental as yet.

HJ: Marie-Antoinette, face powder. Utterly Paris salon, sweet-smelling, dangerous...

AR: Have you been to a Toulouse-Lautrec exhibition recently, Hugh?

HJ: No, but you could be forgiven for thinking that. Develops into a slightly more predictable cooking-apple finish. Starts better than it finishes, so keep.

SL: Yes, bready, loose mousse, mouth-filling, good length but still not together. I'm less sure than I was of the '95 and '96. The vintages I've tasted since then haven't impressed me as much as I expected.

EA: This Cristal isn't as good as the last bottle I tasted a few months ago. Could we try the other bottle?

HJ: This second bottle is even better—fuller and longer. Heaven.

SL: More harmonious and intense.

AR: Better, yes, more concentration and intensity.

EA: Not nearly drinkable yet. The closed nose promises concentrated fruit and charm, but the nuances are still hidden. Very powerful mouthfeel—strong and tight. Knowing the product, it is easy to have faith in its future, but this needs to be locked up for another 5-10 years at least.

PRESTIGE CUVÉE CHAMPAGNE

Flight 3: 1998**Taittinger Comtes de Champagne 1998****Pommery Cuvée Louise 1998****Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1998****Perrier Jouët Belle Epoque 1998****Veuve Clicquot La Grand Dame 1998****Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas-****François Billecart 1998****Dom Pérignon 1998****Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth****Salmon Rosé 1998****Gosset Célébris 1998****Henri Giraud Fût de Chêne 1998**

SL: Among these 1998 wines it's difficult to see much vintage similarity—the house style is much more obvious. The Taittinger was in a very refined, understated style: lovely ripe acidity, complex, creamy, fine, with a minerally touch, but fades a little on the finish. The Pommery had a more aggressive bite on the finish and lacked a little purity and length.

AR: I thought the Taittinger was good, rich, full-flavored fizz, nicely creamy and textured, with toasty flavors in a classic Chardonnay style, but possibly not for long aging. The Pommery had an attractive evolution, a touch of sweetness and quite straightforward—classic rather than thrilling.

HJ: Is it fair to put Blanc de Blancs in with real Champagne?

SL: Maybe 1998 is more of a Pinot vintage...

EA: I also liked the Taittinger, which had an exquisite nose—creamy but elegant and flowery. The creamy nuances of Chardonnay are beginning to show on the palate, and there is excellent acidity for the vintage. Balanced and light as a breath. I agree this is beginning to drink, but there is no rush whatsoever. The Pommery nose is delightfully fruity and toasty but slightly dusty. On the palate, there is fullness and power, but the charm and harmony are not showing yet.

HJ: I thought the Taittinger had a sweet ripeness but not much backup. There was a high register only. A choir without

the men. I kept waiting for the chaps to come in. Louise had super-fine ripe apple on the nose, but was all correctness. Straitlaced and unsexy. You've got to salute her. But austere; more fine than fun.

SL: I found the Belle Epoque rather lackluster...

AR: I thought it more classic and concentrated than the Belle Epoque '99 Blanc de Blancs. This has better flavor and a degree of class. Straw and biscuit on the nose, savory sourdough yeast and apple, quite good evolution, nice, full-flavored richness.

EA: A world of aromas, soft coffee and toffee, but the palate is a disappointment after the charming and promising nose. Will improve with maturation but does not have the makings of a top wine.

HJ: The nose is delicate, far from simple, but I agree the palate is less interesting—apple and almond, good length. But there's something slightly specious about it. Do you ever use that wonderful word, specious? It's one of Michael Broadbent's favorites.

AR: I enjoyed the Deutz: lightly smoky, spicy, and yeasty on the nose, lovely, full, rich flavors on the palate, fine, creamy mousse, with apple and toast and real balance and finesse.

EA: Aristocratic. Classic dignity and style. Toasty nose with ripe fruit. Strong, winey palate with well-balanced acidity. A fine personality.

HJ: It shows various aspects of Champagne very clearly without quite turning them into a whole. Biscuity, gingery, cooking-apple sharpness, lovely brightness of flavor... At first I wondered if it led anywhere, but there is a good, long line.

SL: For me this was sound but not as impressive as anticipated. A very bruised-apple nature on the nose—cooking apple, yes—but not much backbone or complexity, if good length. I preferred the Grande Dame, which was rich but understated. A good biscuity character, firm, rich mousse, bold, Pinot Noir-dominant, powerful and long, not quite knit as yet

and needs time, but plenty of potential. Quite an imposing style...

HJ: Absolutely, full-on, almonds and peaches. Big-bodied, winey, a food wine. Finishes keen and long. Very good.

AR: Certainly the greatest cellar potential of any of the '98s so far. Elemental still on the nose, but good intensity and richness of flavor, evolving nicely now, though still relatively youthful, the power and structure topped off by citrusy-zesty acidity.

EA: The tight nose, with toffee, apple, and brioche, needs time to open. Very pure on the palate, concentrated and full, but this will not reach the quality of the very best vintages.

SL: I thought that the rest of these '98s were very consistent...

HJ: At a high level, yes, and very young still—all keepers.

SL: The only one that seemed really ready to me was the Billecart-Salmon Cuvée N-F Billecart. Already complex, with lovely intensity, but quite forward, soft, and vinous, while still minerally and pure. Complete and harmonious. Apart from the color, the Cuvée Elisabeth was barely discernible as a Rosé on the nose or palate, and it was tauter than the N-F.

HJ: I agree, very pretty, but no hint of Rosé on the nose. Almonds give it away, and a certain tannic tightness on the palate. I prefer the N-F, which was seamless.

EA: Very balanced and charmingly velvety structure typical of the producer. The Rosé was suitably winey, with an exquisite, silky mouthfeel. Not up to the majestic 1996, but clearly one of the best Rosés of the vintage.

AR: The N-F had expressive, sweet, marzipan aromas, nice, rich honeycomb fruit with a soft-textured mousse, and citrusy acidity for finesse, balance, and purity. I thought the Rosé did have a good, rich, smoky, red-berry nose, with good Pinot Noir character showing through on the palate. A delicate style but with considerable vinosity. But I thought the Dom Pérignon was the best wine so far...

HJ: So good. Wonderful perfume—that boudoir smell again; a long-inhabited room. Sweet layers of flavor, almonds prominent, but sugar-coated, leads on and on...

AR: Smoky coffee, cashew nut, and toasty aromas, nice evolution, elegant, with a degree of richness and power. Fresh mineral characters, a citrus-zest zing, and a fine-textured richness that's powerful but still youthful. Not sure yet if it has the complexity of the 1996...

EA: The '96 was brilliant...

AR: A great wine...

HJ: A great wine...

EA: This is still very closed, very minerally and streamlined, but the time since its release has helped it over the past few months. Toast and coffee are beginning to emerge, and the wine improves in the glass. If experience is anything to go by, this should be delightful after another ten years!

SL: Yes, capable of serious evolution. Impressive, powerful, and refined.

EA: I really liked the Gosset and found it very enjoyable even now. Classic charm combined with a small producer's personal charisma. Open and giving nose, with cinnamon, spice, and red fruit. Charming, feminine.

HJ: I'm waiting for something to happen—it's so restrained. The fruity entry is surprising, but it doesn't yet follow through. An infant.

AR: Youthful, yes, but with evolved toasty characters, in a very attractive, full-flavored, winey style.

SL: A lot of power there, bold, distinctive, waxy fruit, very Gosset, huge potential...

HJ: All potential...

SL: Too assertive to be enjoyable now.

AR: Assertive acidity...

EA: No malo. But I still find this more drinkable now than the Dom Pérignon. And while it's not perfect, it has a lot of personality.

SL: I rated it highly too, and I'd love to come back to it.

AR: The Giraud seemed more evolved. An appley spicy nose, with a degree of attractively evolved fruitiness, quite

winey and structured, with a slight phenolic element to it, but improving on the palate and becoming quite intriguing and potentially classy.

SL: The wood is less prominent than I expected from the name and the winemaking. I think it carries it off quite well. Minerally acidity, red fruit, toasty, and I like the texture of the fruit—creamy, harmonious, layered, vinous. The fact that it's effervescent is almost incidental.

HJ: Very unusual...

AR: Yes, but well made; it stands up to scrutiny. It's different but works well in its own way.

HJ: The oak brings a sort of dryness, and the fruit doesn't seem to have room to play. But maybe it just needs time. Arresting and spicy, certainly.

EA: Personally, it's not my style—it's not Champagne at all to me. But it's really well made, and the structure is great, if that's what you like. Very abundant, broad mouthfeel in which the bubbles feel soft. Long and very personal palate. A Champagne for a red-wine aficionado, and one that needs to be accompanied by food.

Flight 4: 1997**Lanson Noble Cuvée Blanc de Blancs 1997****Lanson Noble Cuvée 1997**

HJ: Of these two I enjoyed the Blanc de Blancs more. A really beautifully made wine, smelling more like Chablis than Champagne, but very complete. There was something sugary about it, but it had very good acidity and single-line length. The Noble Cuvée had another dimension, but less drive, less line.

SL: I also thought the Blanc de Blancs was of good quality and, despite the sugary palate, was tightly wound. The Noble Cuvée was almost sweet and lacked some precision and poise.

AR: I also slightly preferred the Blanc de Blancs. An almost floral nose, a hint of lead pencil, some richness and concentration on the palate; perhaps a little linear and at the same time

angular in terms of its steely acidity, but good, classic Chardonnay finesse. The Noble Cuvée also had an attractive fresh nose, good concentrated fruit, tangy and zesty acidity. Also a little linear, softer than the Blanc de Blancs, though also quite fine and tangy.

EA: I thought the Noble Cuvée was a stylish, pure, and fruity wine, with more nuances than the Blanc de Blancs, where the acidity felt aggressive.

Flight 5: 1996**Dom Ruinart 1996****Salon 1996****Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame 1996****Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill 1996****Jacquesson 1996****Billecart-Salmon Grande Cuvée 1996****Bollinger RD 1996****Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 1996**

EA: I'm a bit of a masochist, maybe, but I loved the cold and steely style of these '96s.

AR: All were absolutely excellent, really showing the class of '96.

HJ: I loved the Dom Ruinart. An extraordinary, seashell nose, resonant; complex, a coffee element. It started brilliantly, with sweetness and poise; less good on the finish, but a real original, with lots of class. I thought, I've really made an old friend here.

AR: A fine nose, classic, winey, nutty, praliney, with good, creamy-textured fruit richness and concentration; full-flavored with lots going on. Ripe, zesty acidity, finesse and power, and nice nutty flavors on the aftertaste.

EA: Challenging, minerally, and coolly stylish nose, with a hint of cashew nut. The steely structure lifts the wine to lightness. But not easily approachable; powerful and puckering. Badly in need of time to show the broad, charmingly creamy side of Chardonnay.

SL: Unappealing to me, very aggressive and edgy. There's also an almost piercing acidity to the Salon, but there's lovely density and purity here, real poise, but it needs years.

AR: Absolutely. Elemental, subtle

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aromas; nutty and yeasty; still very tight on the palate; very good richness and concentration; very tangy, youthful fruit with enormous potential.

EA: Very pure and stylish nose with cream toffee and minerals. Tight palate, but made lighter by its steely backbone. The palate is beginning to open, revealing both width and depth. Beginning to be drinkable, but another ten years in the cellar will reveal the real nature of Salon.

HJ: With Salon I often find the structure very youthful but the fruit a little oxidized. There's a strongish color, and a touch of toffee on the nose. But on the palate, lovely fresh apples lead into a *long* finish. Purity, class, simplicity. I felt a little let down by the Grande Dame. Face-powdery nose, fine, appley, *tarte fine*, but a lot of acidity. Not quite what I expect from the Lady.

AR: An almost austere acidity, yes, but bringing intensity of flavor and length, and seemingly fine aging potential. Fine nose, floral, nutty, and toasty, with excellent concentration and length.

EA: The fine acid structure of a top vintage really becomes La Grande Dame. Creamily broad and opening layers. Deceptively light for a Pinot Noir-dominant Champagne. Austere, linear, but stylish wine that still belongs in the cellar.

SL: Still very Grande Dame for me: expressive, heady, rich, Pinot Noir aromas, powerful palate.

HJ: I thought the Sir Winston was beautifully handled, so delicate, a model of balance; plenty of body, but still teasing. Very good.

SL: Yes, pristine; brioche notes but very focused, linear, and taut.

EA: Beautiful. A full nose with ripe fruit and toast—close to perfection. Full, round palate freshened by fine acidity. Still a very young wine whose harmony promises a long, magnificent future.

AR: Yes. An almost exotic, pineapple-citrusy nose. The classic, firm acidity of the vintage and plenty of fruit intensity, yet with great finesse, balance, and aging potential. I also thought the

Jacquesson was lovely again. I'm a real fan of that biscuity, savory, sourdough character; very dry, but complemented by a rich fruitiness that is tempered by the yeasty character, the fine mousse, and the bite on the finish.

EA: I agree that the concentrated mouthfeel works very well with the steely acid backbone. Long and very stylish.

SL: Almond and nutty on the nose, and quite viscous. But green acidity—a little severe.

HJ: Vivid nose but a slight Marmite note, the acidity dominant and raw.

AR: I'd say austere and steely rather than raw.

HJ: It feels very malic to me—the acidity bites. I thought that, of these, the Pol Roger and the Billecart best reflected the art of blending, the need to cover one thing with another...

AR: I agree that they are the two classiest wines, though personally I love the Jacquesson.

HJ: The Grande Cuvée had a sweet and suave nose, tight knit and classic, the high-acid finish still (almost) covered. Very good.

EA: I also thought the Billecart was a magnificent wine. Very strong nose, with cream and toast. The concentration continues on the palate, with hardly discernible oak aromas. Velvet combined with power and purity, brought to a shine by the super acidity of the vintage.

AR: Still very youthful on the nose, almost elemental, a hint of toasty and nutty evolution, confirmed on the palate by nutty, coffee flavors, sourdough, savory-fruit richness, and tangy acidity. Very pure fruit quality and fine aging potential.

SL: Yes, but already complex. A lovely, fine weave; scintillating acidity.

HJ: The Bollinger is such a contrast. Nothing very subtle about it: almost beefy on the nose, ginger and Marmite, there to be noticed. That marshmallow flavor again, vivid, eccentric, lingering.

SL: Yes, again very Bollinger, heady, apple and cinnamon on the nose, but dense, poised, taut on the palate.

AR: Intriguing, exotic nose, nutty, lead pencil, fruits, some of that typical ginger and cinnamon spice oak from cask fermentation, with lovely savory sourdough intensity, textured richness and balance, with plenty of potential.

EA: Light, house-style oxidation combined with delicate oriental spice, citrus, and exotic fruit. An open, extremely intense, and vivid wine whose acidity promises an almost endless life. A desert-island wine. The Clos des Goisses, meanwhile, is one of the best-kept secrets of Champagne. Stylishly reserved, powerful nose. Ripe fruit, cherry, and promising toast. Tight linear structure whose direct acidity leaves nothing to be desired. Clos des Goisses has a reputation of needing time to open, which is even more the case with this brilliant 1996.

AR: Great nose, poised—brioche and cashew nut. Mineral, layered, complex, intense, and long on the palate, with creamy, praliney richness on the finish and excellent balance.

HJ: A fine patisserie nose. Intense, mineral, more intense than complex in a way. Straight to the point. Very good.

Flight 6: 1995, 1992, 1990, 1989**Charles Heidsieck Blanc de Millénaires 1995****Henriot Cuvée des Echanteleurs 1995****Bruno Paillard Nec Plus Ultra 1995****Krug Clos du Mesnil 1995****Krug 1995****Jacquesson 1990 Dégorgement Tardif (1996) Non-Dosé****Jacquesson 1989 Dégorgement Tardif (1996) Non-Dosé****Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1992****Dom Ruinart Rosé 1990**

HJ: On the whole, I liked the previous flight better than this one.

EA: More heaviness and richness here. But I liked the Heidsieck, which was pretty classic. Well developed, very toasty and full, cream-and-coffee nose. Correspondingly stylish, winey palate. Very harmonious and attractively rounded whole, if not quite as fine as

the Henriot, which was really good...

AR: Really good, yes, as was the '90...

EA: For me, this '95 had an enticingly sweet and toasty ripe-fruit nose. On the palate, the complexity of aromas was complemented by a long, dried-fruit finish. Perfect acid structure and soft mousse in the mouth. A very positive experience.

AR: For me, too. Fine, toasty, autolytic character, creamy rich mousse, very savory and dry, but intensely flavored; delicacy and balance, lots of class, and still plenty of time to go. The Heidsieck also had a fine nose, grilled nuts, lovely fruit concentration, and toasty richness; full-bodied, creamy texture, yeasty-toasty autolysis character. Still youthful with nice richness.

HJ: The Heidsieck wasn't special for me, but pretty; gentle, gingery nose; sugared almonds. The Henriot was gently developed, with rich flavors.

AR: The one that doesn't quite work for me is the Bruno Paillard. An odd nose, initially out of kilter, rather plain, and a slightly one-dimensional palate; tangy, youthful acidity but lacking a bit of complexity in the present company.

HJ: Still pale, still tight on the nose, delicate, with a slight spice. But seems a little feeble, however interesting.

EA: Distinctive and nuanced on the nose, with dark-berry aromas reminiscent of bubblegum and wax. Very concentrated, winey palate. A dinner wine to be taken seriously and at a very enjoyable stage.

HJ: I wasn't absolutely knocked out by the Clos du Mesnil. Spice and vanilla on the nose. Big, spicy, vanilla-flavored, but quite severe; slightly 2D, but very long.

AR: Intense, buttery, nutty, and smoky rich nose of new oak that's not yet quite integrated; a hint of appley oxidation, with cinnamon; more like a fine Corton-Charlemagne or Bâtard-Montrachet. Hugely rich, smoky, and winey, with honeyed, almost honeycomb-like character. Toasty, savory richness and complexity, with a refreshing zing on the finish.

EA: The toasty, even slightly oaky nose,

is layered and nuanced. Exceptional, magnificent structure. The abundant fruit of the vintage is exquisitely combined with the streamlined acidity of Chardonnay. Good concentration and length of palate that leaves nothing to be desired. The 1995s are, generally speaking, ready to drink fairly young, but one would hope that the slightly loose oak aroma here will integrate into the fruit over time. Already lots of personality, though.

HJ: My notes praise completeness rather than personality. Balance is the most wonderful thing. If you can describe it, it's no good, really. I thought the Krug '95 had more ginger and spice than the Clos du Mesnil, softly voluptuous, still with vivid acidity.

EA: The '95 is every Krugist's dream. Toasty, strongly autolytic nose typical of the house, with a hint of vanilla. On the palate, full, austere, and faultlessly harmonious: apple, nut, and toasted bread. Long finish and great structure, the promise of a long life, but this wine can be enjoyed already.

AR: I agree, but this is still a very youthful '95. Nutty, praliney notes on the nose, intense cask-fermentation aromas of ginger, spice, and citrus, with sourdough yeast and almonds; creamy, complex, huge structure, and excellent aging potential. The Jacquessons strike me as purist's wines. Initially I didn't like them, but they grew on me. At first, odd notes on the nose of the '90, slightly minty; ditto on the palate, as if the fruit was

drying up; peppermint characters, which you don't look for in Champagne, and an austere drying finish. But it improved on the palate, delivering more complexity and interest. The '89 was a tad over the top, but intense and pure.

HJ: I found the '90 smooth and complex, austere dry and yeasty, but better balanced than the '89, which was wonderfully fragrant on first opening, then rather austere, lean, and lemony, developing a mature mushroom/Marmite character. Very long.

EA: The 1990 had a developed nose reminiscent of burned sugar and caramel.

Taut taste, still very youthful and vivid, full, creamy, and freshened by acidity. In its optimal drinking age, but no hurry. The '89 had a strong caramel and toasted palate—sweeter than the '90, and not as deep or as magnificently structured. Drinkable now. The Dom Pérignon Oenothèque, on the other hand, was still very young for me. Minerally, still very youthful nose. Broad but clean and streamlined on the palate. Concentrated, fresh, but will benefit from cellaring for at least another five years.

AR: Still surprisingly youthful in terms of acidity, yes, and still a tad austere on the finish. But a lovely, complex, and pure nose—honey and beeswax; winey, voluptuous, rich fruit quality and texture. But still with a lot of potential.

HJ: The wine seems more pungent than rich to me; creamy almonds but a bit of cabbage/sulfur on the nose; drier than most DPs, and not their best vintage by a long way.

AR: I think the Dom Ruinart Rosé is exactly as it should be. Smoky nose, a whiff of armchair leather, slightly animal, rustic, very winey, but still very fresh with good acidity and bone dry.

EA: Very winey, yes, and a developed nose with a distinctive toasty note. On the palate, full and round, velvety smooth, and stylish. Like good red Burgundy. A mature wine still retaining brilliant acids and classic elegance.

HJ: Deeper pink than most Rosé Champagnes, but by no means tawny. Creamy mousse; a rich, soft, strawberry/Pinot Noir nose, creamy and sweet, suggesting old red Burgundy. Sumptuous but still structured; big-bodied but elegant. A wonderful wine. Looking over my notes for the entire tasting, my overall conclusion is that Champagne needs Pinot Noir. Blanc de Blancs just don't really do it for me, let alone justify higher prices. But red Pinot Noir is not a good idea either, let alone justifying silly prices for Rosés. Only the Dom Ruinart Rosé 1990 stood out as totally special. ■

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