

(*per se*)

ROSÉ CHAMPAGNE



ROSÉ CHAMPAGNE WORTH THE DIFFERENCE?

Even among the most obviously prestigious wines, Rosé has always had a certain caché, and the style has never been more in fashion than now. Essi Avellan MW introduces an open tasting shared with Simon Larkin MW and Anthony Rose, designed to test the quality, value, and variety of the wines

"It's a complete scam," said Hugh Johnson, commenting on the Rosés in our Prestige Cuvée Champagne tasting, adding, "I don't know why anybody pays extra for Rosé. It's a complete rip-off" (*WFW* 15, p.207). And yet Rosés and Prestige Cuvées are the fastest growing Champagne categories, seeing unprecedented growth. We sampled 28 Rosés, including many of the scarcest luxury cuvées. With Rosé markets expanding, rising yields, and soaring grape prices, we feared the worst. But the tasting was an eye-opener, demonstrating the full scope of the category with a diverse range of styles and qualities.

The Rosé Champagne boom is another glorious example of Champenois marketing savvy. The category has thrived intermittently over the years, but never before has it scaled such heights of popularity. Rosé Champagne is commonly considered as an easy drinking, feminine wine. In Japan, where pink bubbles are experiencing amazing growth, it is seen as the perfect girly drink. And yet if one thinks of the taste profile of most Rosés, they are actually far from easy. The best Rosés are gastronomic, richly vinous wines, in which the effervescence is

mere coincidence. With their common Pinot Noir dominance, the wines tend to be more structured than other Champagnes, with an occasional tannic presence, making them sparkling wines for red wine drinkers.

But even this is oversimplifying the category, as this tasting proved. The styles varied from the highly fruit-forward, youthful styles without much autolytic character, to the aged, deliciously velvety and vinous cuvées. The range of colors was just as wide, from the palest onion-skin color of Roederer Cristal 2000, to the pale salmon shade of Cuvée William Deutz 1999, and the deep, vibrant, cherry red color of Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame 1998. The color of the wine does not necessarily give any clue to the taste, however. Cristal Rosé is nearly as pale as its white version. Yet again, the wine is chewy, muscular, extremely vinous, and well-built. Roederer Cellar Master Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon says that the secret of Cristal Rosé is extremely ripe Pinot Noir grapes from a super parcel, giving the wine a natural onion-skin hue. This color is merely adjusted with minimal amounts of added red wine.

The color does not reveal grape composition or vinification method, nor does the label, so the consumer is in something of a blind spot in this respect. The Champagne producers do not wish to complicate the category, but isn't there so much more to Rosés than the charm of the color and concept?

Laurent-Perrier and Billecart-Salmon were the early drivers of the Rosé category, but the launch of Veuve Clicquot Rosé NV in particular has boosted its popularity, with many smaller producers being able to benefit from the knock-on effect. The increased interest in the category has led to numerous new Rosé launches. Champagne Deutz is in steep ascent, with Rosés that did extremely well in this tasting. They were consistently very impressive all the way from the Rosé NV up to the Cuvée William Deutz 1999 and 1996.

Rosé Champagne's capabilities as single-terroir wines are also worthy of note. Drappier extended its single-vineyard Champagne, Grande Sendrée, to Rosé in 1990. And 2007 has seen two further launches: Clos des Goisses Juste Rosé 1999 and Jacquesson Premier Cru Dizy Terres Rouges 2002.

Premium pricing

Hugh Johnson's skepticism about the premium pricing for Rosés requires further analysis. Is it the flourishing markets that give producers the opportunity to charge a premium, or are prices based on costs? I travelled to Champagne a week after the tasting and quizzed numerous producers on the subject.

At Deutz, Jean-Marc Lallier-Deutz and Cellar Master Michel Davesne of Deutz noted that the vinification of the red wines is very difficult and risky. Deutz uses a combination of the *saignée* and *assemblage* methods of producing Rosé. They use their own specified vineyards from Mareuil-sur-Aÿ and Aÿ for making the red wines. The yields are 8,000–9,000 kg/ha, thus significantly lower than for the white wine grapes. The best grapes from 50-year-old vineyards account for the 10–20 percent higher cost prices.

Taittinger's famed Comtes de Champagne is produced from 14 percent red wine that originates from the number one village for the purpose—Bouzy. Taittinger Cellar Master Damien Le Sueur says that sourcing good raw material is almost twice as expensive as for the whites, and that it is not rare having to taste 15 samples to find two good ones. Taittinger does a four-day cold maceration followed by a four-day fermentation on the skins. Le Sueur says that Taittinger aims to extract some tannin and add structure to the wine.

Billecart-Salmon, on the other hand, aims to extract only color and fruit, not structure. Antoine Roland-Billecart reminds

us that there is a €1.35 per kilo premium in price for the grapes used for red Champagne wine, equalling an approximate 15–20 percent premium. The Billecart-Salmon Rosé is made of 14–15 percent red wine from Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, Aÿ, and Ambonnay. Eight people on the sorting belt ensure the quality of the raw material, and that the grapes are 100 percent destemmed and crushed, and left to macerate until the right color is achieved. The fermentation finishes in vats.

The producers' view was unanimous. The production costs are higher due to the cost of the raw material, the additional vinification, and the smaller batch sizes.

The verdict

By comparison with our previous Prestige Cuvée tasting, the panel was surprisingly unanimous. The top performers were Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1996 and, to a lesser degree, the 1999, Krug Rosé, Pol Roger Rosé 1999, Gosset Célébris Rosé 1998, and Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Rosé 1998. After the Krug in the Non-Vintage category, Cattier Red Kiss Rosé, Deutz Rosé, and Bruno Paillard Première Cuvée Rosé were the most praised wines.

Among those that did divide opinion was the Piper-Heidsieck Rosé Sauvage NV, which differed stylistically from the rest of the range. Drappier Grande Sendrée Rosé 2000 was a peculiar Champagne with a very distinct personality, and not to everybody's taste. Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses Juste Rosé 1999 is an exciting launch, even if not quite up to the level of the regular white version; or maybe the Rosé, too, requires extended maturation before reaching its full glory. Another Champagne that seemed premature was the very promising Cristal Rosé 2000. The high demand for Prestige Cuvées has forced many producers to release them onto the market sooner than might be ideal. Taittinger Comtes de Champagne 2002 is a great Champagne, but it would have benefited from a few more years of maturation on lees before release. The same applies to the Perrier-Jouët Belle Époque Rosé 2002.

Conclusions

All in all, the tasting was a pleasant surprise. Apparently, the increased demand for Rosé has encouraged producers to redouble their efforts, resulting in higher quality and wider variety. It remains to be seen whether the category's renaissance will be lasting or merely a passing fad. But at least for now we are being offered a better and broader range of Rosés than ever before. Whether one finds them a rip-off or well worth the extra money comes down, in the end, to personal preference.

The best Rosés are gastronomic, richly vinous wines, in which the effervescence is mere coincidence. With their common Pinot Noir dominance, the wines tend to be more structured than other Champagnes, with an occasional tannic presence, making them sparkling wines for red wine drinkers

**Flight 1
Non-Vintage**

- Ayala Cuvée Rosé Nature NV**
- Piper-Heidsieck Rosé Sauvage NV**
- Canard-Duchêne Brut Rosé NV**
- Cattier Rosé NV**
- Deutz Brut Rosé NV**
- Egly-Ouriet Brut Rosé Grand Cru NV**
- Henriot Rosé NV**
- Jacquart Mosaïque Rosé Brut NV**
- Lanson Noble Cuvée Rosé NV**
- Mumm Rosé NV**
- Bruno Paillard Première Cuvée Rosé NV**
- Philipponnat Réserve Rosé NV**
- Krug Rosé NV**

AR: Straight away there were a variety of interesting things here, starting with the big differences in color. Rosé color varies from the most delicate, pale pink, to a bronze, onionskin, partridge eye color, and all the way to the make-up pink of the Piper-Heidsieck Sauvage. So it's very difficult for the consumer to tell anything from the color—except probably that the darker it is, the more commercial and

“What you see is not necessarily what you get with Rosé. There were three categories: the commercial; the more delicate, attractive apéritif style; and the big, powerful, winery, drink-with-food style”
Anthony Rose

coarse it is. The more delicate, more complex styles tend to show that onionskin color. The wide variation in styles on the nose and palate was also noticeable, from fresh to evolved, from sweetish to very dry, and from simple to complex. So what you see is not necessarily what you get with Rosé Champagne. For me, there were three categories: the commercial; the more delicate, attractive apéritif style; and then the big, powerful, winery, drink-with-food style.

SL: There were some styles with remarkably soft acidity, so the balance of acidity and dosage becomes quite crucial. I think there were a few wines in this first flight that were very focused, very pared back, very streamlined, but in some cases, at least for my palate, slightly too lean. A more generous dosage would give more texture and fill out the wine. The Ayala, for instance, was very correct. I felt it was very clean-cut, crisp, and pallid, but lacking true expression. I think that the lower-dosage styles like the Ayala would benefit from slightly higher acidity. The wines went from the very pared back to the downright clumsy. But some of the middle wines in the flight showed terrific

harmony, which is sometimes difficult to achieve with Rosé.

EA: This was a very interesting flight. It showed how hard it is to make good Rosé wines, even though there is a big boom for them at the moment and the houses need to produce more of them than they have in the past. The red wine character was too strong on some; the ones I didn't like showed some phenolic bitterness which, for me, Champagne should not have. But all in all, it was a positive experience, encompassing the full range of the very different styles.

SL: I agree with Anthony that they fell quite clearly into different camps, almost a “tick the box” thing that came through.

AR: I found a sweet-and-sour balance that in some of the wines compensated for a lack of acidity where the dosage wasn't quite right. There was a sweet-and-sour balance rather than an acidity-and-dosage balance.

SL: There are certainly a couple of edgy wines among these. But I agree that it was an interesting range that divided quite neatly into camps.

EA: One usually expects an autolytic character from Champagne but, for some reason, it often isn't there in Rosés, even though the time on lees is the same. One style here is very fruity, while the other has much more vinosity.

AR: Both styles are valid, aren't they? But for the consumer it is really very hard to tell anything from the color, or even, for that matter, from the brand name. You do need some guidance as to which camp a wine falls into.

SL: For some houses, it seemed as if the market came first and the style came second, as if the wine was self-generated from the winemaker rather than from the terroir. The Cattier had a very individual style, a real statement in a glass, but some of the others appeared more interested in joining the commercial bandwagon. Some houses probably think, “There's a growing market for Rosé, so we should make a crowd-pleaser.” But it was pleasing to see at least some more individual styles across this range.

AR: The Cattier had an individual character, beyond the awful, garish, red bottle: an evolved bouquet, a touch earthy, but attractively developed, quite carrot and

earthy, with quite marked acidity, a slightly unbalanced sweet-and-sour fruitiness, and a *goût anglais*, biscuity finish.

SL: Really appealing, with that slightly desiccated berry fruit that one expects of mature Rosé. Very harmonious, with lively acidity, but crucially, generous in texture. Fine length. Impressive.

EA: Yes, very muscular and weighty on the palate, smooth and velvety, long, fruity, and ripe, but still with acidic backbone. A wine with personality.

AR: The Egly-Ouriet also has a lot of character, showing complexity as well as elegance and freshness; attractive, biscuity autolysis on the nose, well-crafted, delicately yeasty fruit, nicely textured and weighted on the palate, with a good, dry finish.

SL: The Egly-Ouriet was interesting, I agree, and stood out for me, along with the Cattier and Philipponnat, as being very individual. I liked the style very much indeed—well-focused, pristine, with persistence.

AR: I also liked the Bruno Paillard, though in quite the opposite style. Attractively perfumed, rich and savory, full-bodied fruitiness with a creamy mousse that's nice and silky on the palate, and a touch of sweetness. It feels very complete and is, to my mind, what a Rosé NV should be like—delicate, balanced, long, and very moreishly drinkable. A benchmark for the less evolved, non-autolytic style.

EA: Powerful and structured on the palate, very masculine with some phenolic attack, ripe and warming. Very much a “made,” modern wine. Red wine drinker's Rosé.

SL: A lovely mousse, certainly, pillowy, soft, and luxuriant, but for me the fruit here is fine, understated, and pure, effortless in style, with lively acidity and good persistence. A pared-back, pristine style of Rosé that shows real class. The Philipponnat was in a fuller style, more forthright and vinous, and I also quite liked it. Again, it was individual and stood out as being different, like the Cattier.

EA: The Philipponnat was cheerful and clean, but did not have very much character or structure for me, and some harshness on the finish.

AR: This was quite characterful for me, a good, commercial style: strawberry fruit sweetness on the palate, though not confected, approachable and pleasantly balanced. The Henriot also showed a touch of approachable strawberryish sweetness on the mid-palate, in an attractive, if not over-complex, style.

SL: Yes, a bit of a crowd-pleaser, soft and flowing, erring on the side of commercial appeal rather than individual character, and this bottle was maybe a little disappointing for a house that has been performing well recently. That said, a more than acceptable example, with pleasing red fruits to the fore. I also had

the Mumm down as something of a crowd-pleaser...

AR: Quite aggressively fizzy, distinctly sweet, full of sound and foam and signifying not quite enough, as the overall impression is simple and rather unsatisfying, especially as the finish is ever so slightly rustic. The Lanson Noble Cuvée had quite a lot of autolytic development, though I did also find it a little rustic and a touch phenolic.

SL: Correct but not particularly characterful. Good acidity and pleasing mousse, but it lacks some fruit expression and purity.

EA: An elegant, feminine style, I thought, and much better than on previous encounters.

SL: Too many were very correct, and ticked all the boxes to get an average score, whereas the Krug was very classy, and stood out for having that breadly, toasty, almost *pâtisserie* character that wasn't present in many of the wines. The ripe acidity really stood out as well—there was nothing edgy about it, and it seemed very complete. Qualitatively, it would stand up well against Grand Cuvée. The Krug is first a great Champagne, and second a Rosé.

AR: A great wine! Intense aromas, with undertones of woodsmoke, vanilla, and spiciness—almost curry-like, cumin. Intense berry fruitiness on the palate—a winery style, for food, with good, biscuity autolysis, smooth texture, and yet still an attractive, balancing, fruit freshness.

EA: Gorgeous, it has everything. Great development in the glass, as well. The nose has some oak influence, complex, stylish, and toasty. A concentrated, dried fruit character, with perfect structure—a rich, silky, vinous texture—perfectly harmonious acidity, and a long, powerful finish.

AR: The ones I liked less were the Piper-Heidsieck, which I thought was phenolic, and the Canard-Duchêne, which was okay, but a little bit dull.

SL: Almost a pear drop note on that...

AR: The Jacquart Mosaïque I wasn't that keen on, either. It had a commercial sweetness, with tart acidity.

SL: One wonders how it might show with higher dosage, because it wasn't lacking in acidity, and it would perhaps be more generous as a result.

EA: It was interesting to see two further camps here—the Pinot-dominated wines and the Chardonnay-dominated wines. The Pinot-dominated, like the Cattier, were for me more successful.

AR: Reserve wines would also feature more in the Cattier and the other more complex styles. They show the benefit of having reserve wines in the NV blend.

EA: Deutz, which we haven't mentioned yet, was also very good—very classical, ripe, balanced, feminine, soft, and silky, very delightful. I also liked very much the elegant and balanced Ayala. I agree that

the Piper-Heidsieck was the wild card in this flight—very atypical for a Champagne, with some rubbery notes at first, though it did improve in the glass. Cattier was really good. Egly-Ouriet was rich, charming, had personality, and was stylish. But for me, Krug was the best.

AR: The ones we liked least are probably the cheapest and most commercial—and so probably the ones that most people are going to buy and be disappointed with, at least if they are looking for charm...

EA: And Rosé Champagne is meant to be charming and romantic. But for some of these producers, their white wine is really better.

SL: It's a shame that Hugh isn't here to put the boot in!

AR: Perhaps you can start the article with Hugh's quote from our last tasting: “It's a complete scam!”

EA: At their best, though, these are serious wines.

AR: Yes, the serious ones were superb and lived up to their names.

**Flight 2
2002 and 2000**

- Perrier-Jouët Belle Epoque Rosé 2002**
- Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Rosé 2002**
- Drappier Grande Sendrée Rosé 2000**
- Jacquart Mosaïque Rosé Brut 2000**
- Philipponnat Cuvée 1522 Rosé 2000**
- Roederer Cristal 2000**

SL: This second flight was slightly up and down, it seemed to me. The Drappier has a bizarre, cardamom, almost minty characteristic on both nose and palate. I wondered where it came from...

EA: I also got cardamom and that minty character, as well as dough—a fascinating nose of unique personality.

AR: I would describe it as idiosyncratic. The minty nose put me off slightly—it was verging on eucalypt, for me—but the minty character was not as strong on the palate. Slightly unripe? Or an earthy, terroir character coming through? Certainly quite an earthy, rustic finish. You could like it...

SL: I kind of did! Very unusual, but nonetheless a fine and appealing Vintage Rosé. Textural, quite vinous, with fine persistence. By contrast, the Belle-Époque is soft, breadly, slightly nutty, and doesn't say too much. You shake your head afterwards and think, “Would I be better off with one of the leading NV wines that we tasted earlier?”

AR: Still youthful on the nose, for me, a tad shy, elemental, quite sweet on the palate, attractive berry fruitiness, good fresh acidity, again still youthful, and yet with an evolved element that could almost be reserve wine if this weren't a Vintage! So it was a bit disjointed, not quite knit together,

but good length and berry fruit flavors.

EA: A mineral, smoky nose of red fruit and toast, but yes, fully closed on the palate still—Chardonnay-dominated and very linear—so needs age. In general, though, the 2000s can be drunk now because it was such a ripe vintage—they are fat and open. On the contrary, I don't know why they released the 2002s so early—well, I can guess why they released the luxury cuvées... With the Comtes de Champagne, the structure was there, but it was still very closed on the palate and there was no autolytic influence. Good fruit, but all the nuances and layers are missing for the moment...

AR: I agree. It was too youthful and elemental to see how it would develop. Still a tad shy on the nose, with a touch of berry perfume, quite generous richness on the palate, raspberry fruitiness with tangy acidity to it, stylish and classic, with a winery, slightly phenolic finish. It needs time to develop a bit more complexity and needs food.

SL: You could nevertheless project some sense of harmony with the Comtes de Champagne, though. Fragrant berry fruit notes on the nose, pure and refined, then much more vinous than anticipated on the palate, with a lively acidity and silky, fine texture. Classic style, with a fine, assertive mousse and well-expressed fruit that captures terrific refinement. Harmonious, with lingering persistent fruit. This was already impressive for me.

AR: Agreed...

SL: I liked the texture, very classic in style.
AR: Classically harmonious, yes, even if it wasn't expressing what it might be like to drink in five years time. I still think that to drink it now would be a crime, and releasing it now, and suggesting to the consumer that it is drinking now, is unfortunate.

SL: Yes, but I suppose we have to ask ourselves how many of these wines are drunk in an appropriate environment by a discerning clientele? So much of it is driven by the commercial imperative, it's all about getting the brand out there.

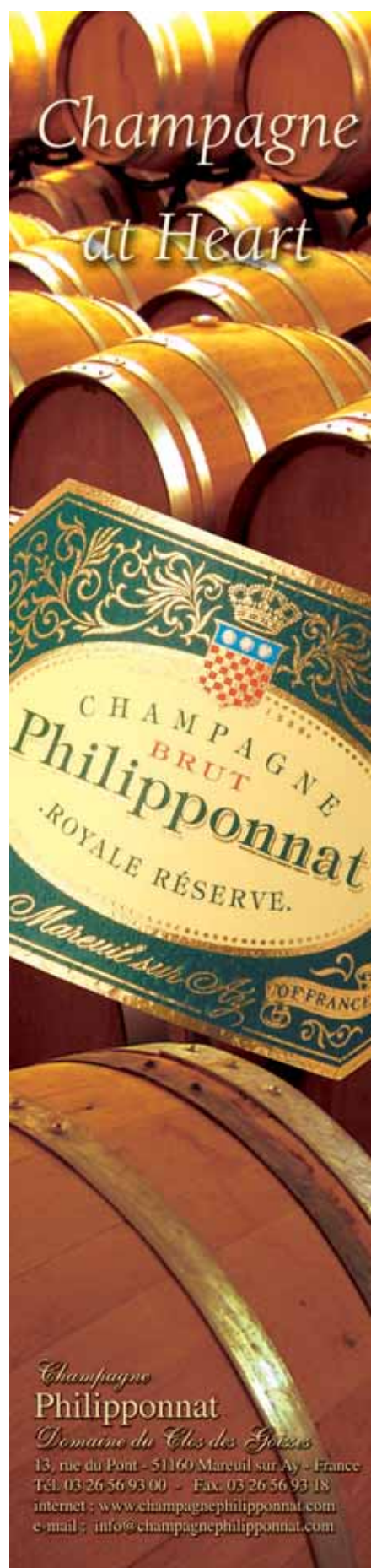
AR: Was it Jay-Z who liked Cristal, or 50-Cent?

SL: I'm impressed by this knowledge!

AR: Well, what's surprising is that while it may have been a rapper's Champagne, nothing could be further from the commercial style. It's pretty extraordinary—so backward, and barely expressing itself at all. Elemental, very fresh on the palate, with a delicate, mouthfilling mousse. A rather unusual style, intense for sure, ethereal, long in the mouth, with lots of depth of flavor, a fine mousse, but still incredibly youthful. It's a very winery Champagne, serious and compelling, but an idiosyncratic beast. I don't think it will drink well for another ten years.

SL: Marginally unconvincing to me—

(per se)



frankly, I just don't get it. The mousse is well-expressed and again a lively acidity persists, but is this a cellarage candidate? There is some class here, but I fail to read the wine. I wrote a really weird note that I'm not sure I want published! I felt all at sea...

AR: Perhaps you need to be a rapper...

EA: I know the wine, so it is not as hard for me to judge it. It's not really Rosé at all. A beautiful, glowing, almost yellow color with orange hues. Stylish, but not very Rosé-like at all on the nose. They make it from very ripe Pinot grapes from one plot, so it's natural skin contact. Waxy, layered, dried fruits, so stylish, rich, and full-bodied on the palate, surprisingly open and enjoyable—because Cristal does usually require long aging to open up—but I agree it will keep for ages. Almost chewy, very ripe fruit, muscular yet with a great acidic back bone, lively non-maloes acidity... For me, the result is fascinating.

SL: Does this justify the price difference between Cristal and Cristal Rosé, though? I'd love to see this evolve, but how much of it will survive for ten years among the customers who drink it?

AR: I thought the Philipponnat was accessible, and better than the NV. I would drink it now. I wasn't so keen on the Jacquart, which had some commercial sweetness.

SL: There was quite a bit of stylistic diversity in this flight. I thought the Philipponnat had quite a bit of acidity for a 2000, with the potential to age a bit. It stood out among the 2000 trio for that. The Drappier was the most unusual. Taittinger was classic. Philipponnat showed really well for a 2000. I put a huge question mark against Cristal.

AR: I wouldn't know where to put the Cristal or the Drappier if I had it blind. Very idiosyncratic wines. Nothing wrong with that, of course—as long as if you pay £350 for an idiosyncratic wine, you actually enjoy it.

Flight 3 1999 and 1998

Bollinger La Grande Année Rosé 1999
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz Rosé 1999
Philipponnat Clos Des Goisses Juste Rosé 1999

Pol Roger Rosé 1999

Gosset Célébris Rosé 1998

Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Rosé 1998

Veuve Clicquot Grande Dame Rosé 1998

AR: These are more consistent in color.

EA: It doesn't surprise me!

AR: This was a consistently good class.

SL: A pretty good batch, yes.

AR: In brief, before we come back to look at our notes: the Deutz, Pol Roger, and

Billecart-Salmon stood out for me in this flight, and the Gosset was also very good. At this sort of age, if they get it right, Rosé Champagne seems to combine the best of the evolved toastiness with a red berry fruitiness that is still almost primary. I love the exceptional toastiness of the Pol Roger—savory and very stylish. The Deutz was very delicate and really lovely, with compelling character. I thought the Billecart-Salmon was fantastic, too, combining toasty nuttiness with a strawberries-and-cream richness. So all of these seemed to suggest that you can actually produce serious, good Rosé Champagne, and perhaps justify an extra premium—depending on how much that premium is. I did think the Bollinger was very good, as well. The Philipponnat was good, though it didn't quite have the substance of the others.

EA: I agree in general that it was a really good flight, showing the houses and their respective styles strongly and well. The Bollinger style doesn't, for me, fit as well into the Rosé style as into the white style, but people who like Bollinger will like this wine. Stylish, ripe, and toasty on the nose, with some deliberate oxidation, then medium-bodied with a smooth mousse on the palate, harmonious and rich. Refreshing acidity, a touch of phenolic bitterness, and a toasty coffee bean character. Very loyal to the house style.

SL: I liked the Bollinger a lot. It fits in with the house style, I agree, it's so Bollinger, with that slightly bruised apple character. The fact that it was a Rosé was almost incidental. They seem to have had a pretty successful vintage in 1999.

AR: Yes. A nice, fresh fragrance, faintly peppery, with a very inviting, subtly complex autolytic character. Very fresh on the palate, good complexity, power, and richness, with nice winey concentration lifted by a lively, fresh mousse and berry fruity character.

EA: The Deutz was elegant and delicate, very stylish. Slightly toasty, ripe, red fruit on the nose, lean on the structure, pure, clean and fruity, but very youthful. Classical and charming, harmonious and delightful.

SL: Bready and doughy on the nose, with pleasing freshness, but again true to the house style in that it has this pared-back pristine quality, but equally an evolved complexity and a sense of breadth. Elegant understated and refined. Lovely persistence, and although it's taut, there's a feminine, silky elegance here. Perhaps I would approach it at a slightly earlier stage. But it's been quite a revelation to taste through the Deutz wines today—they have come through very well.

AR: A lovely nose, very perfumed, with a nutty character and red berry, raspberry and mulberry fruitiness that's seriously compelling. On the palate, lovely, fresh raspberry fruitiness tinged with light

toasty characters, a delicate mousse, and very fresh acidity. Harmonious overall balance and great finesse.

EA: The Clos des Goisses was fascinating, with ripe and elegant fruitiness. The palate was more closed, with some phenolic bitterness, and the alcohol was a bit warming...

AR: A fine, fresh nose, subtle, youthful, and inviting. Nice berry fruit richness on the palate, good weight and freshness, soft and silky-textured, attractively frothy and almost insubstantial, with the emphasis on berry fruit rather than complex autolysis. I agree about the slightly phenolic finish, though.

SL: I also found the Clos des Goisses interesting. The aromas hint at cream and caramel as well as red berry. The structure here is impressive, quite taut, yet the mousse is generous and luxuriant. Full, soft, and inviting, this finishes with a minerally rasp of acidity and terrific lift. It seems young and unevolved. A lively, vinous, finely tuned example, still with the promise of more to come.

EA: Moving on to the last of the 1999s, I thought that Pol Roger have done a fantastic job—a really well made wine, absolute perfection. A beautiful, toasted nose, open and stylish, coffee, toast...the works. Flawless, and starting to drink, even if the palate does not yet express quite as much as the nose. Structured, yet fruity and elegant, with lovely, lemony acidity. A very successful blend. Its price compares favorably with those of the luxury cuvées as well.

SL: The nose is classically Pol, with that restraint and minerally character. Taut, lean, and assertive, there is an underlying richness here that barely peeks through. Very vibrant and lively, with marked, mouthwatering acidity and fine length. Impressive, and lingers well, but lacks some breadth and expression, which one hopes may emerge with time.

AR: A good, intense combination of fine, full-flavored toastiness and red berry fruitiness, just beginning to evolve complex, toasty, savory undertones in a very stylish package.

SL: I found the first of the three 1998s, the Gosset, a little off-putting at present. Odd, slightly cheesy aromas, very autolytic. There was also an evolved, cheesy touch to the palate, as well as a mouthfilling, slightly coarse mousse. There is a hint of aggression here, and one wonders if the acidity is fully ripe. Powerful, rasping, and difficult to assess at its current stage.

AR: I thought it had a delicate, fine, stylish nose, with a nice, toasty touch to it. Rich, dry, and powerfully intense, certainly, with a red fruits quality and a good, clean, pure, fresh blade of acidity, full-flavored and individual. Lightly toasty, slightly firm, with a structured backbone, making it very much a winey, food wine.

EA: I also liked the Gosset. I agree it had a lot of personality. A rich, toasty, dried fruit character on the nose, figs and apricots, and some deliberate oxidation. Great lemony acidity on the palate, though, with non-maloes acidic backbone: structured, vinous, and gastronomic, yes.

SL: I think that the Billecart is by far and away the best Rosé they have produced for some time. The aromas are restrained, with gentle, bready nuances and dried red fruit. A soft, welcoming mousse, quite full, with fine depth and expression. Minerally, fine-tuned and poised, this is impressive, and promises more to come. One could envisage this turning quite biscuity in time. It has a lively vein of acidity and a beautifully understated touch. Lingers wonderfully well.

EA: Pure, restrained, and fruity on the nose. A silky mouthfeel but very youthful still, I agree—even slightly aggressive, perhaps—but stylish, harmonious, and layered. The normal gentleness is missing, but it needs some time. Totally focused winemaking.

AR: A very intense and complex nose—a delicate, nutty toastiness, with lovely, fresh

also lack some expression for me. Perhaps time will tell, as this is built to last, and it is, after all, taut and assertive. A good example, but patience is required to see how these youthful elements knit... Which again raises the question of how long to age some of these wines. Tom Stevenson suggests that most are best within two years of release, as an invariably high Pinot Noir content reduces the acidity and the aging potential. I don't feel confident about when these wines might be at their peak. Very few producers are trading on the Rosé card—the fact that the wine is a Rosé is almost incidental, and being a good Champagne is paramount.

EA: The only 100-point wine—on my scale—that I have ever drunk is Cristal Rosé 1961. It's perfect now. I think that many of these wines do absolutely have the capacity to age. I'm not suggesting that the Deutz, for instance, needs all that long, but it is perfectly harmonious, so why wouldn't it age?

AR: I'm also a bit more optimistic than you are, Simon, and would go up to ten years on most of these wines.

SL: But what happens stylistically to a

“Some of these '98s have a forward character. I would suggest drinking early. The aging potential for Champagne is more dramatic than for other wine styles, and it often moves at quite a pace”
Simon Larkin MW

fruit. Very inviting on the palate, a delicate, persistent mousse providing a strawberries and cream-rich texture, while a savory/toasty element adds a dimension of style and character. Very stylish and fine.

EA: I found that the Grande Dame had a reduced, rubbery nose at first, very youthful, tight, and concentrated, but still very closed, without much autolysis character. Full and rich, but still far too youthful, and at a difficult stage. Searing acidity and some aggression.

AR: I agree that this was rather rustic by comparison with the rest of the group, a bit four-square, the tart acidity slightly disjointed and altogether lacking in comparative complexity and style. But I think our first bottle may have been slightly corked. The second bottle was fresher, with better strawberry fruits character on the palate, but still a tad phenolic and rustic.

SL: The palate of the second bottle is rich, bold, with a wealth of red fruits. Quite luxuriant on the palate, with a pillowy, soft mousse. Quite full and vinous, a rich wine that hints towards ostentation, but does

Rosé when you age it, in terms of what you actually get in the glass?

AR: Pinot actually goes toasty, which I find very attractive. I don't see why some Champagne writers think that because Pinot has less acidity it should be a problem for aging. If a wine is balanced, I would give it ten years, without too much of a problem.

SL: If you back blend Pinot into a white wine, it will proportionally have less acidity, I suppose...

EA: A Rosé doesn't necessarily have more Pinot. Taittinger, for instance, is not a house renowned for its ageing potential, but one of the best Rosés I've tasted was the Comtes de Champagne '71—fabulous!

SL: I'm just not sure where some of these are going. Harmony alone is not a precursor for aging wine. It needs backbone, too. Some of these 1998s have a forward character, and I just don't see any great aging potential. If I was advising a client, I would suggest drinking early. I think the aging curve for Champagne is more dramatic than for some other wine styles, and it often moves on at quite a pace.

(per se)

EA: We need to taste a lot of old Rosés!

AR: We can come back in ten years time...

SL: Happily! But 1990 Rosés ten years on? A lot of consumers think, "It's a Vintage Champagne, so I should age it," whereas perhaps they should be thinking, "It's a Vintage Champagne, but I need to get on and drink it!"

AR: They associate Vintage with longevity and other styles of wine that need aging—that's certainly true on the whole.

**Flight 4
1997 and 1996**

Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle Cuvée Alexandra Rosé 1997
Deutz Cuvée William Deutz Rosé 1996
Pommery Cuvée Louise Rosé 1996
Dom Ruinart Rosé 1996
Dom Pérignon Rosé 1996

SL: The first wine in this flight, the Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle Alexandra Rosé, certainly seemed appropriate for drinking now, as it is slightly soft in terms of acidity. But I was impressed. A delicate style, a pleasing, persistent mousse, a lovely sense of ripeness, with hints of red fruit, and an understated, refined nature.

potential and structure are there, but...

AR: I also found this less expressive than we might have expected—still youthful, with a fresh fruit quality, a firm structure of clean acidity, and slightly phenolic tannins. Sound and quite attractive, but rather lacking in complexity at this stage. I was marginally disappointed, but I accept that it might still flower and blossom into something exceptional.

SL: I've used many of the same words. More breadly and toasty than many of the wines tasted so far, with a soft mousse and some chappy, toasty qualities. But it seems simple and inexpressive—almost harsh, I agree—so a disappointment at its current age. Almost certainly too young.

EA: The Dom Pérignon was more accessible and open when I tasted it previously, and I gave it a few more points then. Palish salmon color. A ripe Pinot Noir nose, with delicate toastiness, minerally and tight, yet long and structured, with searing, linear acidity.

AR: Delicately perfumed, very fresh and fruity, without the self-evident evolution or toasty complexity of the 1996 Dom Pérignon. Good fruit intensity in a youthful, firm-backbone style, smoothly, creamily textured but also showing the firmness of the vintage.

EA: The best in show, for me, was the Deutz, with the great structure and texture typical of the '96 vintage. A very stylish, ripe, but elegant wine. A great, nuanced nose, with very subtle and integrated aromas—toast, dried fruits, coffee. Great acid structure, very silky texture, long, vinous, and charming, with delicate, stylish spiciness. Seductive...

AR: Easily my favorite of the four was the Deutz. It was delicious, drinking beautifully now, but I would give it another five years or even longer. A fine nose, subtle yet intense, very fresh, but with lovely, delicate toastiness of evolution. Very fresh on the palate, too, with marked, almost tangy acidity and good, firm backbone to it, suffused with fine, red berry fruit flavors, mulberry and loganberry, and fine, long, stylish finish. Class!

SL: This again shows the understated, leaner qualities of Deutz. There are evolved aromas here, autolytic and yeasty. But there's far more life on the palate, with more vibrancy to the acidity and still the suggestion of breadth. Still young, with a rasp of acidity on the finish. Barely suggestive of Rosé, but very harmonious, taut, and expressive at the same time. It lingers well, too. Drinking now, but would hold over the next 5 years and more.

Conclusion

SL: After tasting these 30 wines, I still don't think that you can tell the difference between an *assemblage* and a *saignée* Rosé. It's impossible to tell in purely qualitative terms.

EA: I don't think that Rosés are marketed as better Champagnes than the whites.

SL: But they still charge a premium!

EA: It's just trendier.

SL: They justify it partly by scale of production. You get offered a decent allocation of the white Champagne and then five cases of the Rosé as if you're lucky! It's all slightly under the counter: "We don't have enough to publicize it, but specially for you..."

AR: Scarcity of supply is clearly used as a marketing point. Is it justified? I don't really think it is.

SL: Think of the kind of notes you see: "Just 750 cases produced..." It's all so tedious, and a flimsy pretext for a price increase.

AR: It boils down to it being a case of the scarcer and more expensive it is, the more you want it. ■

"The best in show, for me, was the Deutz, with the great structure and texture typical of the '96 vintage. A very stylish, ripe, but elegant wine. Long, vinous, and charming, with delicate spiciness. Seductive"
Essi Avellan MW

AR: Very stylish, yes. The bouquet displays toasty notes of evolution and a hint of bacon fat, while the palate seamlessly combines ripe red fruits in a soft-textured cushion of bubbles, steering the wine's elegantly mouthfilling fruitiness to a satisfyingly dry finish.

EA: I also liked this very much, while the 1996s, by contrast, were surprisingly disappointing for such a terrific vintage, and one that showed so well when we were looking at the Prestige Cuvées. We were unlucky in that both bottles of the Pommery were corked...

AR: Underneath, the Pommery appears to have very good aromatic complexity and good fruit and structure, so a real shame to come across two corked bottles.

EA: Both the Ruinart and the Dom Pérignon are far too young. The Ruinart 1990 was fabulous last time. This 1996 is minerally, smoky, and fairly toasty, with red fruit nuances, elegant and restrained, but very youthful still, harsh, and needs time. The

SL: Absolutely, the minerally acidity is very much in tune with the vintage, quite rasping and taut. This bottle of Dom Pérignon actually showed better than when I last tasted it, but this is still comparatively inexpressive aromatically. The palate shows fine evolution, quite soft and gentle in nature, a pillowy mousse, with some mineral qualities and evolved, desiccated berry fruit. Very much in an understated mold. Impressive, and clearly a cut above, as it is more sophisticated. But again one wonders where this is going and what its potential might be for ageing? Will it become more appealing than this? I'm still undecided. I like it as a wine, but I don't know if it deserves more cellaring—or its price tag.

AR: At the Fat Duck launch of the 1996 vintage that I attended, Richard Geoffroy showed some older Dom Pérignon Rosé vintages, which were pretty amazing, actually, and which showed that this wine needs an awful lot of time.

P O M M E R Y



**Complete your collection of
The World of Fine Wine.**

**Please fill out the coupon in this issue
(p.16) or use the back-issue ordering
facility at www.finewinemag.com**