

CHAMPAGNE

TWO DAYS IN CHAMPAGNE

It's the luxury drink par excellence: whether to make a show, celebrate a deal or seal a romance, it's the one French wine for which there is no real substitute. The photographer Colin Hampden-White embarked on a whirlwind tour to photograph the key players in contemporary champagne: over the next few pages we present his photography and reflections on his trip



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Arriving in Reims is particularly un-awe inspiring. Its architecture is neither grand nor picturesque so luckily we were to visit historic Taittinger first thing the following morning. It isn't the external architecture which is the star of the show at Taittinger - it is the cellars. Dating back to the 4th century, it boasts Roman cellars which at one time belonged to the Benedictine monks of the abbey of St Nicaise. Its miles of tunnels and cellars are very deep and perfect for the slow ageing process involved in making this great champagne.

Taittinger is very much a family business, run by **Pierre Emanuel Taittinger**, his son Clovis and daughter Vitalie. Having photographed Pierre Emanuel and Vitalie, we settled down with a bottle of their prestige cuvée Comtes de Champagne 1998. What a wonderful wine, aged for at least ten years, it's easy to drink despite being made to last. It's smooth and creamy with plenty of depth. Sweetness from honey notes underlying a small amount of brioche, topped off with light floral flavours.

From the cellars in the centre of Reims we travelled south to the tiny village of Le Mesnil sur Oger. It's an unassuming place as is the building we visited but appearances deceive. This is the home of Salon, known to extreme connoisseurs as perhaps the greatest luxury champagne in the world.

There we met **Didier Depond**, the MD, who is a quiet and understated man, very warm and welcoming. Didier showed us around Salon which, in complete contrast to Taittinger, is very small. They only produce champagne in the very best vintages, of which there have only been 33 since 1921.

I photographed Didier standing in the middle of his circular tasting table with a fabulous modern chandelier above him reflecting off the ceiling like little bubbles. Then he cracked open a bottle of their current vintage - 1999



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- which is full of power balanced with finesse. This wine is still so young it's not really ready yet with its high acidity and tannins but plenty of fruit to balance. Made with 100% chardonnay from the neighbouring vineyards, this is one to lay down: Salon insiders say the 1976 and 1985 are drinking very well now.

Jacques Selosse was a complete contrast. Unique in Champagne, Jacques is a grower who produces an oxidative-style wine using only his own grapes. Although his beautiful home is now a luxury hotel, his winery is very simple with a tiny production in comparison to the likes of Taittinger and Veuve Clicquot. We tasted his VO (Version Originale) and his 1999 vintage. Extremely rich with tons of brioche and caramel, the fruit is very oxidative - almost sherryish - but the acidity manages to balance out these huge flavours giving the wine finesse and poise.

What can one really say about Krug that hasn't already been written? It never fails to impress; such complexity from a non-vintage champagne is remarkable. And the vintage versions, although very different and more opulent still have

01. Looking through the vineyards to Avize

02. The 1997 vintage in Salon's cellar in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger

03. Grapes left on the vine after the harvest



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that typical Krug style. **Olivier Krug** arrived with Eric Lebel the cellar master, and, almost as importantly, a bottle. Olivier described their special family tradition: when a new member of the Krug clan is born, the father dips his finger into a glass of Krug and touches it to the baby's lips so that Krug is the first thing the new-born tastes. Apparently, this is how the winemaking skills are passed down through the family generations (the family still makes the wine, although the brand is owned by LVMH). It certainly makes babies happy.

Our next appointment was on the south side of town with **Dominique Demarville** at Veuve Clicquot. Having photographed him at Mme Clicquot's desk, we settled down to another fine tasting ranging from the very drinkable NV to the current excellent vintage 2002, which will last and last. It's so fresh, with plenty of acidity balanced by a depth and complexity which, although a little hidden at the moment, will certainly show in time, in true Veuve style. These are champagnes that taste fresh and simple initially, and need years to show their true colours.

The next morning on this grand tour, we arrived at Ruinart, another venerable maison, to see **Frédéric Panaiotis**. He's only been cellar master for a few years and is a breath of fresh air. Young, relaxed and not at all camera-shy, I photographed him in the main dining room which has just been refurbished.

The ceiling lights form a halo and the vaulted shape of the room reflects the cellars below. Tasting the variations of Ruinart is always such a pleasure because they are so diverse - from the very quaffable Blanc de Blancs and fruity, balanced rosé to the complexity of the Dom Ruinart 1998, another all-chardonnay champagne.

Later, we visited **Louis Roederer**, another legendary name and photographed Frédéric Rouzaud, the MD, in his home. Rouzaud makes not only Roederer but its super-luxury brand Cristal and is the man who caused a brouha in the wider world when he appeared to disapprove of rappers endorsing the super-premium drink in 2006. (The ultimate result was Jay-Z distancing himself from the brand and being associated with the launch of another champagne, Arnand de Brignac's 'Ace of Spades').

- 01. Cuis village church near Epernay
- 02. Pierre Emmanuel & Vitale Taittinger, Taittinger
- 03. Didier Depond, Salon
- 04. Dominique Demarville, Veuve Clicquot
- 05. Frédéric Panaiotis, Ruinart
- 06. Olivier Krug, Krug
- 07. Frédéric Rouzaud, Roederer
- 08. Michel Fauconnet, Laurent Perrier
- 09. Hubert de Billy, Pol Roger
- 10. Richard Geoffroy, Dom Pérignon

Rouzaud's house is a complete contrast to the plain exteriors of much of Reims. Sitting behind a very tall wall surrounded by beautiful gardens the house oozes elegance without a hint of pretentiousness. Exquisite dining rooms and numerous sitting rooms lead off a central square marble hallway. The portrait I took was on the steps of the house with the lens wrapped in the iconic orange cellophane of Cristal (which prevents UV contamination of the wine).

Early next morning, we met with Michel Fauconnet at Laurent Perrier. Laurent Perrier is set amongst extensive gardens in Tours-sur-Marne and for the last twenty years they have shown a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Photographed in the gardens, **Michel Fauconnet** talked about the 2011 vintage: although the flowering came so early, suggesting an early harvest, this was followed by a poor July and August, but the sun shone enough to ripen the grapes, the harvest was successful and the vintage looks to be good.

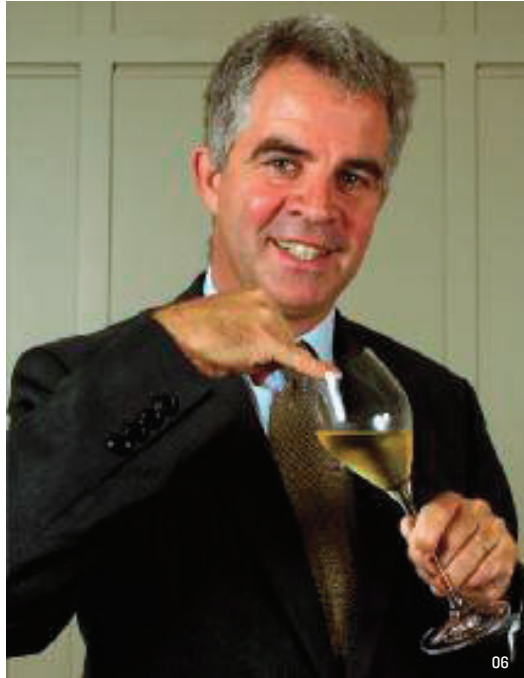
The next day we made a trip to Pol Roger in Epernay. Once there, we were ushered into a little piece of Britain. A small "snug" living room filled with all things British including a bust of Sir Winston Churchill on the mantelpiece. Churchill was a famed Pol drinker and has the company's prestige cuvée named after him. Director **Hubert de Billy**, like Sir Winston, is larger than life but has an incredibly jolly demeanour. Whilst we photographed him he talked about his wines and especially about his 2002 rosé of which he is deservedly proud. It has very good fruit and with no dosage (the sugar added at disgorging when the cork is inserted), it is a very fresh and racy wine which has been made to last a very long time.

For our final meeting we returned to Champagne to visit **Richard Geoffroy** at uber-brand Dom Pérignon. Geoffroy had returned that same morning from the Formula 1 racing in Abu Dhabi to be photographed by us.

We met him at the church in Hautvillers where Dom Pérignon himself is buried. Photographed in front of the altar, hands clasped in reverence, Richard Geoffroy described the differences between the regular, but still fabulous vintage champagne with the oenotheque version. The current oenotheque vintage is the 1996: it is incredibly deep and rich, waves of flavours hit your palate from brioche, caramel, and digestive biscuits to floral notes and honey. (We made up for our flying visit by tasting the wine again the next day at Farr Vintners' tasting at Vintners Hall, London.)

All in all it was an amazing trip even if Reims and Epernay are modest as places to visit, it just means that one focuses on the stars of the show, the wonderful wines and the fascinating people who make them.

Colin Hampden-White's portraits of the Greatest Winemakers in Champagne will be exhibited at The Rebecca Hossack Gallery, from the 16th - 28th of April 2012 r-h-g.co.uk



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