

(Preview)

W I N E S

Pol Roger 2002: Cumulative excellence

Michael Edwards reports from the launch of Pol Roger's 2002 Vintage, held in the wartime base of the Champagne house's most celebrated fan, Winston Churchill

At Pol Roger, they have always taken a particular pride in their Vintages. In the late 1930s, Pol Roger was the number-one Champagne in the United Kingdom; remarkably, the house's shipments here were almost exclusively Vintage, as war with Germany loomed. After the Munich crisis in May 1938, Major-General Sir Hastings Ismay, secretary of the Imperial Defence Committee, was instructed to create a central war room. His team adapted the basement of the newest and strongest building in Whitehall, on Clive Steps. The war rooms opened on August 27, 1939, a week before war broke out. They



were not once hit during the Blitz or the rocket raids of 1944/45.

Sixty-seven years later, the warren of rooms exudes the atmosphere of conflict in the spartan bedrooms of Winston Churchill, a lifelong devotee of Pol Roger, and of his colorful minister of information, Brendan Bracken—Irish adventurer, Tory politician, and the model, it's said, for George Orwell's Big Brother in *Ninety Eighty-Four*. Winston's dining room is captivating,

as simple as a monk's cell but with the little comforts befitting a great man—whisky decanter, tumbler, wine goblet, and, of course, a large ashtray.

Our evening there was meticulously orchestrated by Berry Bros & Rudd, St James's venerable wine merchants, who took us on a journey of cumulative sparkling excellence—from the ever-delicious Brut Réserve, through five vintages from 1996 up to the star of the night, the recently launched 2002, a year that was to meet all expectations. What is it that makes Pol Roger so special, as much for wine lovers from Manhattan to Melbourne, as for professional tasters reviewing this most nuanced and subtle of Champagnes?

As with most exceptional things, the answer is quite simple. Great care is taken over the choice of growers and the grapes. Credit for this must go to the much-loved Christian de Billy, the head of the house until his semi-retirement in 1999. In the '50s and '60s, de Billy had steadily acquired fine but unsung vineyards in the Côte d'Épernay, especially the Cubry Valley in Pierry and in Moussy, home to distinctive Chardonnay and Meunier in a fascinating transitional terrain that lies between the Côte des Blancs and the Marne Valley. With the appointment of



the dynamic Burgundian Patrice Noyelle as managing director, a fine parcel of grand cru Avize soon followed. Just recently, Pol's landholdings in Champagne increased with a further 3.5ha (8.5 acres) in Cuis, Chavot, and Pierry. These acquisitions, along with key contracts on the Montagne and the Côte, are an insuring necessity as more

and more growers now make their own Champagnes. Noyelle's main legacy is certain to be the restored, state-of-the-art winery on the Avenue de Champagne in Epernay, "making," as he says, "selection more precise." The other central winemaking procedure is the radical *débourbage à froid* (cold-settling) technique, in which the

grape must is chilled down to 43°F (6°C) for 48 hours. This eliminates the coarser lees (harboring oxidative elements) and contributes to the Pol Roger style of freshness, finesse, and long life. Their Vintage is also as excellent as it is because of the great depth (110ft [33m]) of Pol's Epernay cellar, where it is aged before shipment.

The Tasting

Pol Roger Réserve Brut (en magnum)

Classic *assemblage*: 33% Pinot Noir / 34% Chardonnay / 33% Pinot Meunier. Thirty-five still base wines plus reserve wines, from exemplary villages: e.g. Ambonnay, Verzenay, Verzy, (PN); Cuis, Chouilly, Oger (CH); Damery, Pierry (PM). *Dosage* 10g/l. Aromas of white flowers, crisp apples, touch of brioche, flick of minerals. Lace-like mouthfeel, orchard fruits, lightly honeyed and nutty. Never better. 17.5

Pol Roger 2000

Regular 60:40 blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. A year that has turned out far better than feared; fine warm weather throughout the vintage saved the day. The acidity is moderate (7.6g/l) but ripeness and phenolic maturity are exemplary (10% natural ABV). Perfect for drinking in 2012: hedonistic, but still with definition and finesse. 17+

Pol Roger 1999 (Magnum)

Challenging vintage needing great care in selection. Topsy-turvy growing season of much warmth and intervening storms. Harvest started well on September 19, but heavy rain in the second half caused some dilution and one of the lowest acidity levels ever (6.3g/l). Vital to pick early, as Pol did; an honorable result in magnums, fresh and fine. 16

Pol Roger 1998

Roller-coaster year with elements of greatness shaped by great heat in August and timely rain in September. Rigorous selection of the grapes was essential. I love this wine: cleansing acidity and explosive fruit in exciting balance; there's still power in the engine until 2016. 18

Pol Roger 1996

Difficult call. At first, '96 was globally hailed as an outstanding vintage. As it matures, the experts differ. Some praise its flavor intensity,

and unrivaled capacity to age; others, like me, think that for classic balance the acidity is just too high, something it will never lose, in a lot of cases. Pol Vintage, as always, is better than most, though the flavors of sour cherry today suggest a battle is still raging between the acids and the fruit. Best for Pinot Noir, as in the outstanding Cuvée Sir Winston. 17

Pol Roger 2002

No reservations or caveats here. This is the best Pol Vintage I've tasted since the magnificent 1982. A wine as great as this is difficult to describe adequately. No single, especially marked characteristic, just every element—fruit, extract, acidity, texture, vinosity—together making a complete whole; the harvest was ideal, warm throughout but not too hot. Still a very youthful Champagne, with 20 years of life ahead; and so much in reserve, thanks to the inspired non-oxidative winemaking. Exquisite. 19.5



WINE CHAMPAGNE

THE TASTE OF HISTORY

*Elegant Pol Roger champagne is a long-established favourite on our shores – lucky **MARK HEDLEY** samples its wonderful 2002 vintage*



AS JANCIS HAPPILY reports [see left], English wine continues to grow from strength to strength. And it's always nice to hear about a Sussex sparkler trumping the Frenchies in a blind tasting now and again.

But in all honesty, it's hard to find one that can take on the purity of Pol Roger – especially its elegant 2002 vintage, released last month. So it's probably just as well we can call Pol one of our own (sort of). You see if it wasn't for the British, the brand wouldn't necessarily exist.

Although the house had been making wine since 1849, it was the burgeoning horde of British devotees who convinced Monsieur Roger to bottle under his own name. By 1878, the brand new Pol Roger cuvée finally made its way to British shores – and we've had difficulty letting go of it ever since.

Great British hero (and heroic drinker) Winston Churchill adopted it as his house champagne, famously declaring: "In defeat I need it, in victory I deserve it." And it was the magnum of choice at Will and Kate's shindig last April. The prince should be kicking himself that he didn't hold off for a year – as the 2002 would have been well worth the wait.

Only producing a vintage when the growth warrants (this is the first time since 1998), Pol Roger has allowed its 2002 nine years of

cellarage before it was deemed ready – holding on for longer than many of the larger houses.

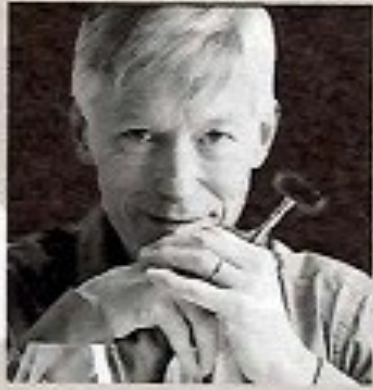
The 2002 comprises the house's trademark blend of 60% pinot noir and 40% chardonnay from 20 grands and premiers crus vineyards in the Montagne de Reims and the Côte des Blancs. The result is a rich, creamy champagne, the perfect drinking partner to smoked salmon, as I discovered at a launch dinner in Berry Bros & Rudd. Which, by the way, has to be one the most charming places to host a corporate dinner in London.

In fact, the 2002 held its own on all three courses – even against a superb guinea fowl with truffle brioche. Indeed, if Churchill could've got his hands on a bottle, it would've worked well for breakfast, lunch *and* dinner. ■
Pol Roger 2002; £65; Berry Bros & Rudd; BBR.COM

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It was the horde of British devotees who convinced Pol Roger to bottle under his name





BOB TYRER ON THE BOTTLE

When I had a hole drilled in my jaw for a tooth implant last month, the dentist told me to lay off alcohol for four days while the antibiotics did their work. I felt so virtuous after the four days that I kept going. But on my way to work on the seventh day, the phone rang with the news that Marie Colvin had been killed. That evening, the corkscrew came out again.

Marie would have been thrilled by the vast amount of booze sunk in her honour by her friends over the past four weeks. Envious, too. My personal contribution has been relatively modest — but with memorable moments. On the evening of her death, I opened a treasured wine made by Vanya Cullen, a woman as well known in her trade as Marie was in hers — and for the same reason: she combines an open-hearted modesty with extreme skill and perfectionism. I think Marie would have adored both Vanya and her heart-liftingly fresh and spicy Diana Madeleine Cabernet-Merlot 2001 (the 2009 is £54.50 from winedirect.co.uk).

She would also have revelled in another highlight: a glamorous journey in a fleet of Jaguar XKRs to Epernay, in Champagne, by invitation of Pol Roger to taste its 2002 vintage. Her war reporting was far removed from PR jollies, but she had the *joie de vivre* to have embraced this one. All the champagne-makers are proud of their 2002s, an outstanding year. Pol Roger's, which will cost £60-ish when it reaches the market next month, is minerally and restrained and will probably blossom fully in 10 years' time, when I hope I'll be able to afford a bottle in Marie's memory.



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2002 Pol Roger in the Cabinet War Rooms

Author: [Chris Pollington](#)



The 8th March saw Berrys host the UK launch of the great 2002 vintage for [Pol Roger](#) at the Cabinet War Rooms in

London. Tickets to the event were sadly limited by the venue's size, but we were joined by 100 of our Cellar Plan customers who were the quickest to reply to our e-mail about the event a few weeks earlier.

The venue had been picked by us and Pol Roger UK, because Churchill was such a fan of Pol Roger's Champagnes. In 1940, shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Churchill stood in the War Cabinet Room and declared: 'This is the room from which I will direct the war'. The evening started with a tour of the museum which gives a fascinating insight into the nerve centre of wartime operations from London. The Cabinet War Rooms includes the Churchill Museum, which gives a deeper insight into Churchill's life and work.

This was followed by an informal walk-around tasting of the last four releases of Pol Roger's vintage Champagne: 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2000, served with canapes. The four tables were manned by members of the Berrys' Cellar Plan Team, Simon Field MW – BBR Champagne Buyer, Alun Griffiths MW, Edwin Dublin – BBR London shop Assistant Manager (and winner of the Grand Prix de Jury prize at the CIVC Champagne Ambassador Competition 2011) and representatives from Pol Roger UK, as well as Patrice de Noyelle – President du Directoire of Pol Roger.



1996 was heralded as the last great vintage before the 2002 and the best bottles were showing great power and depth, along with plenty of maturity. There was a bit of bottle variation however, leading us, and most there, to conclude that this great Champagne's life is drawing to a close, but when it's still good, it is very good.

Chronologically, the 1998 came next, but was probably the best of these four. The 1998 is now coming to its own, having been in the shadow of the 1996 for many years. Amazing depth, personality, class and definition were on show from this much more consistent vintage. If you have some of this in your reserves, it is drinking beautifully now, but there is no hurry to drink it up.



The 1999 slipped down very easily, being the most supple and easy drinking of the four vintages, notes of soft fruits and roasted nuts combine with a honeyed finish, this really is showing very well now.

The 2000 is surprisingly forward and powerful, with notes of brioche toast and honey, rounded out with a creamy finish, again, drinking very well now.

Once everyone had had plenty of time to taste these four, it was time for

the main event, signalled by a stirring sounding of a genuine 1940's air-raid siren expertly wielded by Phil Reed OBE, Director of the Museum. This heralded in suitable and triumphant fashion the serving of the 2002 in the Switch Room!

This was no anti-climax, the [2002](#) is a magnificent Champagne and undoubtedly wine of the night. To do the wine justice, I will borrow the elegant prose of our eloquent Champagne Buyer, Simon Field MW: "Beyond the impressive colour, the 2002 is, quite naturally, still relatively restrained on the nose, with whispers of gunflint, acacia and orchard fruit evidenced; the palate is magnificently poised, with a nascent honied richness deferential to the power and ripeness of the vintage, but very fine stony acidity holding it together in a tight and adamant structure. The finish is clean and pure, amazingly refreshing for its age, elegantly tapered and very long. Finely poised and full of potential, this really is a great vintage Champagne which will age extremely well."

While the 2002 flowed, Patrice Noyelle gave us a fascinating insight into the making of Pol Roger Champagne and the 2002 vintage in particular, rounding off a highly enjoyable evening, leaving us feeling that "this was their finest hour"

Churchill images courtesy of [Imperial War Museums website](#)

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WINE & SPIRIT MERCHANTS

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