

THE RECENT HISTORY of Champagne can be summarized thusly: The big get bigger and the small get street cred. The marquee brands are increasingly coming under consolidated ownership—you could be forgiven for thinking that luxury brand group LVMHMC.FR -0.25% owns all of them—even as the small-grower Champagnes, very few of which were available on these shores five years ago (more about these next month), have become the darlings of critics and sommeliers.

Somewhere in the middle are a handful of venerable family-owned brands, including two of my favorites, Bollinger and Pol Roger, MLPOL.FR +0.63% both of which have long been immensely popular in Great Britain, where Champagne is—quite correctly, I feel—viewed as more of a necessity than a luxury.

One of the smallest of the famous brands, which has remained in the hands of the same family since its founding in 1849, Pol Roger has attracted a devoted following. This group included Winston Churchill, who declared family member Odette Pol-Roger's home, at 44 Avenue de Champagne in Épernay, France, "the world's most drinkable address."

"I cannot live without Champagne," Churchill once said, and named Pol Roger as his favorite. He became close with the family and, after his death, the company created a luxury cuvée in his honor. Made only in exceptional years—the first vintage was 1975—the Pinot Noir-heavy cuvée is richer and more powerful than Pol Roger's regular vintage bottling, and merits comparison with the best. Sometimes I almost prefer the intricately subtle vintage Blanc de Blancs, made from 100% Chardonnay, especially in its youth.

Touring the 4-plus-mile maze of cellars underneath the streets of Épernay with Pol Roger's general manager, Laurent d'Harcourt, I experienced firsthand one of the alleged secrets of Pol Roger's success: The cellars are deeper than those of their neighbors—more than 100 feet underground—which makes them as much as a degree and a half (Fahrenheit) cooler than most, and prolongs the fermentation and maturation process.

Another factor in the quality of Pol Roger wines is the collective family palate, represented by Pol Roger descendants Christian Pol-Roger; his cousin, Christian de Billy; and the latter's son, Hubert de Billy. Although the winemaker Dominique Petit, formerly of Krug Champagne, vinifies more than 30 different lots from Pol Roger's own 200-plus acres of vineyards and purchased grapes, the decision on the final blend is made by family members.

The jovial, gregarious Hubert de Billy, 51, great-great grandson of Pol Roger, is the latest incarnation of the family palate. I caught him on a layover between planes in Paris the day before I visited Épernay. He recalled that I'd told him when we first met, two years ago, that the 1914 Pol Roger was the greatest Champagne I'd ever tasted. "It's probably my favorite as well," he said.



POL ROGER *Depuis 1849, excellence et indépendance*

The vintage was distinguished by a combination of perfect weather and historical catastrophe: World War I had just broken out in August, and when it came time to harvest, most able-bodied men had gone off to war. "The grapes were picked by women and children," Mr. de Billy told me. He added that his grandfather, Maurice Pol-Roger, the mayor of Épernay at the time, was the only official to stay on after the Germans occupied the town. He remained in the face of a threat of execution.

After the war, Maurice, an avid hunter and sportsman, forged close ties with members of the British aristocracy—a continuing association highlighted by the selection of Pol Roger as the official bubbly of Kate Middleton and Prince William's wedding two years ago.

