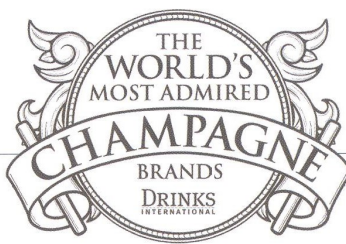


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MOST ADMIRED CHAMPAGNE DRINKSINT.COM



3 POL ROGER

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To be sandwiched between Louis Roederer and Bollinger in third slot, after this year's Most Admired Champagne Brands votes have been counted, will no doubt bring a smile to former Pol Roger boss Patrice Noyelle. These were, after all, the two brands he set his sights on to match, both in terms of the retail price of their wines and their overall image. This result suggests Pol Roger is right on track.

In the 15 years from 1998 Noyelle ran the company for the Pol Roger family, he made a number of changes aimed at improving both the company's business and the quality of wine it produced. Even before his first year ended he had changed winemakers, bringing in Dominique Petit, who had spent the 24 previous years working at Krug. Nearly 10 years ago, Noyelle also decided Pol would stop using any *taille* for any of its wines and that was, he said, another significant step forward in wine quality.

This change followed the decision in 2002 to reduce the dosage in the house's flagship Brut Réserve NV from 12gm/l to 9gm/l. However, while he wasn't afraid to make innovative changes, useful traditions were not abandoned. So Pol Roger has never switched to mechanised riddling in its famously deep – 33m down – cellars in Epernay. All the company's wine, some 1.8m bottles, are still turned, shaken and twisted by hand. Noyelle was convinced of its importance as an influence on quality and probably also aware of the PR benefits that sticking with tradition might bestow on the brand he wanted to take to the



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top of the pile.

Business-wise, faced with the post Lehmann Brothers recession from late 2008, Noyelle didn't panic when sales halved and sensibly eschewed the opportunities to keep sales up by discounting. He was aware that it is much easier to move a champagne's price down than to move it up again when the market picked up. And this helped in the repositioning of the brand against its peers as some houses with larger productions felt the necessity to cut prices to keep their volume.

As revenue at Pol Roger increased, Noyelle saw the importance of reinvesting in the business. The winemaking facilities were renovated and enlarged in an extensive overhaul completed at the start of 2012, giving winemaker

Petit state-of-the-art tools to make further improvements to the range. And Noyelle worked hard at increasing the quality of Pol Roger's bought-in grape supplies, looking at every opportunity to pick up new contracts, particularly for grands and premiers crus material, aware that securing supply was going to become ever more important in Champagne.

He also used his considerable charm to build contacts among the vigneronns so he heard about any interesting parcels coming up for sale. And with various small purchases and 5ha added this current decade, he helped build the company's vineyards to 90ha – more than half what it needs to produce the current 1.8m bottles and helping towards the aim of becoming a 2m-bottle business. Still considerably smaller than either Bollinger or Roederer.

Noyelle was also responsible for building Pol Roger's export markets in places other than the UK, where it has always held a strong position and reputation, particularly for its vintage wines. Spreading the risk meant the company was much less likely to be hit by a downturn in

just one or two markets. Today exports account for more than 80% of the company's turnover.

It was also under Noyelle's reign that Pol Roger got its coveted Royal Warrant back at the end of December 2003. This opened the way to supplying the champagne for the wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton. Famously when that order came through for 75cl bottles, Noyelle insisted on changing it for the equivalent number of magnums. The beneficial effect on Pol Roger's sales and image of being the chosen wine for this event has been considerable globally.

One of his final astute moves was to find and train in the company's ways his successor. He poached Laurent d'Harcourt from the Paillard operation and d'Harcourt started working with Noyelle on the export side of the business in January 2006. When Noyelle retired, a smooth transition was assured and d'Harcourt has been quietly getting on with things since he officially took over the reins back in June 2013. The success in this year's voting shows that his hard work in continuing the quiet revolution at Pol is being recognised.