



Pol Roger Cuvée
Sir Winston Churchill 1975–2004:
Champagne's Churchillian Tones

Tim Hall reports from what may have been the first, and may be the last, complete vertical of one of Champagne's rarest prestige cuvées

For most collectors and most wines with a history stretching back several decades, a complete vertical would be nothing more than a dream. But last November 5, Bonfire Night, in London, one very committed collector made the dream come true with what we believe to have been the first full vertical of Pol Roger's Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill. Vinous fireworks indeed. Hubert de Billy, the family spokesman for Pol Roger, told me in Épernay prior to the event that he thought such a tasting would be unlikely to happen again.

Pol Roger launched its deluxe flagship at Churchill's birthplace Blenheim Palace in 1984, with the 1975 vintage, in commemorative homage to his love of its wines, and it remains the only prestige cuvée Champagne named after a foreigner. That first Cuvée Sir Winston was made only in magnum and sold only in the UK; standard bottles, and sales to the USA and elsewhere, came only from the 1979 vintage on. So far, only 15 vintages have been released over four decades, reflecting admirable Pol Roger fastidiousness. Each declared vintage numbers only 25,000–50,000 bottles—a tiny quantity by comparison with most other deluxe Champagnes.

The catholic scope of Churchill's legendary sybaritism only highlights his particular attachment to Pol Roger Champagne. A 1908 invoice from the UK agent is the first evidence of many Pol Roger purchases he made before he met Odette Pol Roger nearly 40 years later in November 1944 in Paris, when their friendship started. By then he was the chief architect of the imminent Allied victory in Europe, and she sent him birthday gifts of the 1928, 1934, and (later) 1947 Pol Roger Vintages.

The instigator of this event was UK-based Peter Crawford, a private collector of Champagne exclusively and of Pol Roger in particular. Fourteen of the wines were in magnum, and one, the 1988, in was Jéroboam. Ten of the wines—each vintage from 1988 to the

current release 2004—had been bought by Crawford on release and aged in excellent conditions. The 1993 had been acquired directly from Pol Roger's cellar stock and the 1982 at auction, the rest from reputable brokers. In the event, tasters agreed that only the 2000 (corked) and the 1982 (oxidized) were in poor condition—a reasonable hit rate when all but two of the 15 wines were between 16 and 40 years old.

The 19 tasters were Champagne obsessives from all over Europe, part of a small international geek network who fund their own Champagne habit. Only three were wine professionals. Each paid £1,000 for the tasting and dinner, introduced by James Simpson MW of Pol Roger UK, though the event was quite independent of Pol Roger.

Ever greater finesse

The magnum effect was clearly evident here, judging by my prior experience of seven of the wines from standard bottles. The benefits of a larger format were even clearer in the 1988 Jéroboam, which was, for most tasters, the outstanding wine. We need to remember, too, that apart from different disgorgements of the same vintage, for at least the past five releases, the magnums have been kept longer on lees than the standard bottles. Since 1995, moreover, Pol Roger has lengthened the time on lees for Churchill—it is now about ten years, whereas earlier vintages had about seven.

Pol Roger's *chef de cave* Dominique Petit arrived in 1999 after nearly 25 years at Krug, and he has reformed the viticulture and winemaking regime, working closely with the Pol Roger directors. The Churchill cuvée is a blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but while the Pinot is always dominant, the exact makeup is never revealed. It has always been sourced solely from grands crus delimited in Churchill's lifetime. Since then there has been tighter grape selection and more intimate control of grower contracts for higher-quality fruit. Petit oversaw the spending of €15 million on new winery facilities, which exemplify stainless-steel reductive methods (there is no oak at all). Small new *parcelle*

Left: Sir Winston Churchill with Odette Pol Roger at the Brighton races to watch a filly that he named after her.

All photography courtesy of Champagne Pol Roger



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 20 3096 2606



vinification tanks have been installed, and it is in particular this multiplication of blending options from a larger mosaic of terroirs that should give future releases even greater finesse and precision. Petit continues to employ cold-settling and low temperatures for both fermentations, as well as for the lees aging *sur lattes* in deep cellars.

In this tasting, the 2004 and 2002 both show glimpses of heightened finesse, etched in youth but surely making for longer and more complex aging trajectories. One of the revelations of this tasting, though, was that vintages from 1995 onward seem to develop on a longer curve of complexity post-disgorgement, avoiding or outliving the flavors of peat and struck-match reduction met on many other long lees-aged prestige cuvées, which seem hackneyed secondary winemaking signatures. The implication is that this wine, when well kept for between five and 15 years after release, can develop both aged complexity and a fresh tertiary character, leaving its technical winemaking traits behind and revealing a bouquet on a different plane.

"We make the vintage but in a Churchill style," Hubert de Billy told me. But I think he accepts that the style of Churchill now is not quite the style that the man himself drank. There's always a stately weight, no lack of Pinot structure or sweeping undercurrent to Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill. Churchill himself seems to have appreciated full-bodied and full-flavored wines. But Churchill's Champagnes in the first half of past century were made in oak and were much darker, richer, and sweeter than now. Although "dry" Champagne was all the rage in London from the 1870s onward, there was not a total retreat from the more syrupy style of former years. In the first half of the 20th century, Churchill drank Champagnes with 17g–25g/l of residual sugar, which we would now call extra sec or sec (off-dry) rather than brut. The present *dosage* of Cuvée Sir Winston is about 8g/l, drier by half. Churchill's bottles came in different sizes, too; his "bottles" were 80cl and his imperial pints 60cl, respectively 15cl more and less than modern bottles. Pol Roger is considering the reintroduction of pint bottles once Britain leaves the EU. What goes around...

Top: Maison Pol Roger, Epernay, the firm's HQ since 1851. Bottom: The handsome label of a great recent vintage.

TASTING

2004 (magnum)

Pretty white-flowers nose; a sense of fresh and intense focus. An elegant pointed structure and no intruding smoky reductive notes. Compact, not bumptious. All rather neat and pressing. A gentle scent of white chocolate, coconut, and tempering chalk. This has the freshness of 2004 but is barely off the runway yet. Early promise and early charm. Keep for two years, but should drink well to 2025+.

2002 (magnum)

Mid-gold. A nervy nose, but a shimmering yellow-fruit immanence. Starts full in the mouth, though—very burnished, concentrated, and powerful but balanced by keen acidity. Much less evolved than the standard bottles I've tasted recently. Fern and forest, yellow plum but still early days and dominated by the impression of its powerful structure. I'm slightly in awe. Drink now and bow down, but this should keep for another 12–20 years.

1999 (magnum)

Deepish gold. Huge fruit and a gunflint reductive nose. Very bright and pointed, with a fresh streak of acidity. Fresh moss and sweet forest aromas. Vigorous and alive, with a keen spear of piercing fruit. Sparely built now but etched and attractive, not an ounce of spare flesh. One of my favorites.

1998 (magnum)

A mild mushroom note. An impressive balance, some weight and complex developed baked apple and white peach on the mid-palate; all quite luscious, with softer acidity than the 1999, but far from ending in a heap—a real sense of delicate tincture toward the end. Admirable integration, a sense that one thing leads to another on the palate, but the joins are seamless. A wonderful fresh orange-cream note runs through this—indeed, this is a thread in many of the Churchills here.

1996 (magnum)

Mid- to pale gold; a lemon-hay look common to so many of the high-acid 1996 Champagnes. A faint note of toffee oxidation, but it is faint, so mostly forgiven! This is impressively harmonized for all its true-to-vintage big fruit and high acid. These two components, which dominate so many 1996s like wrestlers before a match, here shake hands and embrace. A lovely folding in of fruit and a fresh keen edge. Lemon and cream, very posset, ending in gentle harmony rather than a dramatic face-off.

1995 (magnum)

Quite deeply colored. Starts very fresh. There's a humming feel of presence, tension, and tone, carrying the developed, complex grilled-apricot, preserved-lemon, and lily notes across the palate. It's a relaxed and restrained but stately power, fairly

mature now, revealing and unfolding, not exploding, and a mousse that keeps on balancing and crisping all beneath it. Great texture. Satisfying and lingering. Should improve and hold to 2020+.

1993 (magnum)

Mid-gold. Time after disgorgement has emphasized a classic toastiness here—so unlike the others in that respect. Aromas really built up, blossoming with time in the glass. Then a surprising luxuriant and youthful expression of honey and lemon curd, very flattering, rather playing to the gallery. A very delightful bottle, which smiled with strutting fruit, when I had expected something a little more demanding with a frown on its face! The mousse is gentle now, but there is a nice tight balance overall.

1990 (magnum)

Gold. Very rich, full-bodied and frank. Seemed very red-fruit and Pinot Noir-dominated, great depth, orange peel and roast nuts to the fore. Rather grand treacle-tart flavors, with the pastry crust, too. Not gentle, the mousse very present, but creamily unfolding. No trace of oxidation or tiredness.

1988 (Jéroboam)

Mid-gold. Delightful aromas of peach and apricot; very fresh, with a pleasant straightening residue of earthy fresh-picked mushrooms. Again that thread of orange cream running through the palate. It feels very athletic and poised. Long and giving, with a modest but persistent mousse. Holds its pitch like a tuning fork. A bare hint of smoke and gunpowder, but subservient to the redolent fruit. Stunning.

1986 (magnum)

Deep gold. Very fresh apple and peach flavors, but only medium in weight, with a good deal of finesse. A touch of seaweed and smoke, but fresh fruit and deep marmalade; this wears its magnum youth proudly. Not at all simple, but still oh so fresh.

1985 (magnum)

The darkest color yet. A nervosity, all finesse and race on the nose, then a quince *marmalada* perfume, some mint. A pressing but gentle mousse perfectly matches the slim-line impression. A bounding, fresh, saline acidity holding it all in. It this holds well, then it still has some years ahead of it.

1979 (magnum)

Quite gold. Sherried and volatile, the fruit in decline. Lean and skeletal; intriguing but past its best.

1975 (magnum)

Mid-gold, lighter than expected. Mature aromas, hay-like, wine gum and quince, but no decline: fresh and focused, complex but not oxidized. Very little mousse, but the light spritz suits the compact proportions. Develops a dry, smoky, seaweed finish that falls away rather quickly. A wine in wise old age, not flashy, but holding its head high.