



POL position

Despite 2020 having been a brutal year for many in the wine business, Champagne house Pol Roger has been less affected than many, thanks to its strong following, the firm's CEO, Laurent d'Harcourt, tells *Lucy Sharw*

FOLLOWING THE devastating Windsor Castle fire, and the separation of Charles and Diana, in her ‘Annus Horribilis’ speech, the Queen of England said of 1992: “It is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure.” Many feel the same way about 2020 – a year in which there has been little to celebrate. Spare a thought then for Champagne houses, whose currency is celebration. With weddings cancelled, restaurants shuttered and entire countries locked down, the occasions to pop a cork have been few and far between this year.

Despite the numerous challenges 2020 has thrown at the Champenois, not least trying to harvest their 2020 vintage during a pandemic, Laurent d’Harcourt, CEO of Pol Roger, remains characteristically upbeat. While 2020 has by no means been easy, d’Harcourt is

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feeling a lot more positive about Pol Roger’s end-of-year outlook than he was a few months into the first lockdown.

“Six months ago I was not anticipating that we would be where we are now. Our sales were down quite a bit the first few months after lockdown, but since July they have been picking up every month,” he says. He predicts that by the end of 2020, the house will only be down by around 10% in volume and 8% in value on last year. Something that has stood the house in good stead with regards to navigating its way through the pandemic has been its philosophy to grow its value rather than volume sales, and to only

modestly increase its production each year, despite healthy consumer demand for the sparklers around the world.

Pol Roger has never been interested in playing the volume game and engaging in price battles with its competitors, meaning managing supply and demand this year has been easier for Pol than for many other houses.

TRADITIONAL ROUTES

Given the current climate, d’Harcourt is thankful that the brand isn’t reliant on travel retail or nightclubs for sales. And while many wine producers have pivoted to online retail, Pol has stuck to its traditional distribution routes. The fizz has been sold on allocation for the past 12 years to ensure each market gets its fair share. While its on-trade sales have inevitably taken a tumble this year,

d’Harcourt is happy to report strong off-trade sales in its number-one market – the UK.

“We’ve been pleasantly surprised that our sales have been pretty solid. I don’t want to be arrogant in saying that because I know it has been difficult this year. We feel we’ve pushed Pol in the right channels, and our positioning is paying off. We had the chance to grow our volumes, and the fact that we haven’t opened the tap too much has

made it possible to see good sales activity in a difficult year like this.”

While d’Harcourt is feeling more positive than he was six months ago, he admits that, for the Champagne region as a whole, 2020 has been extremely challenging, with the future becoming ever more difficult to predict. He’s hoping strong sales at Christmas and New Year will help to offset some of the losses.

“Even though get-togethers are going to be smaller than usual this year, I think people are still going to be drinking Champagne over Christmas,” d’Harcourt says. He believes consumers will stay loyal to their preferred brands this year

Laurent d’Harcourt at a glance

- > Laurent d’Harcourt was born in Châtillon-sur-Seine, Burgundy, in 1963 and went on to study economics and law in Paris.
- > After his studies Laurent spent a year in the US, working with wine distributors and wholesalers across the country.
- > Laurent then returned to Dijon, France, to undertake mandatory military service. During that time he was an officer in the air force.
- > After this, he became the area export manager for small Burgundy house, Ropiteau Frères, based in Meursault where he stayed until it was taken over by Jean-Claude Boisset.
- > In 1996 he moved to Champagne to join Bruno Paillard, where he worked until 2004, when he left to complete an MBA in finance at Reims Business School.
- > In 2006 he was approached to join Pol Roger, and in June 2008 he was named as the export manager for the Champagne house.
- > In June 2013 he became CEO of the Champagne house and chairman of Pol Roger Ltd, upon the retirement of Patrice Noyelle.
- > He is a member of the board of Union des Maisons de Champagne, and is co-president of commission protection of the Champagne appellation for the CIVC.
- > When he’s not working d’Harcourt likes to wind down by playing golf and tennis, and spending time with his family at his countryside retreat in Burgundy.
- > He has two grown-up daughters, Amélie and Mahaut, and one son, Tanneguy, with his wife, Charlotte.

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Big overseas: Pol Roger is extremely popular in the UK

rather than being lured by promotional offers. As for the uncharacteristically early 2020 vintage (the earliest harvest in the history of Champagne) d’Harcourt was grateful that the grape picking took place between the first and second waves of the pandemic, when the virus was less

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prevalent. All of the grapes were in the crusher by the start of September, and the quality of the vintage is looking promising. “We’re just starting to taste the still wines now, so it’s too early to say whether or not 2020 will be a vintage year, but the health of the grapes was good and I’m happy with the quality. We picked some outstanding Pinot Noir and beautiful Meunier.”

From the get-go, Pol Roger has celebrated its focus on vintage Champagne, which has long proved popular in the UK. Today, one in every 10 bottles of vintage Champagne sold in the UK is Pol Roger, with vintage fizz accounting for up to 15% of the house’s annual production.

Pol Roger has always maintained a special relationship with the UK, which was the first place the fizz was exported to in the mid-19th century. Being one of only eight Champagne houses to hold a royal warrant helps, as does its link to Sir Winston Churchill. Pol Roger has long been a firm favourite of the British royal family – magnums of Brut Reserve were served at both Prince William and Prince Harry’s weddings, an accolade d’Harcourt is particularly proud of. At the request of the Pol Roger Portfolio team, led by James Simpson MW, bottles of Brut Reserve destined for the UK are treated to six months’ extra ageing after disgorgement than bottles sent to other nations, in a tradition that d’Harcourt can relate to. “I like to enjoy Pol Roger with more post-disgorgement ageing too – I



Vintage serve: Pol Roger 2013



Popular fizz: Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill

The Churchill effect

One of Pol Roger’s most enthusiastic imbibers, Sir Winston Churchill has become synonymous with the house. So much so that in 2011 Pol Roger changed the address of its headquarters in Épernay to ‘1 Rue Winston Churchill’. The British Prime Minister loved the fizz so much that he named one of his racehorses after the house. Upon Churchill’s death in 1975, Pol Roger created a cuvée in his honour, releasing it in 1984 to coincide with the 40th anniversary of D-Day. Made in tiny quantities, while the blend is a closely guarded secret, it contains a high proportion of Pinot Noir in a nod to Churchill’s preferred style of Champagne. Made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from grand and premier cru vineyards, the fizz is riddled and disgorged by hand, and aged on its lees for a decade for added complexity and depth, leading to a robust and full-bodied Champagne with a long finish. The dosage is typically 7g/l. Before a vintage is released it has to get the blessing of the Churchill family first, in a tradition that continues to this day.

This March, the 2009 vintage of Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill was launched to coincide with the 75th anniversary of VE Day, marking the sparkler’s 18th release. Despite it being a tricky year for Champagne sales, the house has had no trouble selling it. “There is more demand for Sir Winston today than there is supply. James Simpson MW of Pol Roger Portfolio would take our entire allocation if he could. We’ve produced a little bit more of it over the past few years as we’ve had access to more top Pinot from the Montagne de Reims. We need to make an effort to produce more because we have a healthy demand for it, and we need it to be available in markets like the US, Australia and Italy,” says Laurent d’Harcourt, who is also looking to increase the number of Jeroboams of Sir Winston that are produced.



Churchill was a huge Pol Roger fan

age my magnums of Brut Reserve for three to four years before I open them.”

The house recently released its Brut Vintage 2013, and is also on track to release vintage sparklers from 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, and quite possibly 2020 too. With vintage Champagne having

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traditionally been a phenomenon that occurred around three times a decade, perhaps four at most, does d’Harcourt feel the concept of vintage Champagne is being diluted by ever-more frequent releases? “It’s always nice to have the opportunity to bottle a vintage

Champagne; it’s part of our DNA. When he founded the house, Pol Roger was selling vintage Champagne before non-vintage. The increasing number of vintage releases in Champagne mirrors what’s happening in the vineyards and with the climate. So far, climate change has given us the chance to produce more vintage Champagne,” says d’Harcourt, who admits that within the

region’s vintage declarations are a number of “outstanding” vintages, such as 2002 and 2008. “When we release outstanding vintages, sometimes the entire allocation is taken in a few days – it’s interesting to see the effect they have on the market.”

To keep up with increasing global demand, Pol is bottling a greater quantity of its vintage wines in magnums and Jeroboams, both for the on-trade and for vintage Champagne enthusiasts seeking the optimum ageing format for their fizz. The house is also building up its library of vintage stock, holding back more and

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the big interview



Strong foundations: Pol Roger's headquarters

more each year so that it will, in time, have the chance to rerelease the wines that not only boast pristine provenance, but that have been aged in perfect conditions. The house used to only keep back a tiny amount from each year – around 500 bottles – but in recent times has significantly increased the number of bottles it stashes away from each vintage, though d'Harcourt won't reveal the exact number. The plan is to be able to sell half cases to restaurants and collectors.

He is, however, happy to talk numbers for the house's entire annual production,

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which was a record 1.8 million bottles last year and is around 1.6m on average. Keen for demand to outweigh supply, d'Harcourt says that Pol Roger will never look to exceed an annual production of two million bottles.

While the UK remains Pol Roger's top market, ahead of its homeland, d'Harcourt is keen to explore new frontiers for the fizz next year, and is optimistic about its potential in mainland China. In a 2014 interview he said that China wasn't ready for a brand like Pol Roger, but a lot can change in six years.

"China is really starting to move. We didn't want to be the first Champagne house to fly the flag in China, as we didn't have the capacity to do so, but I'm totally convinced that China will become an important market for Pol Roger, especially when you see the work that Masters of Wine Fongyee Walker and Edward Ragg are doing in educating Chinese consumers about Champagne. Wine lovers

in mainland China maybe didn't have the appetite for Champagne before but it's starting to develop," says d'Harcourt, who believes that making headway in new markets may help to make up for lost sales in traditional markets in the coming years. "There are a lot of markets that we haven't fully explored the potential of yet in Asia, Africa, South America and Russia, which is a historical Champagne market that I think will become important again."

Keen to be able to sell its Champagnes at the optimum moment for drinking, the house is building a new disgorgement, labelling, storage and shipment site in Épernay that will allow it to rest its sparklers for longer after disgorgement before they're shipped around the world, the aim being to age bottles of Brut Reserve for a minimum of three months, its vintage wines for at least six months and bottles of top drop Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill for at least a year after disgorgement.

THE PEOPLE BUSINESS

As for d'Harcourt, he's looking forward to 2021, when he hopes to get on the road again and fly the flag for Pol Roger around the world. "I'm missing the social element of my job – we're in the people business; it's what we do," he says. Feeling fortunate to have been given the top job at a family-run Champagne house as an outsider, d'Harcourt hopes to pass it on in pristine condition to his eventual successor. While 2021 isn't going to be easy for the Champagne region, d'Harcourt believes its spirit of camaraderie will help it pull through and, hopefully, emerge even stronger on the other side. "We'll get through this as a region if we stick together. Champagne has been the trailblazer that has led the way for other sparkling wines and has shown them the importance of producing something special and unique – I'm convinced that we will continue to do so. After all, people need Champagne in victory and defeat." db