

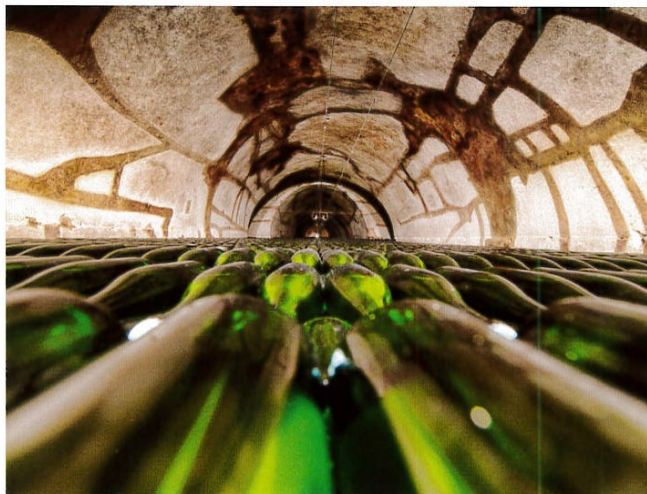
2 POL ROGER

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Sandwiched between Bollinger and Roederer last year in third spot, this time round Pol Roger makes it to number two, splitting winner Louis Roederer from third-placed Charles Heidsieck. This is now the third year in a row that Pol has achieved a top-four finish – more evidence, if it was needed, that Pol is a great favourite among the professionals in the drinks trade and it's the brand's best result in the five years of the World's Most Admired Champagne Brands.

This hasn't happened by chance. A great deal of work has gone on behind the scenes to take Winston Churchill's favourite champagne to another level of consistent quality. Chief executive Laurent d'Harcourt, who joined Pol from Bruno Paillard's operation, started working with the larger-than-life Patrick Noyelle on the export side of the operation in January 2006. So he's been in the business a dozen years, quietly and unassumingly at the helm since the ebullient Noyelle retired in 2013.

He has continued to be a discreet figure in the background, getting on with job of ensuring everything runs smoothly and efficiently. The renovation and enlargement of the winemaking facilities was completed at the beginning of this decade. It gave head winemaker Dominique Petit, poached from Krug back in the late '90s where he clocked up more than two decades, all the modern winemaking tools to work with from the 2012 harvest. With another fine vintage due to follow in 2013, it will be interesting to see how




IMPRESSIVE OFFERINGS HAVE BEEN MADE NEARLY EVERY EVEN YEAR

these wines perform when they are released, compared with the highlights of the previous decade, where impressive offerings have been made nearly every even year (2000-2008) and some critics say Pol 2008 is the best vintage it has ever made.

Crucially, in today's competitive market for grapes, where increasingly high prices have to be paid to secure the best supplies, Pol Roger owns 91ha of vineyards on prime sites.

These are in the Côte des Blancs, Montagne de Reims and the Vallée de la Marne, enough to supply slightly more than half its needs with production at around 1.8m bottles.

Given the importance of the Pol vintage offering, it makes a disproportionately large

volume of vintage champagne compared to champagne's norm, which is less than 10% of any house's production. This is sensibly used to preserve Pol's reputation as a producer of age-worthy, quite muscular champagnes that often show a lovely silky richness.

In reality these are the wines on which the house's reputation for quality and it's hard-to-match image are built, rather than the Brut Réserve. The longer ageing that non-vintage cuvée gets, along with the increasing portion of reserve wines used plus the three-way grape blend, provides the classic example of the so-called goût-anglais and the secondary flavours longer ageing tends to impart.

While the brut vintage style is typically a 60/40 Pinot Noir/Chardonnay blend, it's curious to think that Winston's Churchill's penchant for Pinot Noir-dominated champagne was an influence in the blend effectively created in his honour with the 1975 harvest, which has nearer 80% Pinot Noir set against 20% or so Chardonnay.

There was, of course, another prestige offering from Pol at

that time called Pol Roger PR Réserve Speciale, which was a 50/50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blend, also entirely sourced from Grand Cru vineyards.

They were both produced until the end of the '80s and, if it hadn't been for the power of the Churchill connection, this might still be the style of Pol Roger's prestige line today.

As we have seen in a number of recent tastings run by The Finest Bubble in London, at which Pol Roger vintage and Winston Churchill have been shown together blind, many people take the view that the higher proportion of Chardonnay in the straight vintage gives a better balance and often more complexity, especially in magnum, a format to which Pol seems ideally suited.

My introduction to vintage Pol Roger was with the Blanc de Chardonnay vintage, often the unsung star of the range. It comes exclusively from five Grands Crus – Oiry, Chouilly, Cramant, Avize and Oger – and provides further strong evidence that Pol Roger's Chardonnay vineyards are something special.

A blind tasting of Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill, putting a jeroboam of 1988 along with magnums and bottles of '96 (bottle only), '98 (magnum only), '99, 2000, '02 (bottle only) and '04 showed little pattern in either the speed of development or any obvious difference between bottles or magnums of the same wine. Although it did show up 2002 (in bottle), 1998 in magnum and, perhaps surprisingly, magnums of the 2000 vintage, as being the most impressive wines on the night.

Can Pol Roger make it to the top spot next year in the Most Admired Champagne Brands? We'll have to wait and see.



CHAMPAGNE
POL ROGER