

CHAMPAGNE'S BRIGHTEST STARS

YOUR GUIDE TO THE BEST
WINES IN THE BEST VINTAGES.

BY ROGER VOSS PHOTOS BY JON VAN GORDER

In the past 12 years, Champagne has had a succession of great vintages—some glorious, some immensely ageworthy, others ready to drink now. From 1996 to 2000, every year was a vintage year for a majority of producers. From 2002 onwards (with the strange exception of 2003), it's been the same story.

Call it global warming, climate change or just plain luck. But the fact is, Champagne drinkers have never had such a great choice of vintage Champagnes: not only the prestige cuvées, but also the straight vintage wines that represent great value by comparison. These wines are a reminder that the art of blending in Champagne is not just across years (for nonvintage), but also within years, as master blenders pull together their best wines from a vintage to showcase not only their own skills, but the quality of that year's grapes, as well.

And the process isn't taken lightly. Champagne houses don't make the final decision about a vintage until the March after the harvest, and until then, it is a matter of tasting and observing how the wines are evolving. "For a vintage, we look for solidity and complexity, because the wine has to stand on its own without any reserve wine," says Jean-Baptiste Lecallion, director of Vines and Wines at Roederer. "A great wine is a great wine from day one. I have never seen an unbalanced wine, which becomes balanced later. It's not like Bordeaux."

Not every producer makes a vintage Champagne every year. It's a question of personal taste, of house style and the demands of the sales force. And, it does make for lively discussion around the tables in Champagne. Jean-Hervé Chiquet, owner of Jacquesson, says "apart from four vintages since 1996, two (1996 and 2002) of which are the best, two (2001 and 2006) the worst, we can spend many happy hours talking about the merits of each year."

As we move through the vintages, I've cast the Champagnes in the roles they will play—on the table, in the cellar and on the palate, beginning with the starring roles. After all, if "all the world's a stage," then what's a curtain call without Champagne?



93 Ayala 2001 Cuvée Perle d'Ayala Brut; \$120. Now that it is owned by Bollinger, Ayala is returning to form. The style of this prestige cuvée is mature, dry, a fresh yeasty character showing against toastiness and pink grapefruit acidity. The finish is very crisp and dry. Imported by Cognac One LLC. (12/1/2008)



