

Champagne

Tom Stevenson

Champagne's proposed expansion could create €12 billion of new wealth for lucky landowners and absolutely nothing for neighbours a stone's throw away.



TOM STEVENSON

On 14 March 2008, INAO approved the village-level recommendations of its committee of experts: Claudine Wolikow (historian), Dominique Moncomble (agronomist), Stéphane Thévenin (phytosociologist), Marcel Bazin (geographer), and Michel Laurain (geologist). INAO's decision is currently going through a legal inquiry, which, with €12 billion at stake, could turn into a bunfight, since other villages want to be in with a chance.

The experts examined two zones of Champagne – the Zone de l'Élaboration and the Zone de Production. The Zone de l'Élaboration is the outer limits of the region, which currently comprises 647 communes, covering in excess of 600,000 ha, where grapes, clear wines, and bottled champagne may be freely transported. It is also the only part of the region where it is legal to vinify champagne. Within the Zone de l'Élaboration is the Zone de Production, which currently consists of 319 communes, covering approximately 300,000 ha. Each of these 319 villages contains a small lacework of land that has

TOM STEVENSON has specialized in champagne for almost 30 years. *Champagne* (Sotheby's Publications, 1986) was the first wine book to win four awards, and it quickly established Tom's credentials as a leading expert in this field. In 1998, his *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* (Absolute Press, revised 2003) made history by being the only wine book ever to warrant a leader in any national newspaper (*The Guardian*) when it published a 17th-century document proving beyond doubt that the English used a second fermentation to convert still wine into sparkling at least six years before Dom Pérignon even set foot in the Abbey of Hautvillers. Tom has judged in France, Germany, Greece, the USA, and Australia, and he is chairman of the Champagne panel at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards. His annual Champagne masterclass for Christie's is always a sellout.

been classified on a parcel-by-parcel basis as AOC Champagne, currently extending to 35,200 ha.

The proposals approved by INAO are: Zone de l'Élaboration (deletion of 117 villages, addition of 157) and Zone de Production (deletion of two villages, addition of 40). The village-level expansion of the Zone de l'Élaboration is very satisfactory for two reasons: the villages to be removed have no logistical rhyme or reason to be part of the region (for example, the northwestern extremity around Soissons, and various remote areas between the Marne and Aube), and the additions envelop the proposed enlarged Zone de Production one commune deep in most parts, easing the necessary movements between vineyards, press-houses, wineries, and warehouses.

The village-level additions proposed for the Zone de Production are also mostly satisfactory. They do not represent an expansion outwards as much as a consolidation inwards, filling gaps between or adjacent to existing villages, where an impartial expert might reasonably expect vineyards should exist. In fact, there are at least another half-dozen equally deserving villages that have not been included – to demonstrate that the inquiry is not simply rubber-stamping INAO's proposals, perhaps? If some additional villages are admitted on the basis of well-supported arguments, it would pull the rug from beneath the rants and raves of demonstrably inferior villages. However, the two villages that the experts propose to remove from the Zone de Production (Germaine and Orbais l'Abbaye) are much less convincing. They are insignificant and farmed by three of the largest producers (Moët, Vranken, and Laurent-Perrier), who all have more to gain from any expansion than they could possibly lose from being denied access to such modest growths (for which, no doubt, they will be compensated).

But the *champenois* have not been strategically clever in timing this expansion. With almost every square inch of AOC land cultivated, and unprecedented pressure on stocks from record sales despite increasing prices, it looks as if they are merely milking every penny they can from an expanding market. They have been talking about an expansion for at least 30 years, and an announcement during either of the two major slumps – when they had thousands of unplanted hectares, cellars overflowing with stock, and prices were dropping – would have been ideal, since it would have been seen as an academic exercise and not drawn any flack. There is now only one get-out clause available to the *champenois*: to demonstrate transparently that all proposed new vineyards are superior to the average, not lowest, level vineyards currently classified. All this can be achieved by the experts with little more than the data accumulated by Champagne's five-year zonage project. Classifying only superior land makes an infallible argument, because to deny such an expansion would

be to condemn Champagne to an intrinsically inferior future potential. However, to set out the parameters of vineyard quality and to demonstrate their application transparently will inevitably result in the declassification of some of the poorest currently classified AOC land. This would entail scrapping the Echelle des Crus, which is nothing more than a defunct, politically biased shopping list, and replacing it with a Côte d'Or style parcel-by-parcel classification, which Champagne deserves.

If the *champenois* are hopeless at strategic thinking, they are even worse at damage control, otherwise they would have explained that in 1951 they asked for a reduction in the region from 46,000 ha spread over 407 villages to 34,000 ha in 302 villages. The committee of experts will take at least five years to do its work at vineyard level, so we won't know how many hectares or where until 2015, which is the earliest that any proposals agreed by INAO can be put to another public inquiry. In the meantime, someone in Champagne's bureaucracy should learn the meaning of damage control, because they could classify an additional 10,000 ha and end up with a smaller region!

Anyone for bling?

Krug's €3,000 Clos d'Ambonnay 1995 was released in May 2008. This extremely rich and intense wine is every bit as special as Clos du Mesnil, but neither *clos* is intrinsically superior to Krug Vintage. Occasionally a particular vintage of one or the other might be better than most Krug Vintage years, and Clos du Mesnil 1996 is one such wine, but I'm not convinced that even that wine will, over time, prove superior to all and every Krug Vintage. So how can the price be justified? Krug CEO Panos Sarantopoulos explained that Clos d'Ambonnay is not priced according to perceptions of quality, but like all Krug champagne, the price is proportionate to size of production. Although Krug has no control over its retail prices, he said that Clos d'Ambonnay was one-third the size of Clos du Mesnil, thus rarity makes it three times the price. Actually, at 0.685 ha compared to Clos du Mesnil's 1.85 ha, it is more than one-third the size – it is closer to 40 per cent; and the price that Krug does control, the price Under Bond, was £1,150 to the UK trade, compared to £295 for Clos du Mesnil – closer to four times the price. However, with only 3,000 bottles produced, and 800 of those sold to Krug's best customers, invited to taste the wine at the *clos* in October 2007, it does not look as if Panos will have trouble shifting such an expensive *cuvée*. A couple of "rogue" six-bottle cases from the Octoberfest surfaced at the Zachys auction in Las Vegas on 8 February 2008, three months before the official launch. They fetched \$26,180 per lot (equivalent to €2,836, or £2,234, per bottle). Personally, I would prefer 12 bottles of Krug Vintage!

Opinion:

Sugar-coated?

Brut Nature (0–3 g/l residual sugar) and Extra Brut (0–6 g/l) seem to be flavour of the month in Champagne these days, and for devotees of mature champagne this is a bad news indeed. I don't want to taste sugar in a brut-style champagne, but the lower the *dosage*, the more coarse and aldehydic it evolves following the oxidative shock of disgorgement. For a champagne to age smoothly in its post-disgorgement phase, it has to contain a certain minimum residual-sugar content. Why? We wine hacks talk blithely about sugar's general preservative qualities, but at concentrations found in champagne, it really has no preservative property at all. So it is not that. Sugars have several alcohol or hydroxyl groups that could, I suppose, react with the carbonyl group of acetaldehyde, and sugars can react with amino acids, potentially forming heterocycle compounds, which could also bind acetaldehyde. But do these things happen in champagne? And if they do, would they be sufficient to reduce aldehydic aromas and enable champagne to age gracefully? Having tasted tens of thousands of champagnes over 30 years, I can say categorically that *dosages* above 6 g/l have a smoothing effect on the aromatic development of champagne and that the increase and decrease in finesse above and below this minimum level are proportionate to the amount of residual sugar. However, empirical evidence is not pure science, so I turned to the greatest scientific expert I know on the chemistry of champagne: Bertrand Robillard. I asked him whether sugar could mask aldehydic aromas and was amused by his part-empirical response. To cut a long reply short, he told me, "A lot of people who make a low-*dosage* or no-*dosage* champagne do not add SO₂ at the time of disgorgement, and these wines show a high oxydability level. [And yes,] sugar is a good compound for screening some aromas." When I asked him to elaborate on the last sentence, he confessed, "I've never read of any experiments on the influence of sugar on aromas, but I have noticed this effect. I know that some people consider this to be a fact, and we can imagine that some aldehydes could be sensitive to this phenomenon." Robillard has introduced another important factor, SO₂, but if one of the world's leading scientists in champagne chemistry believes sugar affects positively the smooth and graceful post-disgorgement ageing of champagne, that's good enough for me. However, it should not be good enough for the champagne industry. If ever there was a subject ripe for a doctorate, surely this is it. I know a bright young Australian lady who has put her doctorate on hold and would love to research this subject. Any takers?

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2007

A curious year, with the first buds appearing as early as 5 April, and a very hot spring encouraging some observers to think that picking could commence on 14 August, seven days earlier than 2003, the earliest harvest on record. July, however, saw strange weather: dark and brooding one moment, followed by an expected heavy downpour, then completely unexpected bright sunshine, and it seemed to rain all night, every night. Even while it was sunny, there was an almost electric tension in the air. Spring frost is usually Champagne's most dangerous meteorological threat, but in 2007 it was summer hail. On 4 July, hail destroyed between 10 and 40 per cent of the potential crop in Chigny, Rilly, Ludes, Taissy, Cormontreuil, and Montbré. The summer was relatively cold, dragging out the *véraison* and putting back the harvest to 28 August. Tasting the *vins clairs*, the biggest problem was a reductive tendency in some of the Chardonnay. This is generally a non-vintage year that turned out better than hoped, with Mesnil, Avize, and Villers-Marmery among the most successful villages for Chardonnay; Aÿ, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, Bouzy, and Verzy showing well for Pinot Noir; and Cumières and Villedommange for Meunier. Some producers will declare a vintage, and Roederer was among the best of those.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2006

Vintage rating: 85

Definitely a "Chardonnay vintage", with some excellent base wines produced on the Côte des Blancs, but the Pinot Noir suffered rather more rot in 2006 than most producers were inclined to admit, and the Meunier was even worse. With nearly 16 per cent affected, the normally hardy Meunier was exceptionally rot-prone for the second year running. This does not mean that some fine-quality champagnes won't be produced from black grapes, just that selection will very much be the key to this vintage. The Aube produced the most interesting Pinot Noir, although some grapes were overripe.

2005

Vintage rating: 85

With about 14 per cent grey rot in the black varieties, particularly Meunier, 2005 cannot be classified as a true or great vintage. Definitely not in the class of 2002; probably on par or just below 2004, although some producers may make better 2005s. This is a winemaker's year. Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, the *chef de caves* at Roederer, told me: "If you are a good blender, one plus one can often equal three, but in 2005 one plus equals four!" From tasting the *vins clairs*, I found Chardonnay overwhelmingly the best variety, with Le Mesnil-sur-Oger the most successful *cru*. As far as black varieties are concerned, Pinot Noir has the edge over Meunier, with Verzy and Verzenay standing out.

2004

Vintage rating: 85-88

This is a vintage on steroids: huge and yet boosted by an injection of exceptional sunshine. The quality is good to very good, with excellent acids and purity. It is very early days, but the best so far appear to be the Clos des Goisses, Belle Epoque Brut, Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs, Cristal, Dom Ruinart, Grande Dame, Brut, and Blanc de Blancs Brut from Deutz; Gastronome Brut from Pierre Gimonnet; and Cuvée Deluxe Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru from André Jacquart.

2003

Vintage rating: 50-90

Frost destroyed 50 per cent of the potential crop, then a pan-European heat wave ripened the grapes at an extraordinarily fast rate, resulting in the earliest harvest since 1822 (when records began), with high, but not excessively high, natural alcohol levels (an average of 10.6 per cent ABV). The speed at which the grapes went through *véraison* produced the lowest acidity and highest pH on record. It is therefore not another 1976, 1959, or 1947, as some *champanois* would have us believe. Considering the small size of the crop and proportionately greater scarcity of Chardonnay, a number of houses might not release a standard vintage, but any producer who has not produced at least a small amount of pure 2003, even if only for in-house use, will regret it, since they will have no library bottles to consult if climate change continues. Most commercial 2003s are dismal, but the best are very special and include Clos des Goisses and 2003 by Bollinger; Paradox from Pierre Gimonnet & Fils; Célébris Extra Brut Rosé, Grand Vintage Brut, and Grand Vintage Brut Rosé from Moët & Chandon; and Cuvée de Prestige from JM Gobillard. Even Sainsbury's Taste the Difference isn't bad!

2002

Vintage rating: 90

This is without doubt a vintage year, and a very special one, too, marked by the *passerillage* that reduced the crop in some vineyards by up to 40 per cent and endowed the wines with the highest natural alcohol level since 1990 (which itself was the highest since 1959). It is definitely a Pinot Noir year, with Aÿ-Champagne the most successful village. There are some fine Chardonnays, but in general they are less impressively structured and lack acidity. Not that the Pinot Noirs are overblessed with acidity. Low acidity is a key feature of this vintage, with *vins clairs* tasting much softer than their analyses would have us believe. Many of the earliest 2002s to appear on the shelf have been disappointing, but the best are years away from release. Virtually everything with 2002 on the label is exciting – from Veuve Clicquot, which was released too early but hit a truly sweet spot by April 2008 and will stay there for years, to Dom Ruinart, the greatest 2002 I have tasted so far, although all the prestige *cuvées* from this vintage stand out.

Grapevine

- **At the Decanter World Wine Awards**, Taittinger's Les Folies de la Marquetterie won the Non-Vintage Champagne trophy, Charles Heidsieck's 1999 Brut Rosé Millésime won the Rosé Champagne trophy, and Waitrose's own-label 1996 toughed out some very classy competition to win the Vintage Champagne trophy.

- **Perlage**: the perfect way to serve mature and prestige Champagnes by the glass? I am putting the Perlage system to the test by letting my local wine bar, the Summertown Wine Café, play with it. I will report back next year. In the meantime, for details about this system, which has already been adopted by Dom Pérignon, see www.perlagesystems.com/About/.

- **Grower champagnes** are available by the glass seven days a week at a new bar-cum-caviste, C Comme Champagne, at 8 Rue Gambetta in Epernay. Up to 250 different champagnes from 45 growers are

listed, but only five *cuvées* (on a rotating basis) are offered by the glass, although you should be able to manage a full bottle of the others over a coarse-pâté platter in the bar.

- **Two bottles of 1959 Dom Pérignon Rosé** went for \$85,000 at an Acker Merrall & Condit auction in New York in April 2008. That's \$42,500 each for bottles that are probably oxidized! I confess that I have never tasted the 1959 DPR, but I have tasted the straight 1959 DP many times, and most of those bottles and magnums have been oxidized. There is a flaw on the inner surface of the neck of the 1959 DP. It's well known. Whenever I have tasted this vintage with Richard Geoffroy, he always has two backups ready and waiting at the correct temperature. The last time all three were oxidized and had to be thrown away. I assume that they must have used the same bottles for the 1959 DPR...

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 Krug
- 2 Pol Roger
- 3 Louis Roederer
- 4 Billecart-Salmon
- 5 Bollinger
- 6 Deutz
- 7 Jacquesson
- 8 Gosset
- 9 Pierre Gimonnet
- 10 Vilmart

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 Lanson
- 2 Taittinger
- 3 Heidsieck & Co Monopole
- 4 Piper Heidsieck
- 5 De Saint Gall
- 6 J Dumangin
- 7 Moët & Chandon
- 8 Mumm
- 9 Jacquart
- 10 Ayala

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Jean-Noël Haton
- 2 Louis Barthelemy
- 3 Serge Mathieu
- 4 Henri Mandois
- 5 Fluteau
- 6 Bruno Paillard
- 7 Chanoine's Tsarine range
- 8 Henri Giraud
- 9 Audoin de Dampierre
- 10 Chapuy

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 Palmer
- 2 Piper-Heidsieck
- 3 Charles Heidsieck
- 4 Serge Mathieu
- 5 Henri Mandois
- 6 Jacquart

- 7 Lanson
- 8 Louis Roederer
- 9 Drappier
- 10 Heidsieck & Co Monopole

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Cuvée R Lalou 1998**
Mumm (€120)
- 2 **Les Folies de la Marquetterie NV** Taittinger (€41)
- 3 **Belle Epoque Rosé 2002**
Perrier Jouët (€200)
- 4 **Dom Pérignon 2000**
Moët & Chandon (€95)
- 5 **Noble Cuvée Brut 1998**
Lanson (€86.87)
- 6 **Vintage Brut 2002**
Veuve Clicquot (€40)
- 7 **Brut Millésime 2000**
Piper-Heidsieck (€39)
- 8 **Clos des Goisses 1998**
Philipponnat (€86)
- 9 **Blanc de Blancs Fleuron 2002**
Pierre Gimonnet (€26)
- 10 **Brut Réserve Dégorgement 2007 Mis en Cave en 2004 NV**
Charles Heidsieck (€30)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 **Grand Cellier Brut NV**
Vilmart (€22)
- 2 **Brut NV** Palmer (€16.50)
- 3 **Brut 2000** J Dumangin (€22)
- 4 **Brut 2000** Jacquart (€22)
- 5 **Blanc de Blancs Brut 2002**
Palmer (€24.90)
- 6 **Grand Sendrée 2000**
Drappier (€30)
- 7 **Brut Réserve Dégorgement 2007 Mis en Cave en 2004 NV**
Charles Heidsieck (€30)
- 8 **Blanc de Blancs Brut 2002**
Chapuy (€21.90)
- 9 **Cuvée Prestige NV**
Dumenil (€19.10)
- 10 **Silver Top 2002** Heidsieck & Co Monopole (€29.55)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 **"Single-cask" Ratafia 2005**
Janisson Baradon (€19) *The first ever Ratafia recommended in Wine Report, this pure Pinot Noir nectar really tastes as if it has been made from chocolate.*
- 2 **Pure Brut Nature NV** Pol Roger
A skilful blend of freshness with some softly-aged components and lovely acids, underscored by a silky mousse, allows this cuvée to achieve an unprecedented level of instant class and finesse, making it the finest brut nature I've ever tasted.
- 3 **Cordon Rouge Brut Millésimé 2002** Mumm (€31) *Mumm's best vintage since 1955!*
- 4 **Clos des Goisses Juste Rosé 1999** Philipponnat (€86)
Champagne's most exceptional terroir gets just a touch of colour for its first ever rosé. Look out for the 2000 vintage.
- 5 **Vintage Brut Rosé 1999** Charles Heidsieck (€75) *Buy this sumptuous rosé in so-called "rip-off Britain" for only £42 (€53), where the mousse is much softer and silkier due to its longer post-disgorgement ageing.*
- 6 **Black Label Brut NV** Lanson (€24) *For the past two years this has been the best and most consistent non-vintage from any of the big grandes marques.*
- 7 **Rosé Brut NV** Bollinger (€65)
Although this is so Bollinger on the nose – that is, oxidative – this firm's first non-vintage rosé has an immaculate mousse and classy, focused fruit on palate.
- 8 **Millésime de Collection 1999** Pierre Gimonnet & Fils (€85 per magnum) *Minerality magnified by the magnum effect. Just starting to drink well.*
- 9 **Femme 1996** Duval-Leroy (€220 per magnum) *So much better in magnum. Cellar it for a decade!*
- 10 **Brut 2000** J Dumangin (€22)
With Gilles Dumangin's 2000 even better than his 1999, it looks as if quality and consistency are really starting to kick in.

Grapevine

- **Hervé Jestin**, the former *chef de cave* at Duval-Leroy, has entered into a partnership with young Benoît Marguet of Ambonnay to produce a very special champagne for release in 2010. I cannot reveal any details, since that information was given to me confidentially, but I can say that I caught up with Hervé in Marguet's cellar, just around the corner from Krug's illustrious Clos d'Ambonnay. Marguet's vineyard is, in fact, just above the now famous *clos*, 10 m (30 ft) higher, but not benefiting from the protection of a wall. I tasted the wine in barrel, and it's outstanding. Almost too good for champagne,

although both Benoît and Hervé have overoaked champagnes in the past, so I will wait until I taste it in bottle before passing judgment.

- **Fredrick Wikingsson**, a Swedish television host, paid £1,450 for a bottle of 1937 Champagne Moët & Chandon. Believed to have come from Hitler's private cellar, and rumoured to have been injected with cyanide, the bottle will feature in a documentary about dictators, after which Wikingsson said he "might sell it off and donate the money to a Jewish charity."