



FIZZERS

The number of corked, stale and lightstruck champagnes on the shelves this year is appalling.

Has champagne lost its sparkle? Last year I raised the alarm on champagnes arriving in the market out of condition, reporting one bottle in ten on the shelves to be faulty. This year I have delved deeper, retasting the same cuvées at different times and in different countries. The findings are shocking.

Champagne as a region is currently facing dire quality challenges on many levels; climate change, expanding boundaries, cropping, supply and demand will all play out to varying degrees of significance over the coming decades. But when it comes to drinking champagne in 2012, there is a looming monster that pales all of Champagne's other woes into insignificance. The gross inconsistency in the condition in which champagne reaches the consumer is absolutely appalling.

Fundamentally, this comes down to four things: the consistency of the closure, of transportation, of storage and of a timely selling cycle. These factors lead to cork taint, flavour scalping, oxidation, staleness and 'lightstruck'. Each of these is quantifiable, well understood and has a demonstrable and realistic solution. Some in Champagne have effectively implemented such solutions, with outstanding results.

The continued insistence of other champagne producers and their overseas agents to refuse to acknowledge and address these concerns is the single most significant factor impeding the quality of champagne today.

Champagne is an exceedingly fragile beverage and it distresses me immensely that you may not find the wines that I recommend to be in the same condition that I enjoyed them. For this reason, it is not sufficient to simply arm yourself with the list of my best buys of the year and get on with your celebrations. It is vital that you are keenly aware of the inconsistencies that plague champagnes so that you can immediately recognise them and reject any bottle that is out of condition. I have also mentioned every faulty bottle I've encountered in the notes throughout this guide.

The detail with which I have described the aromas, flavours, textures and styles of every cuvée is not only to point you to champagnes that match your taste, nor simply to coax you to find these characters in your own sipping, but to give you a benchmark to which to compare the condition of every bottle. Feedback on The Champagne Guide 2011 indicated that readers were able to easily correlate my descriptions with the characters they were detecting. This is your most reliable means of identifying a faulty bottle.

I am but one voice in a country that drinks merely one percent of champagne's annual production. If change is to be effected, the voices of consumers must be raised to send a message that we do not accept champagne that is corked, oxidised, stale or lightstruck and we will continue to return it and request replacement bottles until such time as these problems are finally resolved.

The Champagne Guide 2011 was hailed by critics as “bold”, “politically incorrect”, “lacking diplomacy”, even “rude”. There are more superlatives and more high scores in the 2012 edition than any other publication I have ever written – credit where credit is due, and there is much to be celebrated in Champagne right now. But all is not perfect in paradise and there are far too few voices in the world today holding one of the most expensive and celebrated of all wine styles accountable for quality and consistency. I am answerable to one person and one person only, and that is you, and the assurance that you can always drink the best champagne that money can buy.

Hundreds of tastings, conversations and visits over the past year have only exacerbated and reinforced the concerns I raised last year. I have and will continue to voice these in conversation with those for whom they are most pertinent, in Champagne and around the world. And I will, without any hesitation, continue to keep them prominent in the wider conscience of the wine world. Not for criticism’s sake but because I am optimistic and confident that Champagne can and will be a much better place with proper attention to a number of small but crucial details.

CORKED

Champagne is a delicate and subtle wine style and any imperfection in the closure stands out glaringly. In my tastings, I find five to six percent of champagnes to be cork tainted (TCA) or distinctly corky (cork flavour in the wine). This is a shocking disgrace in any wine, let alone one that commands such a premium price.

Cork taint is imparted randomly by natural corks, giving a mouldy, ‘wet cardboard’ or ‘wet dog’ character to champagne. It suppresses fruit and shortens the length of finish. In its most subtle form, it may simply have a slight dulling effect on the bouquet and palate.

Cork taint is not discerning of price or prestige. Or is it? In my tastings last year, the average price of bottles that were corked was fifty percent higher than the overall average price. Why such a difference? Unlike virtually every other wine style, the further you climb the price tree into prestige champagne territory, the finer and more elegant the wines become. Here, even the faintest nuance of cork taint topples the delicate balance of the wine in a manner that a more robust style might – might – manage to smother. This is one reason why prestige champagne registers such a high incidence of cork faults.

Take the bottle back if it’s corked and you must get a replacement. But what if that special bottle has been popped to propose to your love, to celebrate your wedding night or to toast your lifetime achievement? You can replace the bottle but can you replace the moment? Five to six percent is one in eighteen. Those are abominable odds. If I knew of any other premium product with a failure rate like that I’d never buy it. Ever.



The Mytik DIAM facility in Cumières is Champagne's answer to cork taint | Tyson Stelzer Photography



Champagne has a monumental cork problem. When I visit most champagne houses, I hear of very little imperative for this to change. But with each passing year, a growing band of some of the finest houses and growers are switching to a more reliable closure.

The crown cap is the best seal for champagne, as a billion bottles in Champagne's cellars attest. Ruinart Chef de Cave, Frédéric Panaïotis, spent years working in the technical department of the CIVC (Champagne's regulatory, supervisory and promotional body) studying closure alternatives. He found four percent cork taint, which could be reduced to two percent with rigorous sampling and batch control. This clearly does not work in practice as other critics seem to agree with my experience of five to six percent. "Crown cap is the only reliable solution," Panaïotis says. "We don't want to use it but if we have to we will." My understanding was that, by law, champagne could no be sold under crown seal. "There is not much specified in the regulations regarding closure, except that the vintage should appear on the side of the cork inside the bottle." Panaïotis explains. "So it could be printed on the inside of the crown seal."

With all the pomp and ceremony surrounding the pop of the cork, this is not likely to change any time soon. The alternative that's gaining traction is DIAM, cork which has been granulated, treated to fully remove cork taint and other compounds that might produce off characters, then moulded into shape. DIAM is a significant improvement on natural cork and the only cork product successful in eliminating cork taint. In comparative tastings with still wines, I've consistently noted a slight muting effect of DIAM on the aromatics of the bouquet and palate, but not nearly as acute as that of natural cork. DIAM also seems to provide a more consistent physical seal than natural cork, and trials at Bollinger have confirmed a lower rate of oxygen interchange in DIAM than natural cork (too low for Bollinger's ageing under cork pre-disgorgement, but a good sign for DIAM's performance post-disgorgement). This would suggest that DIAM might more reliably protect a champagne from oxidation during long-term ageing, although it's still too early for evidence to support this.

Purity-focused Vertus grower Veuve Fourny switched its entire range to DIAM in 2006 after five years of trials. "We compared twenty bottles of our Blanc de Blancs under DIAM with twenty bottles of the same wine bottled under natural cork for five years," Emmanuel Fourny reports. "All the DIAMs were similar, fresh and

with pure fruit. The others were more evolved and each bottle had a different personality. Using a normal cork is like Russian Roulette!” Prior to the switch, the company used a standard letter to reply to complaints regarding cork faults. In the five years since, it has not sent this letter once. “It’s a kind of revolution in Champagne,” Fourny says.

Billecart’s Australian agent, Domaine Wine Shippers, reported an immediate drop in returned bottles as soon as DIAM was introduced on the company’s non-vintage wines in 2006. Testing is currently underway on the ageing of its vintage wines under DIAM.

At Gaston Chiquet in Dizy, Nicolas Chiquet is fanatical about preserving the character of his fruit and uses DIAM on some of his cuvées. “It is a huge advantage!” he exclaims. “Every cork is very regular because the oxygen ingress is very consistent and there is no cork taint.”

DIAM closures are manufactured under the Mytik brand name of Oeneo Bouchage (although not always branded ‘Mytik’ or ‘DIAM’) and other companies have entered the market with similarly looking technical corks which have not been treated with the DIAM process. Last year I reported slight cork taint in some bottles of J. Dumangin Fils Brut 17 NV, which appeared to be sealed with DIAM corks. Gilles Dumangin has since tracked this batch to a small trial bottling with a competitor’s untreated product. He opened 100 bottles and found a disturbing twenty-three percent showing low-level cork taint, as well as higher rates of oxygen ingress than DIAM. He has since abandoned the alternative in favour of true DIAM.

This year the A-team of producers using DIAM closures on at least one cuvée has grown to include Ayala, Besserat de Bellefon, Billecart-Salmon, Chanoine, Charles Heidsieck, Claude Carré, Devaux, Duperrey, Gaston Chiquet, Gauthier, Gosset, Henri Maire, Henriot, J. Dumangin Fils, Laherte Frères, Lanson, Martel, Moët & Chandon, Perrier Jouët, Philippe Gonet, Pierre Moncuit, Pierre Peters, Pommery, Taittinger and Veuve Fourny.

It’s about time more champagne houses offered a consistent and reliable closure on those 320 million bottles that leave their cellars every year. At five to six percent, that’s eighteen million bottles of corked champagne down the sink, almost five times Australia’s annual consumption!



RED-FACED ROSÉ

Champagne rosé is a sensitive soul. Across my tastings this year, no champagne style varies more between France and Australia, from one disgorgement to the next or one year to the next. Rosé champagne loses its freshness, character and appeal more quickly than white champagne post-disgorgement and because it's often bottled in clear glass, it's also more susceptible to lightstruck degradation (see page 55). Even at the very top end, rosé possesses a lower resilience to the effects of oxidation as it ages in bottle. The Champagne Guide 2011 Rosé of the Year, Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Brut Rosé 2000, is on a disappointingly fast-fading spiral since its disgorgement in early 2009, plummeting a whopping five points on my score sheet this year. Dom Pérignon Rosé 1998 and Krug Rosé NV dropped a couple of points each, too. With the same extra year of bottle age since disgorgement, the white champagnes of the same brands did not lose one point.

This effect is exacerbated in Australia because we just don't drink a lot of pink fizz here and bottles tend to collect on the shelves. The US and UK are currently enjoying a rosé revolution but it's yet to come to Oz. Rosé champagne on Australian shelves sells at just three percent of the rate of the equivalent white champagne, according to Coles Liquor Senior Buyer, Simon Cleave, who manages imports for Vintage Cellars, 1st Choice and Liquorland. He puts this down to the price premium of rosé, which is equally preferred at functions where it's poured free of charge. "People like it, they're just not prepared to pay over the top for it," he says.

Rosé now accounts for ten percent of champagne sales in France, where it is generally priced thirty percent above its white counterparts. A quick survey of retail shelves in Australia and the UK this year indicates a similar price premium here. Australian consumers aren't going to buy that, when sparkling rosés are consistently line-priced by local producers.

The Champenois justify this on the basis that it costs more to produce red wine than white in Champagne. I'm not convinced. Old vines are required and yields must be kept low to ensure sufficient ripeness, but this does not equate to a thirty percent premium in production costs. Even if the cost of producing the red wine to make rosé were as high as double that of the base white wine, an addition of ten percent in the blend only increases the total cost of production by ten percent. And then there are absurd extremes. Ruinart's prestige Dom Ruinart Rosé (\$699) is identical to its Dom Ruinart (\$280) but for an addition of 16% pinot noir. At this rate, the house values its pinot noir at a preposterous \$2619 per 750mL!

Vranken-Pommery agent, Cameron Harris, suggests that the price gap is exemplified by heavy discounting of white champagne. "Rosé may be priced a little above white champagne, but when discounting is factored in, this may blow the price out to thirty to forty percent more, and people aren't prepared to pay that."

Hopeful Australian agents put rosé champagnes into their warehouses, and they can sit around for years under less than ideal conditions. By the time they emerge, they've lost the fresh fruit edge and the vibrant structure that this style depends upon.

When Ayala's agent, Fine Wine Partners, read my grumbles about stale, old, 2006 disgorged bottles of Ayala Rosé Majeur Brut NV in The Champagne Guide 2011, they advised in late 2010 that they would take a look at samples across their stock. I hoped this would be the last I would ever hear of this disgorgement. On visiting Ayala in July 2011, I was impressed with the freshness of the March 2011 disgorgement. Hence my dismay to be poured the 2006 disgorgement at Fine Wine Partner's trade showcase tasting in Brisbane the following month – not just slightly too old, five years too old. Not only was this stale stock still on the shelves, and still in the warehouse, but, worse, it was poured as a showcase to media and prospective buyers! Fine Wine Partners wrote this off to a miss-pick from the warehouse and promised me a sample of the 2009 disgorgement, current in Australia at the time, which was never sent. How many stale old bottles remain on the shelves and how many unsuspecting buyers are set for a horrid – and expensive – shock? It's a disgrace. Agents must get their stock management under control.



FRESHEN UP, CHAMPAGNE!

Beware of stale and fruit-flat champagnes. Rosés are particularly vulnerable, but champagnes of all styles lose freshness from sealing faults, poor transportation, bad storage conditions or simply sitting on the shelves for too long.

Bollinger uses a computerised system on its bottling line to check for defects in the seal of cork-sealed bottles and rejects between three and four percent (if only it could detect cork taint, too!). When I visited the bottling line this year, a full cart was stacked ten high with rejects destined to be used as liquor. Over a year, 20,000 bottles pass through that cart. Only five such detection systems are in use in Champagne. For everyone else, that cart of rejects goes off to market.

I have done everything physically possible to ensure that this guide featured the freshest, most recent shipments into Australia and I was still tasting in November 2011! After the huge rates of inconsistency that I encountered last year, I called in two samples of every bottle for the first time this year. Those smaller producers and occasional medium-sized houses who print the disgorgement date clearly on every bottle do their customers an important service by giving them the opportunity to find a fresh bottle. They may also save themselves considerable embarrassment.

Last year I reported Ruinart Brut Rosé NV to be disappointingly stale and fruit-flat. When Chef de Cave Frédéric Panaïotis visited Brisbane to host a tasting for a room of discerning media and trade I presented him with a copy of the book and he immediately read the review. “You must have tasted the disgorgement from the 2005 base, a poor vintage that has developed quickly,” he explained. “We will taste from the lovely, fresh 2007 base today.”

When the rosé was served, it tasted fruit-flat and simple, though not as stale as last year. “This looks like the 2006 base to me!” he apologised as he whisked everyone’s glasses away. “It’s lacking fruit character.” He ducked away and recorded the bottle code and said that he would decipher it later because he needed to check it on his computer. If the maker himself can’t distinguish a tired, old disgorgement until it’s opened, what chance do the rest of us have?

“My position for non-vintage champagne is that I don’t want the disgorgement date on the bottle,” Panaïotis said. “Probably only five percent of consumers are interested in this information, and printing the date will only confuse others, who might read it as a use-by date.” Really? There’s no way to decipher the bottling code, either. “If it could be deciphered, it would no longer be a code,” he dismissed. Instead, Panaïotis suggests writing down the code and emailing Ruinart for the base vintage.

When I sent a request for the disgorgement dates and base vintages for Moët & Chandon’s non-vintage wines, the response came back from the Moët Hennessy agent that, “These are all NON VINTAGE (NV), hence do not have a vintage base year.” Finally, after more than three weeks and no less than a dozen emails backwards and forwards, the base year and disgorgement were confirmed by chef de cave Benoît Gouez himself. In the process, it became apparent that the vintage base that I had published last year was incorrect.

This is a ridiculous state of affairs and one that Champagne could resolve in a heartbeat by printing disgorgement dates on every bottle. Many smaller producers are doing this, and it is all the more helpful for medium and large houses, who often disgorge in successive batches, each of which is subtly different, and who are more likely to have older disgorgements lingering in some markets.

What’s in a disgorgement date? Not a lot in itself but it communicates a world of information. The disgorgement date stamps the bottle with an indelible time reference, the only clue to its age, to locating a fresh bottle and avoiding a stale one, to finding a similar bottle if you like it or giving it a wide berth if you don’t. Collectors are increasingly ageing non-vintage wines like Krug Grande Cuvée and Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle and a disgorgement date would provide a means of managing these collections. Armed with a little knowledge from this book, the disgorgement date is your insight into the base vintage of a non-vintage blend and all the information that goes with this. Disclosure of disgorgement dates on every bottle removes ambiguity.

It also gives importers and retailers an imperative to ensure timely movement of stock. Otherwise, they will only continue to slowly trickle out disgorgements that should have been consumed years ago. Some champagne producers print disgorgement dates only at the request of their agents in particular markets. If other countries are requesting this, why not Australian agents? Is this simply a lazy excuse to remove

accountability for timely stock turnover? Surely it is in the interests of every champagne house to protect the reputation of their brand by ensuring that outdated stock can be easily identified in every market? It's an opportunity every house owes its customers but precious few deliver.

Until every bottle leaving Champagne is printed with its disgorgement date, consumer, beware! Take back your bubbles if it's not up to scratch. If it's corked the replacement will be on form (fingers crossed) but if it's stale you'd better order something else.

LIGHTSTRUCK

There is another factor that plagues champagne freshness. Did you know that if you leave a bottle in the light it could taste like onions? '*Lightstruck*' is the name that wine scientists give to the menacing effect of degradation of wine exposed to ultraviolet light from fluorescent lamps and, worse, sunlight. Dark green glass solves much of this problem, naturally filtering the vast majority of ultraviolet but white flint (clear) glass blocks just a tiny fraction. Louis Roederer recently switched to brown bottles for its vintage wines because they provide 97 percent UV protection (compared with 92 percent in green bottles).

Artificial lighting can produce discernible changes in wine bottled in clear glass within just a few hours. For champagne the problem is exacerbated because long lees ageing makes Méthode Traditionnelle wines particularly susceptible to "lightstruck" degradation. Fruit esters (like citrus aromas) are diminished and reductive characters (sulphur, cabbage, corn, garlic, onion, gherkin, smoke, burnt rubber, bacon, gunsmoke) are produced.

There is no wine more susceptible to lightstruck degradation than champagne in clear glass bottles, which makes rosé particularly vulnerable. The strong incidence of stale champagnes on Australian shelves is due, in part, to lightstruck degradation. Other bottles are simply too old, affected by less than ideal storage conditions or a combination of all three. It's difficult to always determine which effect is the prime culprit. But it is telling that a high proportion of the stale champagnes that I open are in clear glass bottles.

There is not yet a clear glass treatment to block ultraviolet light for champagne, as there is for beer, because it's a different wavelength of light that troubles champagne.

How do you avoid a lightstruck wine? A number of champagne houses ship their bottles in cellophane wrap to protect them. This is even more effective than dark bottles, so make sure you keep the bottle in its wrap until the moment you serve it. Gilles Dumangin (J. Dumangin Fils) goes one step more sophisticated and sells his top rosé in a protective cotton bag. Never, ever buy a clear glass bottle of champagne that's been sitting on the shelf or in an illuminated fridge unless it's sealed in its box, cellophane or bag.

The Champenois use yellow lights with no ultraviolet in their cellars to avoid lightstruck wines. It's time the same was considered around the world. In retail spaces and other places where this isn't always possible, champagnes displayed without a protective covering should be shielded behind a sheet of Perspex or UV-tinted glass.

Some of the best research in the world on lightstruck has been done right here in Australia at the AWRI. Search for "lightstruck" at www.awri.com.au.

The only way that Champagne will take its troubles with faulty bottles seriously is if the consumers of the world send Champagne and its agents a clear message that we will not tolerate expensive bottles that are out of condition. It is imperative that every bottle that's old, stale, corked or clearly lacking in freshness is returned. Do your bit, and change will come.