

## Victory in Europe

### WINE

*WILL LYONS*

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I CAN'T tell you the sense of national pride I felt upon stepping inside a champagne house and being greeted by a bust of Sir Winston Churchill. Can you imagine ever walking into a whisky distillery and coming face to face with a statue of the great General de Gaulle? Or nosing a ten-year old Jacques Chirac?

That's pretty much what happened last week, when I visited the home of Pol Roger champagne. There, on 44 Avenue de Champagne, in the heart of the sparkling-wine region, I was treated to a tasting of the Winston Churchill Cuvée by Patrice Noyelle, the ebullient president of the firm.

Churchill's relationship with Pol Roger dates back to 1945. Although the politician had been a loyal customer since 1908, it wasn't until a luncheon given by the British ambassador to France some months after the liberation of Paris that his love affair with the champagne house really took off. It was there, over a glass of the sumptuous 1928 vintage, that Churchill met the charming and captivating Odette Pol-Roger and began a harmless flirtation, indulged by his wife Clementine, that lasted until Sir Winston's death, in 1965.

Each year on his birthday, Odette would send him a case of vintage champagne. In return, Churchill named one of his favourite racehorses after her, and made sure that she was invited to lunch at the British embassy every time he was in Paris.

Despite never actually visiting 44 Avenue de Champagne, Churchill proclaimed it "the most drinkable address in the world". So close was his relationship with the family that, on Churchill's death, the Pol-Rogers had black-bordered labels put on their bottles.

In 1984, the firm went one step further and named its prestige cuvée after him, making it in the robust, mature style that he liked so much. And it is this robustness and purity of fruit that makes Pol Roger such an excellent champagne to lay down ...

But for all the robustness and strong character that Pol Roger achieves in its vintage blends, it is the lightness and elegance that it obtains in its non-vintage White Foil that really excites me. The Brut Réserve possesses a wonderful creamy mousse of small, compact bubbles and a light, crisp finish - in other words, the sort of champagne you can serve before dinner without the risk of overwhelming your guests' palates, or even during a meal.

The firm is still in family hands, which is a relevant factor in its consistency of quality. Because the family makes the final choice every year in the blend of the cuvée, it means that the style is passed on from year to year. Perhaps that's why Churchill liked to drink two bottles a day.

### TASTING NOTES

#### **1 Brut Réserve NV**

It's the sheer drinkability and elegance of this wine that astounds. A wonderful mousse of tiny bubbles and a delicious appley nose are complemented by a fine undertone of honey.

#### **2 Brut Rosé 1996**

This has a strong pink hue, and is made from a blend of 66 per cent pinot noir and 34 per cent chardonnay grapes. Its lovely firm acidity and ripe fruit make it an awesome aperitif.

#### **3 Winston Churchill Cuvée 1995**

An intense golden yellow in colour, the Churchill is slightly creamier than the non-vintage, with a more mature nose of dried fruit and apricots. But there is a rich, firm finish, with a slight vegetal character, which makes for a sophisticated and complex wine.

**STOCKISTS**

Peter Green & Co, Edinburgh (0131 229 5925); Friarwood, Edinburgh (0131 554 4159); Luvians  
Bottle Shop, Cupar (01334 654820); Abbey Wines, Melrose (01896 823224); John Scott & Miller,  
Kirkwall (01856 873146)