For most collectors and most wines with a history stretching back several decades, a complete vertical would be nothing more than a dream. But last November 5, Bonfire Night in London, one very committed collector made the dream come true with what we believe to have been the first full vertical of Pol Roger’s Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill. Vinous fireworks indeed.

Hubert de Billy, the family spokesman for Pol Roger, told me in Epernay prior to the event that he thought such a tasting would be unlikely to happen again. Pol Roger launched its deluxe flagship at Churchill’s birthplace Blenheim Palace in 1984, with the 1975 vintage, in commemorative homage to his love of its wines, and it remains the only prestige cuvée Champagne named after a foreigner. That first Cuvée Sir Winston was made only in magnum and sold only in the UK; standard bottles, and sales to the USA and elsewhere, came only from the 1979 vintage on. So far, only 15 vintages have been released over four decades, reflecting admirable Pol Roger fastidiousness. Each declared vintage numbers only 25,000–50,000 bottles—a tiny quantity by comparison with most other deluxe Champagnes.

The catholic scope of Churchill’s legendary sybaritism only highlights his particular attachment to Pol Roger Champagne. A 1908 invoice from the UK agent is the first evidence of many Pol Roger purchases he made before he met Odette Pol Roger nearly 40 years later in November 1944 in Paris, when their friendship started. By then he was the chief architect of the imminent Allied victory in Europe, and she sent him birthday gifts of the 1928, 1934, and (later) 1947 Pol Roger Vintages.

The instigator of this event was UK-based Peter Crawford, a private collector of Champagne exclusively and of Pol Roger in particular. Fourteen of the wines were in magnum, and one, the 1988, in a Jéroboam. Ten of the wines—each vintage from 1988 to the current release 2004—had been bought by Crawford on release and aged in excellent conditions. The 1993 had been acquired directly from Pol Roger’s cellar stock and the 1984 at auction, the rest from reputable brokers. In the event, tasters agreed that only the 2000 (trocken) and the 1982 (oxidized) were in poor condition—a reasonable hit rate when all but two of the 15 wines were between 16 and 40 years old.

The 15 tasters were Champagne obsessives from all over Europe, part of a small international geek network who fund their own Champagne habit. Only three were wine professionals. Each paid £1,000 for the tasting and dinner, introduced by James Simpson MW of Pol Roger UK, though the event was quite independent of Pol Roger.

Ever greater finesse

The magnum effect was clearly evident, judging by my prior experience of seven of the wines from standard bottles. The benefits of a larger format were even clearer in the 1988 Jéroboam, which was, for most tasters, the outstanding wine. We need to remember, too, that apart from different disgorgements of the same vintage, for at least the past five releases, the magnums have been kept longer on lees than the standard bottles. Since 1995, moreover, Pol Roger has lengthened the time on lees for Churchill—it is now about ten years, whereas earlier vintages had about seven.

Pol Roger’s chef de cave Dominique Petit arrived in 1999 after nearly 25 years at Krug, and he has reformed the viticulture and winemaking regime, working closely with the Pol Roger directors. The Churchill cuvée is a blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but while the Pinot is always dominant, the exact makeup is never revealed. It has always been sourced solely from grands crus delimited in Churchill’s lifetime. Since then there has been tighter grape selection and more intimate control of grower contracts for higher-quality fruit. Petit oversaw the spending of €15 million on new winery facilities, which exemplify stainless-steel reductive methods (there is no oak at all) and small new puncheons.
nouveau / liquid assets / preview / review

Britain leaves the EU. What goes around…

the reintroduction of pint bottles once
modern bottles. Pol Roger is considering
respectively 15cl more and less than
about 8g/l, drier by half. Churchill’ s bottles
present
sec or sec (off-dry) rather than brut. The
sugar, which we would now call extra
Champagnes with 17g–25g/l of residual
syrupy style of former years. In the first
rage in London from the 1870s onward,
Although "dry" Champagne was all the
century were made in oak and were much
Champagnes in the first half of past
and full-flavored wines. But Churchill’ s
seems to have appreciated full-bodied
or sweeping undercurrent to Cuvée Sir
stately weight, no lack of Pinot structure
But I think he accepts that the style of
Churchill style,” Hubert de Billy told me.
revealing a bouquet on a different plane.
technical winemaking traits behind and
can develop both aged complexity and
between five and 15 years after release,
is that this wine, when well kept for
winemaking signatures. The implication
which seem hackneyed secondary
other long lees-aged prestige cuvées,
curve of complexity post-disgorgement,
trajectories. One of the revelations of this
tasting, though, was that vintages from
1997 onward seem to develop on a longer
and balanced winemaking traits behind and
revealing a bouquet on a different plane.
“We make the vintage but in a
Churchill style,” Hubert de Billy told me.
But I think he accept that the style of
Churchill now is not quite the style that
the man himself drank. There’s always a
state of age, no lack of Pinot structure
or sweeping undercurrent to Cuvée Sir
Winston Churchill. Churchill himself
seems to have appreciated full-bodied
and full flavoured wines. But Churchill’s
Champagnes in the first half of past
centuries were made in oak and were much
darker, richer, and sweeter than now.
Although ‘dry’ Champagne was all the
rage in London from the 1870s onward,
there was not a total retreat from the more
syrup style of former years. In the first
half of the 20th century, Churchill drank
Champagnes with 17g–22g/l of residual
sugar, which he would now call extra
sec or sec (off-dry) rather than brut. The
present dosage of Cuvée Sir Winston
Churchill is about 7g/l, dry to half half. Churchill’s
bottles came in different sizes, too; their ‘bottles’
were 80cl and his imperial pints feel, respectively 15
mascarello and less than modern bottle. Pol Roger is considering
the reintroduction of pint bottles once
Britain leaves the EU. What goes around...

---

TASTING

2004 (magnum)
Pretty white flowers nose; a sense of fresh and
intense focus. An elegant pointed structure and
intruding smoky reductive notes. Compact, not
bumpful. All rather neat and pressing. A gentle
scent of white chocolate, coconut, and tempering
chalk. This has the freshness of 2004 but is barely
off the runways yet. Early oomph and early charm.
Keep for two years, but should drink well to 2025+

2002 (magnum)
Mid-gold. A very nose, but a shimmering yellow
fruit immensity. Starts full in the mouth, though—
very burnished, concentrated, and powerful but
balanched by keen acidity. Much less evolved
than the standard bottles I’ve tasted recently.
Fern- and forest, yellow plum but still early deep
and dominated by the impression of its powerful
structure. I’m slightly in awe. Drink now and bow
down, but this should keep for another 15–20 years.

1999 (magnum)
Deep mid-gold, Hugs fruit and a gaffe-reductive
rose. Very bright and pointed, with a fresh streak
of acidity, fresh moss and sweet forest aromas.
Vigourous and alive, with a keen sense of piercing
fruit. Simply built now but stiched attractive,
not an source of spare flash. One of my favorites.

1998 (magnum)
A mild mushroom note. An impressive balance,
some weight and complex developed baked
apple and white peach on the mid palate, all quite
kunvius, with affer acidity the 1999, but far
from ending in a heap—a real sense of delicate
texture toward the end. Admirable integration,
a sense that one thing leads to another on the palate,
but the pane is censer. A wonderful fresh
orange-scent note runs through this—indeed, this
is a thread in many of the Churchills here.

1996 (magnum)
Mid to pale gold, a lemon-hay look common to so
many of the high-end 1996 Champagnes. A faint
note of toffee oxidation, but it is faint, so mostly
because. This is impressively harmonized for all its
to vintage big fruit and high acid. These two
components, which dominate so many 1990s like
sweaters before a match, here shake hands and
embrace. A lovely folding in of fruit and a fresh
lean edge. Lemon and cream, very present, ending in
gentle harmony rather than a dramatic face-off.

1995 (magnum)
Quite deeply colored. Starts very fresh. There’s
a humming feel of presence, tension, and tones.
carrying the developed, complex grilled-apricot,
preserved lemon, and lily notes across the palate.
It’s a released and restrained but stately prove, fairly
mature now, revealing and unfuilling, not exploriting,
and a nose that keeps on balancing and
praying all beneath it. Great texture. Satisfying and
bargnign. Should improve and hold to 2020+

1993 (magnum)
Mid-gold. Time after disgorgement has emphasized
a classic toastiness here—so unlike the others in
that respect. Aromas really built up. Blooming
with time in the glass. Then a surprising lusciant
and youthful expression of honey and lemon curdy,
very flattering, other placing the galaxy. A
very delightful bottle, which smiled with strutting
fruit, when I had expected something a little more
demanding with a frozen on its face! The mousse is
terse now, but there is a nice light balance overall.

1990 (magnum)
Gold. Very rich, full-bodied and frank. Seemee
red-fruit and Pinot Non-dominated, great depth,
orange peel and roast nut to the nose. Rather grand
triole-tart flavors, with the pasture, crust, too.
Not gentle, the mousse very present, but creamy
unfulilling. No trace of oxidation or tiredness.

1988 (Jéroboam)
Mid-gold. Delightful aromas of peach and apricot,
v very fresh, with a pleasant straightonge residue of
earthy fresh-packed mushrooms. Again that thread
of orange cream running through the palate. It feels
very athletic and poised. Long and going, with a
modest but persistent mousse. Holds its pitch like
a taurine fork. A bare hint of smoke and gaperometer,
but subsequent to the residual fruit. Striking.

1986 (magnum)
Deep gold. Very fresh apple and peach flavors, but
very medium in weight, with a good deal of finesse.
A touch of weaved and smoke, but fresh fruit and
deep marmalade; this wears its magnum youth
proudly. Not at all simple, but still so oh fresh.

1985 (magnum)
The darkest color yet. A knobly, all-fine and
race on the nose, then a quince marmelade
perfumes, some mo. A pleasing but gentle mousse
perfectly matches the alim-low impression. A
bouncing, fresh, saline acidity holding it all in. If
this holds well, then it will still have some years ahead of it.

1979 (magnum)
Quite gold. Sherrated and volatile, the fruit in decline.
Lean and skeleltal, intriging but pant to its best.

1975 (magnum)
Mid-gold, lighter than expected. Maturo aromas
hay-like, wine gums and quince, but no decline:
fresh and focused, complex but not outland.
Very little mousse, but the light spritz suits the compact
portions. Develops a dry, smoky, seaweed finish
but falls away rather quickly. A wine in wise old
age, not flashy, but holding its head high.