

## Exclusive: Buried Bubbly Could Be Buried Treasure

Champagne house Pol Roger has unearthed century-old Champagne from the ruins of their collapsed cellars



Photo by: ©Michael Boudot/Champagne Pol Roger

As far as buried treasure goes, Pol Roger Champagne from the 19th century is the stuff of wine lovers' dreams. More than a century after a cave-in buried 125,000 cases of the Champagne house's aging bubbly deep underground, the current owners have unearthed 19 bottles of the lost wines, and hope to uncover more.

The story began as a disaster. At 2 a.m. on Feb. 23, 1900, Pol Roger's then-owner Maurice Roger was awoken in his Epernay home by a thunderous sound. More ominous noises followed. The company's vast cellars as well as the adjoining buildings had partially collapsed. The rain-soaked earth had given way, the ground sinking 13 feet, taking a good portion of the building with it.

"It was the beginning of both the dreams and nightmares of generations of the family and chefs de cave," Laurent d'Harcourt, president of Pol Roger, told *Wine Spectator*. "In the past, digging the new cellar, maybe the chalk was too fragile and they didn't realize it."

Thankfully, the catastrophe happened during the night when the cellars were empty and no one was injured, but the chalky earth had swallowed 500 casks and 1.5 million bottles of wine. It was a stunning loss.

Maurice and his brother Georges, second-generation owners, considered tunneling into the cellars to retrieve the wine, but a month later a neighbor's cellar also collapsed. They decided it was too risky. The brothers left the buried wine, built new cellars on Avenue de Champagne, and worked hard to rebound from the massive loss.

But no one could forget the buried wine or stop wondering if any of it had survived. Over the generations, there were quiet attempts to see if any wine could be salvaged but nothing came to fruition.

Now more than a century later, a new project to build a packaging facility on the site of the historic cellars, including the collapsed portion, gave the fifth generation of the family the opportunity to discover whether the Champagne survived.

Last month, on Jan. 15, construction workers found a void while drilling. At first the only thing the cavity yielded was broken bottles, but Pol Roger's retiring cellar master Dominic Petit and his successor Damien Cambes persisted, and their efforts paid off.

"We found one bottle the first day, then five or six the next day, then we had 19—then we stopped," said d'Harcourt. "The chalk is very humid. There was so much rain the last two months and it could be dangerous. Sometimes blocks of chalk fall down. We have to make sure the ground above is steady."



Champagne Pol Roger

*February 1900: Pol Roger's cellar collapsed after heavy rains soaked the chalk soils above.*

The 19 surviving, hand-blown bottles, encrusted in chalky soil, allow for cautious optimism. The wines are clear and the levels are correct. The corks, held in place by a metal staple, are in good shape.

The exact vintage remains a mystery—they could be as old as 1887 or as young as 1898. In the coming weeks, the staff plans to hand riddle the bottles, moving the sediment to the neck, and disgorge them. "They'll definitely be tasted, but we're taking our time," said d'Harcourt.

If past tastings of Champagne with more than 100 years of age on them are any indication, there may be some bottle variation, but there could also be some potentially beautiful wines.