

DRINKS



2 POL ROGER

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his is the fifth year on the trot that Pol Roger has been placed among the top three brands – an amazing performance. And it's up one place on 2020. As with Roederer, this is very impressive consistency and it's achieved through a lot of hard work, looking at every aspect of the business to find improvements.

It's not just a question of the wine quality, though that continues to shine. As all the many refinements that have been made at the winery in Epernay over the past few years trickle through into the new releases, that gentle improvement continues to show. For something like prestige line Churchill, where the 2009 vintage was only launched in early 2020, not all the new winery kit is in evidence yet in the bottle. For this cuvée, we have to wait for the 2012, which, based on the quality seen in the Pol vintage offerings - Brut, Blanc de Blancs and Rosé - is going to be very fine indeed.

As fifth-generation family member Hubert de Billy remarked at the launch party, 2009 Sir Winston Churchill cuvée is "a vintage for drinkers, not collectors". It's generous and agreeably approachable even in its youth. When 2012 Churchill is launched, and it may be a couple of years off yet, one suspects there will be a return to something similar to the broad shoulders, structure and fine acidity of the 2008, but perhaps with a little more charm.

At Pol's most recent launch, the 2013 vintage, introduced to the press last October via a Zoom tasting, Pol's UK managing director, James Simpson MW, saw it as representing "a return to proper, old-fashioned vintage Pol with a proper backbone". Certainly, it is a wine that will benefit from and blossom further as a result of additional cellaring, for 2013 was that rarity among recent vintages in Champagne, a predominantly October harvest, where no one started picking until the final week of September. Quite a contrast to 2020, where the majority of grapes were pressed before the end of August (see detailed harvest report, pages 41-45). The cool nights of late September and the longer maturation process have preserved a lively acidity in this vintage, and again this is a wine that offers considerable scope for further ageing.

At that October press conference, we learned from Pol's chief executive, Laurent d'Harcourt, that, thanks to a conservative and balanced approach to gently expanding the business, even when demand was high, its sales in 2020 are only slightly down on what was a very good 2019. Under his and predecessor Patrice Noyelle's leadership, it has become a more

profitable business, something that has enabled the family-run house to invest considerably over the past two decades in the Epernay site, their traditional home. "We wanted to stay in Epernay and keep a single site by transforming the existing buildings and changing the logistics for both economic and philosophical reasons," says De Billy.

A new programme of investment, begun in January 2020 and due for completion by the end of 2022, will see some restructuring and a new production building of nearly 18,000sq m on four levels, at a cost of almost €40 million. Modernising the historic buildings which have housed the company since 1851 and front on to Avenue de Champagne, a UNESCO World Heritage site, requires a sympathetic approach. But this was something tastefully achieved in the modernisation of the office and tasting rooms only opened a few years ago, which augurs well.

While consistent quality in the bottle plays a vital part, in terms



of image, Pol has something very particular that's quite difficult to put your finger on. It offers a kind of discreet luxury, with strong links to the past that are easily understood. There is nothing flash here, just an understanding of what matters and a richly aromatic style of champagne that easily wins admirers.

The links with Churchill and the ongoing patronage of British royalty doesn't do the brand image any harm – although there are in total nine champagne brands that have the Royal Warrant, Pol was the first to receive this accolade back in 1877, and has managed to feature rather regularly in many of the most recent Royal nuptials.

The strong family connection remains a vital part of the picture. Hubert de Billy's father, Christian, who was born in the great vintage of 1928, is still going strong in his nineties and the sixth generation of the family, in the shape of Bastien Collard de Billy, started work at the house last November as general secretary.

Keeping a strong connection with the past while embracing the best modern developments in the winery and the vineyard, is a balancing act that's arguably far easier for the still family-owned houses to pull off. It's no accident that, as in nearly every past year of this survey, it's the family-owned brands that dominate the top positions. And Pol Roger remains a shining example of how this is best done.



