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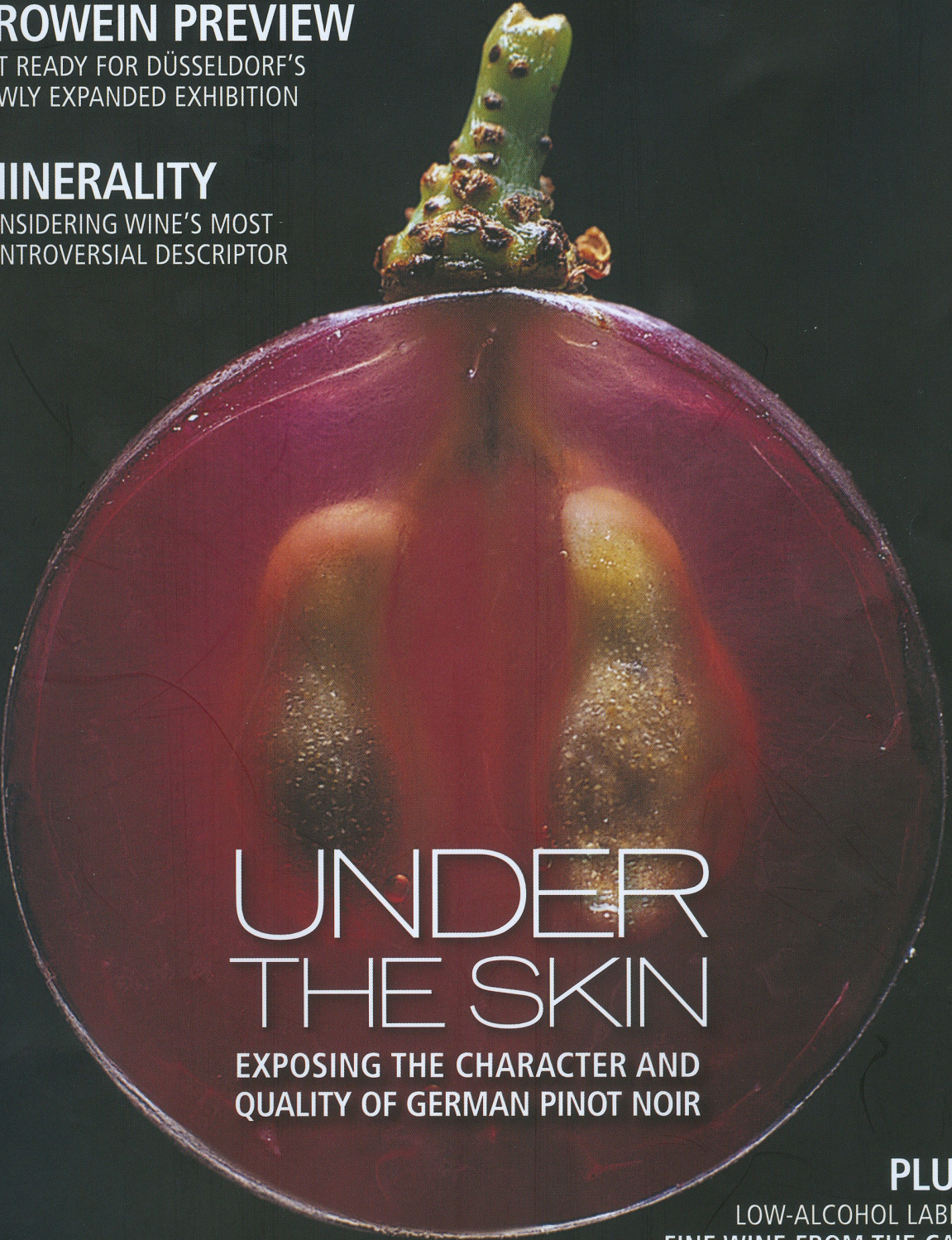
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# 'I WANT TO BE THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS'

As he prepares to leave Pol Roger, Patrice Noyelle tells **Patrick Schmitt** that despite making changes to the Champagne, he has always deeply respected its traditions



**ONE OF** Champagne's most likeable figures is retiring. After 15 years at the helm of Pol Roger, Patrice Noyelle is handing over management to a new head, though not a fresh face to the offices, or the region. Former employee at Champagne Bruno Paillard and export manager at Pol Roger since June 2008, Laurent d'Harcourt will become managing director in June, when Noyelle finally gives up control of the business – a moment, he says, which will be emotive. "I'm sure the day I leave I will be crying – it's my baby," he admits, signalling the strength of his attachment to the brand and its staff.

Noyelle, though too modest to say it himself, has achieved much in his time. Without interference from the former head and Pol Roger family member

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Christian de Billy, Noyelle has made decisions which, from the outset, precipitated the improvement of both the Champagne and the business. "Christian gave me the keys and he didn't stop me in one thing," recalls Noyelle.

His first major change, and still his most daring, was asking cellar master James Coffinet to leave and then appointing Krug's Dominique Petit – a man who Noyelle had to prize from the famous Reims-based house where he had been working for 24 years.

That was in March 1999, less than a year after Noyelle had taken control of Pol Roger. He admits it was the greatest risk of his 15-year career at the Champagne house, but, thankfully, one without dire consequences. Quite the opposite in fact, and Noyelle happily describes Petit's influence as "a major factor" in the success of Pol Roger.

"Dominic is demanding of himself and others, inspiring and confident, but also shy, and a perfectionist," says Noyelle. He also installed a sense of "serenity" in the cellar says Noyelle, implying that the situation before his arrival was as not as calm and controlled as he would have liked. Also important, he says, is how Petit adapted himself to the different style of Pol Roger, which, unlike Krug, uses no oxidative handling of the must or wine. "And he never said Krug was better."

Petit too has benefited from the move to Epernay's Pol Roger. Completed in January last year were new and enlarged winemaking facilities after an investment of almost €10m (£8.75m) by the house. "I built a winery around him," explains Noyelle, suggesting the state-of-the-art equipment was created entirely to meet Petit's requirements.

A further significant change in quality came with Noyelle's decision to only use the first pressings in any of Pol Roger's range. "We don't use the *taille* any more. Six years ago, as soon as I realised I could exchange the *taille* for *cuvée*, I did." He adds, "This is a big step forward in quality."

And before this, Noyelle had already approved another shift to alter the Pol Roger house style for the better – in 2002 the dosage in Pol Roger Brut Reserve was lowered from 12 g/l to 9 g/l in a desire for greater balance.

However, Noyelle has also respected tradition at the house, above all where it

augments the image and excellence of the product. For instance, Pol Roger has never switched to mechanised riddling in its notoriously deep cellars.

All the company's 1.8 million bottles are still turned by hand, a labour-intensive and archaic approach which Noyelle has retained on quality grounds. "It's very important only to move the sediment when it has its back to the glass and, with variations in atmospheric pressure sometimes this isn't the case. And if not, unlike gyropalates, the riddler won't turn the bottle... People say I'm the last of the Mohicans, but I want to be the last of the Mohicans, because I'm convinced riddling by hand makes a difference."

Noyelle's influence over the management of Pol Roger's sales and distribution has also benefited the house. In particular, his handling of the financial crisis after the Lehmann Brothers collapse in late 2008 was key to the long-term health of the brand. As orders dried up immediately following the headlines, Noyelle was concerned, but didn't panic, and hence turned down offers to take stock at lower prices and sell Pol Roger on discount. "I remember sales by June 2009 had dropped 50% but we still made a profit that year because we never gave up in price," he recalls.

#### ROYAL PRIVILEGE

More recently, Pol Roger has benefited from its association with British royalty. Chosen Champagne for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, Noyelle expresses incredulity at the effect



of this decision on the brand and sales, from the UK to Japan. In fact, it was during Noyelle's tenure that the brand regained its Royal Warrant – having lost it in the 1950s – allowing it to be considered for the wedding. Noyelle remembers the satisfaction of being the first new warrant holder “for some years” when the brand was told it could once more state its association with the British monarchy on 23 December 2003.

As for the selection of Pol Roger for the wedding, Noyelle says the brand was chosen during a blind tasting in 2010. Once he was informed of the decision – which he had to keep secret – an order came through for 75cl bottles of Pol Roger Brut Reserve. Noyelle, remarking that his own children had enjoyed Champagne from magnums at their wedding, changed the order to the

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equivalent amount in the larger format.

Noyelle has also been active when it comes to improving Pol Roger's global distribution.

Exports are key for the business, with over four-fifths of Pol Roger's turnover coming from outside its domestic market. In the UK, Pol Roger has its own distributor with Pol Roger Portfolio, an operation that has steadily grown to

become an important player not just for the Pol Roger brand, but other wine and spirits brands from Drouhin to Hine Cognac and Glenfarclas Whisky. The Champagne house also has a share of its distributor in Japan, while in other markets, it has worked hard to improve its spread, and has recently changed its importer in Italy to maximise the brand's position in this key Champagne market.

Securing supply has also been important, and in 2012 Pol Roger acquired 3.5 hectares, and at the start of this year bought a further 1.5ha to take its total ownership in Champagne to 90ha. In terms of production, Noyelle admits he'd like Pol Roger to become a two million-bottle business, but that's the maximum the operation can accommodate.

“Pol Roger is the last jewel in Champagne, and there is no stress –

Christian de Billy is zen and Hubert [Christian's son] is relaxed,” says Noyelle, implying that the management aren't pressurising staff unreasonably to meet short-term sales targets. Speaking of himself, Noyelle adds, “And even if I have been pushy, people love to be led.”

So what of d'Harcourt's appointment? Noyelle explains that d'Harcourt was chosen seven years ago to replace him.

“In January 2006, the day

Laurent arrived, I said to myself he would be my successor, and I had said to the headhunter [who was used to find a new staff member], I want to hire my successor, but the person has to run exports first, because that accounts for 82% of our turnover.”

Continuing, Noyelle says, referring to the seven-year period d'Harcourt has worked at Pol Roger before his

promotion to the top job, “Our business is built over time, so for me it was important to prepare my succession. When I started Christian just gave me the keys and I went on my own – I didn't want Laurent thrown to the wild like I was [as the first non-family member ever to head the company].”

## MOVING ASIDE

Outwardly they appear different. Noyelle, slightly rotund with a full head of grey hair stands in contrast to d'Harcourt, who is thin, very tall – over 6ft 3” – and almost bald.

However, d'Harcourt, coincidentally, has much in common with Noyelle. Both had previously worked and lived in Burgundy for négociants and both admit to a nervous concern when it came to moving to Champagne for their careers. Furthermore, d'Harcourt comes from the same town where Noyelle's mother was born – Châtillon-sur-Seine – while both enjoy a cigarette, although Noyelle has recently given up the strong tobacco he used to smoke, and blames his weight gain on the change.

They are also both blessed with a generous spirit, a gregarious nature, and a healthy sense of fun. And, seeing them together, it seems a friendship has formed founded on mutual respect. “I was given a lovely jewel and I'm giving it back to the family and Laurent even lovelier,” says Noyelle, recalling his period at Pol Roger. Later, d'Harcourt responds, looking at Noyelle, “If have the ability to preserve Pol Roger at the top of the first league, I will be very proud.”



## Pol Roger's leading men: the incumbent and the successor

Notably, for Noyelle, Pol Roger appears to have completed something missing in his own life. Noyelle had married into the Mommessin family and, as a result, worked for the Burgundy-based business for 25 years until the call to head up Pol Roger arrived. "I was the husband of my wife in Burgundy, and I became myself in Champagne," he admits, with great honesty and emotion.

Not only did running a Champagne house give him freedom to make, implement and earn respect from his own decisions, but it also allowed him to take part in the production side. "Mommessin were merchants and I wanted to be a winemaker," he says, adding with emphasis, "I wanted to be responsible for the product."

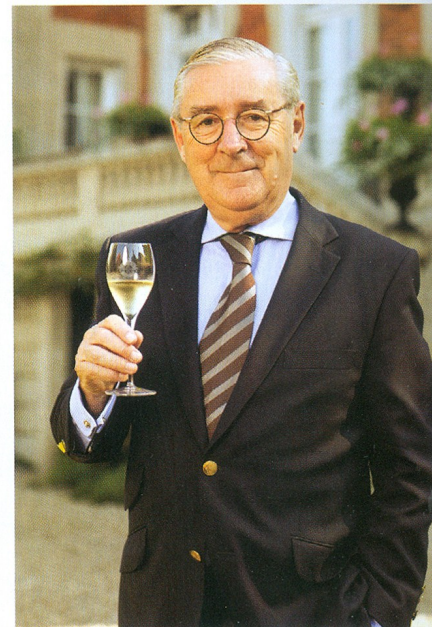
Furthermore, the late career move has created a new passion for Noyelle. "If you can do Champagne well it really is a dream wine, it is such a nice beverage, easy to drink and never tiring. I was told when I arrived in Champagne that it is the king of wines, and it really is the king of wines. I am very happy I spent 15 years of my life in Champagne."

Doubtless d'Harcourt will improve the sales and reputation of Pol Roger, building on the solid foundations for success laid by Noyelle. Indeed, d'Harcourt is part of a very strong base carefully constructed by Noyelle in anticipation of his retirement.

But while Pol Roger will continue in the same spirit, Champagne has lost something. With Noyelle's departure goes one of the region's most charming and engaging personalities. He will be missed, but, of course, not forgotten. **db**

### Patrice Noyelle: CV

- ▶ Patrice Noyelle trained as a chemical engineer and worked from 1969-70 as a research engineer at the Alcolac Chemical Corporation in the US.
- ▶ In 1971 he moved to chemical company Aquitaine Organico in Paris, where he was export director.
- ▶ Following his marriage to Bénédicte Bellenand, who is part of the Mommessin family, in 1972 he became export director at Maison Mommessin, where he worked until 1997, when he was approached by Pol Roger to become the house's managing director.
- ▶ In June 1998 he was made president of the directors at Pol Roger.
- ▶ He is also a director of Mommessin's Domaine du Clos de Tart.



### Laurent d'Harcourt: CV

- ▶ Laurent d'Harcourt was born in Burgundy and went on to study Economy and Law in Paris.
- ▶ After his studies Laurent spent a year in the United States, working with wine distributors and wholesalers in more than 17 different states.
- ▶ Laurent then returned to Dijon, France, to conduct mandatory military service as an air force officer.
- ▶ After his service Laurent became the area export manager for a small Burgundy house based in Meursault.
- ▶ Laurent stayed with this winery until it was taken over by Boisset.
- ▶ In 1996, he moved to Champagne to join Bruno Paillard, where he worked until 2004 when he left to complete an MBA at Reims Business School.
- ▶ In 2006 he was approached to join Pol Roger.
- ▶ In June 2008 he was appointed export manager for Pol Roger.
- ▶ In June 2013 he will become managing director of the Champagne house, when current MD Patrice Noyelle officially retires.

