

BLING *in a* BOTTLE

The new glampagnes aren't
just about the bottle: the stuff
inside is seriously good

Words Avril Groom

Beneath the unremarkable village of Rilly-la-Montagne in the Montagne de Reims lies a vast network of tunnels and cellars – not unusual in these parts, where for over a thousand years people have dug into the soft chalk rock for defensive purposes and, later, for storing the area’s most celebrated product – champagne. But round a corner deep in the warren, behind an ornate, wrought iron gate, is what seems to be a blazing sunrise. Serried rows of bright gold bottles reflect the lamps that highlight them – bling made flesh. Further back, pewter coloured bottles glint more subtly.

These are maturing Armand de Brignac, part of a phenomenon that is changing the upper reaches of a very traditional industry. Despite its aristocratic name, the brand started as a marketing exercise, launched in 2008 on the coat-tails of the music industry fad for treating champagne, especially in distinctive bottles, as a drinkable fashion accessory. Roederer Cristal was the initial brand of choice in its clear, gold-labelled bottle – satisfactorily expensive, it looked great in an ice bucket on a nightclub table and made its way into rap and hip-hop lyrics. That it was made in limited quantities from the best grapes in the best years was less important than its looks, though these qualities stood it in good stead when musicians took umbrage at the brand’s perceived snobby attitude to their patronage and took their custom elsewhere.

Armand de Brignac’s glitzy bottle and high price made it an obvious successor and it duly reeled in its name-checks. Rapper Jay-Z, who had very publicly dropped Cristal, liked it so much he eventually bought the brand. Yet like Cristal, which was originally made exclusively for the Russian Tsar, it is rooted in history, made by the Cattier family who go back eleven generations as champagne growers. Jean-Jacques Cattier’s mother registered the name, for a potential special cuvée, in the 1950s – it came from a character in a novel she was reading – but it was not until around 2000 that he and his son Alexandre decided to vinify the grapes from their 33 hectares of top-quality vineyard in a very particular way, aiming for excellence by blending the first, best pressings from three specific vintages. An American contact suggested the dressy bottle – the glass is coated with gold and the hand-applied pewter labels are shaped like the ace of spades, which has become the champagne’s nickname – and a very distinctive brand was born.

Predictably it was not easy to get it taken seriously. The trade agreed that the champagne was good but the price made it indeed a nightclub special. As the music connection faded and the Cattiers experimented with different varieties – a rosé, a demi-sec and a blanc de blancs, each in a different metallic-coloured bottle – it became clear that here was something new, a ‘glampagne’ that

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The Armand de Brignac grape harvest, Reims, September 2016. Top right: labelling and packing the bottles. Right: Jay Z, happy champers.

might be bought for its showy bottle but is also a wine worth savouring, especially in its most rarefied forms like the richly flavoured yet light new Blanc de Noirs A2, made entirely from pinot noir grapes and released late last year in an edition of only 2,333 bottles. It courts the client who knows and appreciates the best wines but who is also not averse to a little showmanship – a potentially lucrative market area that this very conservative industry is now busily addressing.

Change was coming anyway. In an era when exclusivity and rarity are buzzwords, small-production, top-end cuvées – long made by highly-regarded houses, but rarely promoted for fear of over-stimulating demand – are being cautiously revealed, usually in their traditional livery and often quaintly named. At the same time, new niche champagnes are arriving on the market, made in sometimes unorthodox ways, striving for top quality



Collectible cuvées Designer glampagnes

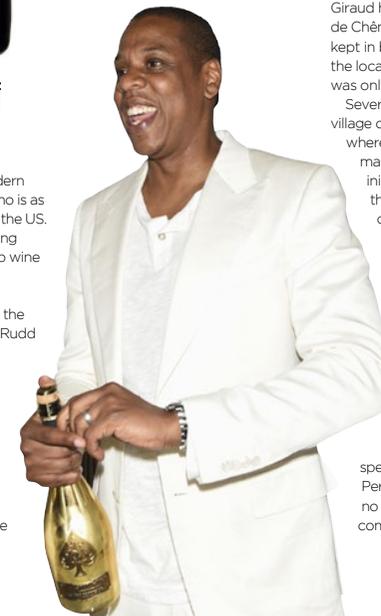


Armand de Brignac Blanc de Noirs A2

Henri Giraud Fût de Chêne Grand Cru MV09

and small-scale production and aimed, in modern ‘designer’ bottles, at an elite collector client who is as likely to come from the Far East as Europe or the US. Some, Armand de Brignac included, are winning both industry prizes and the confidence of top wine merchants, who see increasing demand for exclusive champagnes and special cuvées.

The new Blanc de Noirs is now stocked by the venerable London merchant Berry Bros and Rudd along with, more predictably, Harrods. At Mayfair wine merchant Hedonism, assistant buyer Lawrence Walker says, “This brand is now focusing on creating excellent content as well as an image. Blanc de Noirs is unusual and this is more interesting than many more established brands”. Simon Staples, the Berry Bros director who liaises with ultra high net worth clients, agrees. “It’s very good champagne, once you get past the



bottle which I’ve never really been convinced about”, he says. “I am extremely impressed by the new Blanc de Noirs, which will keep for decades, and I think they have refined the taste of the Gold recently, making it drier and more sophisticated – they are getting there on quality.” He adds that there now are a number of very niche, very small production, ‘designer’ champagnes arriving on the market, “that in quality terms pose a real challenge to the established special cuvées from the grande marques”. Most come from small parcels of high-quality vineyard, in some cases – and unusually for champagne – from a single vineyard. Staples mentions Henri Giraud’s Fût de Chêne Grand Cru MV09 from the highly-regarded commune of Ay, in an elegant, streamlined bottle. The “MV” stands for multi-vintage – 70 per cent of the wine is from 2009, while the rest is a blend of older reserve wines. Giraud has now made a rarer blend of the best Fût de Chêne vintages, aged for a year in oak barrels and kept in bottle until mature. It is named Argonne after the local forest where the oak is sourced. The 2004 was only released two years ago.

Several special cuvées come from the fabled village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, in the Côte des Blancs, where the best blanc de blancs champagnes are made entirely from the chardonnay grape, often initially showing a steely minerality which allows them to age well so they develop great complexity. Pierre Péters’ Les Chétilions is one example, made from the hand-selected produce of a tiny 2.5 hectare vineyard with vines up to eighty years old. With their flamboyant, black and gold labels, the bottles are matured for as long as it takes – the 2000 and 2005 are available. Like other top cuvées it is made only in notably good years. Even more rarefied is Champagne Salon Blanc de Blancs, in its austere bottle with a large gold ‘S’, from an even smaller, one-hectare patch of Le Mesnil vines with additions from other, specially-chosen corners of the commune. Persuading its winemaker to declare a vintage is no mean feat – there have only been 39 in the company’s 105-year history. It keeps a minimum

DRAPPIER TOLD THEM ABOUT A SPECIAL CUVÉE HIS FATHER MADE IN THE 1960S FROM THREE TINY VINEYARDS. THEY FUNDED HIM TO REMAKE THE WINE



Laurent-Perrier
Grand Siècle

matched against Krug's non-vintage Grand Cuvée which, as a blend of over 120 wines from up to 15 vintages then matured for six years, is a masterpiece of complex construction. As is Dom Pérignon, a vintage blend that was the first prestige cuvée, launched in 1936 with the 1921 vintage. Its eighteenth-century style bottle is still a marker of excellence for many clients and, says Simon Staples at Berry Bros, "It is a yardstick by which any top champagne is judged. It is no way a niche brand – they never say how much they make but I estimate six million bottles a year – and keeping up the consistency and quality on such a scale is a remarkable achievement."

Laurent-Perrier's Grand Siècle, in a chic, discreetly black-labelled bottle, is another excellent non-vintage special cuvée from a grande marque, while Walker's favourite for a strong look plus very good champagne is Taittinger's Collection Series, that marks small quantities of outstanding vintages with a special, artist-designed bottle. In 1983, Claude Taittinger approached Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely to design a bottle for the 1978 vintage. Later designs by such luminaries as Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg have become collector's items. The 2008 vintage released last year is the first to feature a photographer, Brazil's Sebastião Salgado, who works mainly in black and white, and the very chic bottle is in black with a white design.

Prices on all these cuvées are very variable, depending on vintage, age, bottle size and rarity – £100 to several thousands covers it. But the sense of well-being created by one of these glossy and delicious bottles in an on-deck ice bucket is incalculable.

of twenty years – the 2004 is the latest available (42,000 bottles) but kind climatic conditions mean the 2006, 2007 and 2008 are all in waiting. For rarity and quality, Walker nominates Boërl and Kroff, a boutique champagne house started in 1994 by two young men after they met highly respected winemaker Michel Drappier. He told them about a special, forgotten cuvée his father had made in the 1960s from three minuscule grand cru vineyards along the Aube valley, in the far south of Champagne. They funded him to remake the wine, to extraordinary effect, from some of the most complex and long-lasting blanc de noirs and rosé champagne, made only in the best years and only in humbly-labelled magnum size upwards, which keep longer. Initially for their private use, the first release, in 2007, was 2,500 magnums of the 1996. It is predicted to last a century.

For many Le Mesnil means Clos du Mesnil, the blanc de blancs from grande marque Krug's beautiful 17th-century walled vineyard in the village. Known for their delicate spritz and biscuity flavours, Krug champagnes are held in high renown and this cuvée, launched in 1986 with the 1979 vintage, is one of its purest expressions, complemented by the even scarcer Clos d'Ambonnay blanc de noirs, launched in 2007 with the 1995. They have to be



Pierre Péters
Les Chétillons

Champagne Salon
Blanc de Blancs

Boërl and
Kroff

Krug Clos
du Mesnil