

Ageing potential of non-vintage champagnes. Is there life after disgorgement?

Motivation

The past five years I have visited the Champagne region more than twenty times. Each time I have discovered new Champagne houses (big or small), met new people, enjoyed restaurants, bars and nice encounters.

Ever since I fell in love with champagne I find it fascinating how consumers look at the product and enjoy it and how this differs from wine professionals and aficionados.

Objective

Consumers tend to think champagne does not keep well, and needs to be drunk young. However, in my experience, champagnes can age well and develop more complex aromas.

Therefore I wanted to explore this in more depth, taking into account the opinions of consumers, retailers, houses and growers.

To back up opinions, I also wanted to gather technical information on what makes a champagne age worthy. Should you age champagnes, and if so, which factors improve ageability?

Methodology

In order to have a total insight in the market I used different methods. Firstly I visited the region in March and April, to organize encounters, visit shops and look for older bottles.

Secondly I interviewed different champagne professionals: cellar masters, growers, a professor and the Comité Champagne (CIVC).

Thirdly I organized two tasting panels with Belgian sommeliers, where we tasted 24 champagnes in total.

Last but not least, I filled in the gaps with insights from important literature on champagne.

Content

In chapter 1 I researched on the **technical and facts part of ageing champagnes**. Apart from opinions I wanted to learn which factors are important in making champagne, which make it more or less suitable for ageing. Grape variety and viticultural decisions of course, play an initial role.

During the winemaking process, winemakers can make a lot of different choices all impacting the future of that bottle. But it doesn't stop once the bottle has been disgorged and bottled. In order to enjoy the aged champagne to the fullest there are rules about storage and serving conditions to be followed. It's clear that a flute won't showcase the full potential of an aged champagne.

In chapter 2 I wanted to put to the test, and **taste and experience aged champagnes** in comparison to their younger version. I went to the Champagne region on a quest for aged bottles, and searched within my personal network. With these aged bottles I hosted two evenings where, together with Belgian sommeliers, we tasted the aged champagnes in comparison to their younger version. It is clear to state that champagne can age, even get better with age. There was actually no bottle where I didn't think it aged well. Question if you should age some champagnes, like rosé, was something else.

In chapter 3 I summarized **different market opinions**, mostly people I interviewed, from houses, growers, a professor to the Comité Champagne.

In chapter 4 I looked into the **market readiness** and opinions of consumers, retailers, growers and houses. How do they look at aged champagnes, and is this a style they aim at or are looking for? In other words, is there a market for?

Conclusion

Through researching and writing about the ageing potential of non-vintage champagnes after disgorgement I came across lots of factors that have an influence on the ageing, which make an important technical point, but there are also different opinions about whether you should age champagne. There are factors like grape variety, the use of (barrel-aged) reserve wine, ageing on the lees, dosage and many more that make a difference in the life of a champagne bottle.

I have reviewed relevant literature, have done interviews with influential experts in the industry, organized tasting panels to conclude that champagne is a very qualitative wine, that can age. **Question is if you like the more complex aromas?**

Producers like Bruno Paillard, Charles Heidsieck, Veuve Fourny and Henri Giraud are convinced their champagnes can age. By tasting more than 24 champagnes with sommeliers, we concluded unanimously aged champagnes have far more complex aromas, which we liked. But for the standard consumer with little knowledge it remains difficult to understand why you should age champagne.

We can conclude there still is a gap between what producers, sommeliers and retailers know and experience, and what standard consumers are expecting. The last category lacks knowledge and there is an important role for producers, sommeliers and retailers to change the consumer's habits, and give them more knowledge on why they should cellar their champagnes.

I'd like to encourage producers to further more experiment with long-term ageing and share their passion with their customers. This way, if all professionals play their part, **consumers may get convinced that aged champagnes are one of the world's most vinous, gastronomical, complex and enjoyable drinks!**