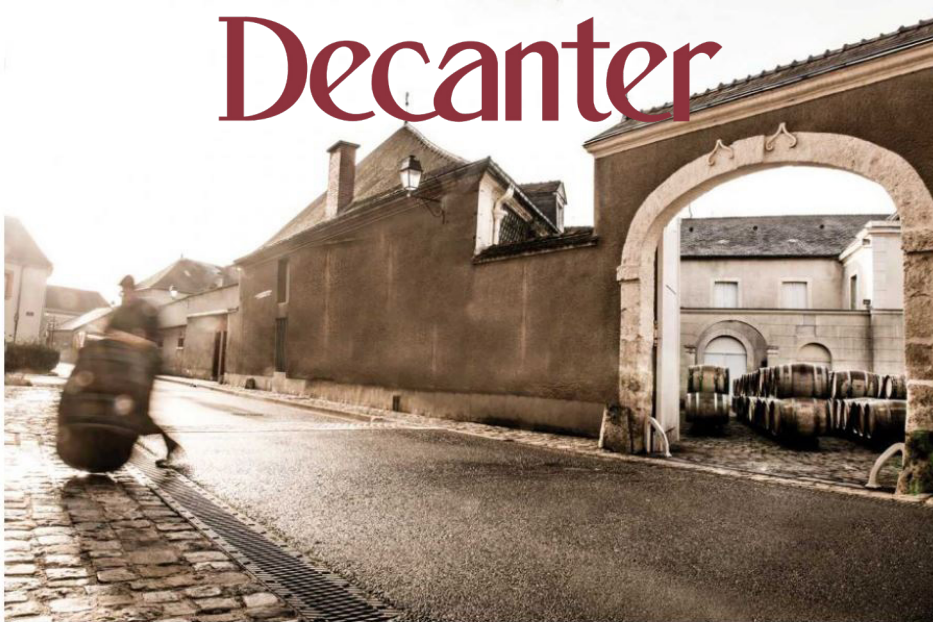


Decanter



Barrels drying in the courtyard at Bollinger's base on Rue Jules Lobet in Aÿ. Credit: Michael Boudot

OAK IN CHAMPAGNE: A NEW CHAPTER & 20 WINES TASTED

Traditionally in common usage before being elbowed out by the advent of stainless steel, oak barrels are again playing a major role in shaping many of Champagne's most exclusive cuvées.

Tom Hewson
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Bollinger's archives contain an unusual letter, penned by Madame Lily Bollinger herself in 1963 and addressed, surprisingly, to the house of Krug. Having lost her husband Jacques, head of the house, in 1941, 'Madame Jacques' was entrusted with maintaining Bollinger's prestige at a time when Champagne's cellars were modernising.

'At the beginning, she didn't know the daily work of the house,' explains Bollinger's current chef de cave Denis Bunner. 'But she put her trust in André Bergeot, the cellar master at the time. She was loyal to oak, and she wanted to start an association to help keep the tradition.'

Krug, then, was first on the invitation list. But why the desire to establish such an association in the first place?

There aren't many places where the use of oak in vinification is much of a story, after all. Champagne, though, undertook a very particular journey through the second half of the 20th century that saw an almost-complete abandonment of oak by the 1960s and 1970s.

'Before the 1950s there were 150 tonnelleries (barrel makers) in Champagne,' points out Sébastien Le Golvet, chef de cave at Henri Giraud. The advent of concrete and then stainless steel tanks in the 1960s proved particularly attractive to the Champenois, whose volumes could be sizeable and whose wines took much of their roundness and texture from – rather than oak – reserve wines [from previous harvests, stored and matured], ageing on lees, and dosage [the addition after secondary fermentation of a 'liqueur' mix of sugar dissolved in wines, according to the intended final style of the wine].

An association between Bollinger and Krug never surfaced. Both, though, stuck to their use of predominantly old, small (205L or 228L) barrels for fermentation. It wasn't until the 1990s that the emerging names of the modern grower Champagne movement began seeking inspiration from their Burgundian neighbours, not only in their focus on single-terroir wines, but in their barrel usage, too. Anselme Selosse was the poster boy, but Pierre and Sophie Larmandier, Frédéric Savart and a number of the growers that made headway in the early 2000s vinified partially in oak. And by the 2000s, houses including Veuve Clicquot and Louis Roederer were using large oak foudres in their blends once again.

Anything but oakiness

Bunner, standing in Champagne's last remaining in-house cooperage with cooper Gaël Chaunut, maintains that Champagne in oak is more about the subtle effects of micro-oxygenation through the porosity of the staves than the sort of oaky flavours expected of, say, young white Burgundy. 'Some people are oxygenating their musts artificially, but we prefer to use craftsmanship to manage it,' says Bunner; something echoed at Krug where the old barrels are said to immunise the wine against premature ageing.

Do warmer, riper harvests mean oak is less necessary to broaden the wines? Not according to Bunner. 'The more ripeness you get, the more phenolics (bitter-tasting compounds from the grape skins) you get. Oak helps to oxidise (and remove) the fragile components at the beginning. We just had a hot year, so we know that oak helps to keep the freshness.'

Florent Nys, cellar master at Billecart-Salmon down the road in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, agrees. 'Oak with blocked malolactic fermentation will bring freshness,' he offers, explaining the producer's approach to its 100% barrel-aged cuvées Brut Sous Bois and Le Clos Saint-Hilaire.

Billecart-Salmon also adds about 8% oak-fermented wines into its Brut Réserve. 'It's a new development,' says Nys. 'We have more concentration, more depth. Oak is only used for the oldest vineyards, the grands crus, our best Meunier, with high natural sugar.' Bollinger, too, only vinifies entirely in oak for its vintage Grande Année cuvée and above; its Special Cuvée sees around 10% oak-aged reserve wines, depending on the annual requirements, with the remainder vinified in stainless steel.

For top still Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines it is normal to see a period of *élevage* – or maturation – in oak after fermentation, sometimes lasting two years or more. In Champagne, though, this period tends to be shorter; the wines are prepared for bottling and second fermentation in the spring and summer following the harvest, so it's rare for any wine to spend more than nine or 10 months in oak unless it is a longer-aged reserve wine.

Age & subtlety

At Bollinger, barrels are an average of 15-20 years of age, at which point the aromas associated with oakiness – vanilla and sweet spices – have long since disappeared. With 4,000 barrels in the cellar, a small intake of new barrels hides itself in the blend. At Billecart-Salmon, though, a uniquely Champenois oddity occurs to soften the impact: rinsing. 'Champagne is subtle, we don't want new oak flavours and tannins in the wines,' explains Nys. The new barrels are filled with pressings [the juice extracted from grapes after the initial, best-quality pressings] for five years, and this sucks out the oakiness from the barrels before the juice is discarded. 'At five years, the barrels contribute to the wine, but with no tannins,' adds Nys.

Not everyone, though, plays the subtle card. More and more of the younger generation are embracing the idea that the flavour of new, or relatively new, oak can be part of a great Champagne. Smaller houses such as Henri Giraud in Aÿ have been at the spearhead. 'We have two grand cru terroirs – Aÿ, and the Argonne forest,' says Le Golvet. 'It's me who makes the barrels, me who does the toasting, and I'm not making furniture; it's a slow, gentle toast, one to two hours.'

'We don't want tannin, bitterness or astringency. When it gets to notes of bread, pain au chocolat, apricot tart, then I know it's ready.' New oak barrels are also in rotation at producers such as Dhondt-Grellet and Ulysse Collin.

Oak à la carte

Champagne's susceptibility to over-oxidation means that producers tend to shoot for the slowest-growing, tightest-grained oak for their top wines as it lets less oxygen in once a barrel is filled with wine. 'Our wine is very delicate,' says Le Golvet. 'The Argonne soil is very poor, and when oak grows here it grows very slowly, with a tighter grain. If I used inferior forests it wouldn't work.' It's refreshing, though, to hear a winemaker openly discuss the flavour of oak, especially when some cuvées, such as Giraud's ambitious Argonne, are fermented entirely in new barrels.

Most barrels in the region, though, are bought second-hand from Burgundy. At Billecart-Salmon, individual wines and grape varieties get tailor-made marriages with oak of different sizes, ages and, crucially, coopers. 'Seguin Moreau gives very sweet, fat wine, but François Frères gives a firm structure and tension,' says Nys. Billecart's much larger foudres hold more delicate wines that benefit from a lower ratio of wood surface to wine and even slower micro-oxidation: '[Foudres] can make elegant wines, but you need elegant juice to be able to do it.'

The Tasting

The wines in this tasting were all 100% vinified in oak. Some styles, such as those of Krug, Vilmart & Cie, and recent Bollinger releases, retained formidable freshness and detail. Others, such as the Henri Giraud, as well as wines from smaller producers such as Rousseaux-Batteux and Mouzon Leroux, successfully wove in some savoury, nutty and oxidative tones, while some, such as the Devaux Sténopé, even played with a little newer oak influence.

No matter the stylistic choice, one thing is clear; what was once the norm, then a niche, and even perhaps a novelty, is today none of the above. If 'Madame Jacques', Lily Bollinger, were alive today, she would no doubt be content to see Champagne's traditional oak vinification alive and well.