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THE  
CHAMPAGNE  
GUIDE 2012 - 2013

9/10 – THE CHAMPAGNE GUIDE  
HALL OF HONOUR

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# THE CHAMPAGNE GUIDE 2012 - 2013



STEPPING INTO POL ROGER'S production facility in Épernay is like entering a different world. "We call this the kitchen," introduced Laurent D'Harcourt, but this was not like any kitchen I'd ever seen. Immaculately polished stainless steel tanks perfectly reflected shiny white tiles and snow white surfaces. It was as if we were entering a brain surgeon's theatre or a NASA assembly room, and I had an uneasy feeling that I might be asked to don a body suit, lest I contaminate this precision machine with a single molecule of foreign material.

I have been buying Pol Roger for decades but it was not until that moment that everything about this celestial estate suddenly snapped into perfect focus. How it is that the favourite champagne of Australia's wine trade is so desperately precise, so intricately delicate and so flawlessly pristine. And why it is that the current shipment is the finest that has ever emerged from this extraterrestrial building. That polished exterior reveals the manifesto that defines all that lies beneath.

The pace of advancement amazes me every time I visit Pol Roger. Since chef de cave Dominique Petit joined the company in 1999, after twenty-four years at Krug, more than nine million Euros has been invested in upgrading the winemaking facilities alone. And it doesn't seem to stop. When I visited four weeks before vintage this year, the site was buzzing with activity. There were new cold settling and fermentation halls, six new tiny 2200L tanks, the old concrete tanks were being refreshed, the cellar extended and the cellar floors concreted to reduce vibrations from the electric vehicles.

Stainless steel fermentation space was updated in 2001, 2004, 2008, 2010 and 2011 and more consistent and more precise disgorgement and dosage machines were installed. Even the address has changed. After twenty years of discussion with the council regarding the renaming of the street, Pol Roger is now proudly located at 1 Rue Winston Churchill, although it won't make a big deal about this. "The street is not that nice!" admitted D'Harcourt, who replaced Christian Pol Roger as the face of the company when he retired six years ago.

Pol Roger's investment is not for the sake of increasing production, but to improve quality and consistency. Having already recently grown from 1.5 million to 1.8 million bottles annually, there are no immediate plans to increase further. "Every year for the past twelve years we have seen results in the consistency of the wines from the work we are doing in the winery," D'Harcourt explained. "We have made a solid investment to ensure the family house remains secure in the family's hands into the 21st century."



There is another reason, too. "Dominique Petit is very precise," D'Harcourt pointed out. Pol Roger's preference for stainless steel over concrete and oak barrels rests on judicious temperature control of its musts during clarification and vinification. Like Billecart-Salmon, musts undergo a cold settling process at just eight degrees, producing the most pristine juice. A cool primary fermentation maintains fruit freshness and aromatic definition in its wines.

Secondary fermentation is likewise cool, thanks to Pol Roger's 7.5 kilometres of cellars, which are among the coolest (nine to eleven degrees Celsius) and deepest (up to thirty-five metres) in Épernay. Most of the bottles rest in the deepest parts of the cellar. This slow fermentation produces wines of great finesse, fine effervescence and enduring longevity. "Greater precision in the first and second fermentations have enabled a trend toward lower dosage," explained D'Harcourt.

Everything in the cellar is done by hand by a team of no more than ten. Pol Roger boasts four of the remaining fifteen riddlers still working in Champagne. Each turning 50,000-60,000 bottles daily, it takes four to five weeks to riddle each bottle. Every bottle is stacked in the cellar by hand, including every non-vintage wine. A painstaking process for a company with 8.5 million bottles in the cellar.

Pol Roger provides for an impressive fifty-five percent of this production from eighty-nine hectares of estate vines. "These holdings allow us to be more consistent over the long-term," D'Harcourt explained. The remainder is sourced from long-term contracts under an arrangement that promotes quality. "Many of the growers from whom we source also care for vineyards that we own ourselves," he said. "They cultivate our vineyards, we press all the fruit and then give a portion back to them in payment."

With such a regime of excellence in the vineyard and winery, under the ownership of the same family since the house was founded in 1849, Pol Roger's success is no surprise. "We have been selling champagne in all of our markets under allocation in recent years," D'Harcourt explained. "We could sell two or three times the volume in the UK, but we don't want to be too dependent on one market. We have been telling Australia to stop selling because we don't have enough to send! We simply cannot produce more to sell."

Now there's a line you don't often hear from any medium-sized wine company. And with ever-improving facilities every time I visit, this company is poised for even greater things to come. It certainly is a different world at Pol Roger.

— TYSON STELZER

*International Champagne Writer of the Year 2011*

*Louis Roederer | International Wine Writer's Awards 2011*



## Pol Roger Pure Brut Nature NV

Like the Brut Réserve, a blend of the three champagne varieties in equal proportions, but a different blend here, with more floral parcels and less higher acid fruit. A zero dosage version of the Brut Réserve apparently didn't work (if only every house exercised such attention to detail). This is one of the few Pure Brut styles more graceful than the dosaged wine. The quintessential aperitif style, it's purpose-built to a recipe of purity, precision and honed style. The bouquet has delightful aromas of little white flowers, fresh lemon and white peach, quite remarkable without any sweetness to lift it. The palate is linear and long, fresh and floral with soft minerality that lingers. Disgorged April/May 2011; 2007 base vintage. Tasted July 2011 in Épernay.

— **94 points**

## Pol Roger Brut Réserve NV

The same base vintage as was current in Australia last year, but a fresher disgorgement here. While disgorgement dates are not marked on bottles, the packaging date on the carton will always be about three months after disgorgement. An attractive and refreshing aperitif style, clean, crisp and well made. The classic fine bead of the house is on full display here, with flavours of lemon and white peach on the front palate and subtle minerality on the finish. It lacks a little in mid-palate presence and carry through the finish. One bottle tasted in Australia was less lively and slightly more developed, taking on walnut skin and savoury notes and finishing short.

— **93 Points**



## Pol Roger Brut Vintage 2000

I predicted last year that vintage 2000 was well-poised for medium-term cellaring. A year on, it's ticking along nicely, holding its elegance and determined focus of citrus, preserved lemon and white fruit that defined it last year, while mature nuances of ginger nut biscuit, cloves, cinnamon, buttered toast and roast almond are building slowly. Its persistent, chalky minerality is undeviating throughout.

— **95 Points**

## Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs 2000

If you adored the 1999 as much as I did last year, just wait for the 2000! For a warmer vintage, the pure and pronounced minerality, incredible drive and taut acid energy that it carries are something to behold. Testimony to the molecular precision of Pol Roger's regime, after a decade in the cellar its pale straw hue still holds a vibrant green tint and its palate is beach-fresh with lemon blossom, lemon butter, preserved lemon, yellow plum and white peach. Hints of vanilla bean and nutmeg are subtle suggestions of maturity. The finish surges onward amid waves of minerality. 96 Points Disgorged December 2010 or January 2011; usually only grand cru Côte des Blancs but sometimes a touch of Vertus.

## Pol Roger Brut Rosé 2002

This was such a highlight last year that I chose it above all else to introduce the book on the very first page. It has risen even higher in my esteem a year on because, unlike many highly-rated rosés last year, it has not shed one iota of the freshness that endeared it so highly. This is catwalk rosé, sculpted, taut, slender and sporting perfectly formed curves. Its

pale salmon hue with a tint of copper has not evolved in a year, nor have its layers of wild strawberries, red berries or black cherries. If anything, it has only blossomed in exotic spice, anise and hints of sous bois (forest floor). It gives an impression of richness, then stretches out into a beautifully honed, sculpted finish of great finesse and fine minerality. Marrying glorious elegance with gorgeous complexity – you could gaze into her eyes for hours or engage in vigorous conversation. Take your pick, she'll entrance you either way. 96 Points Based on the vintage brut blended with red wine; 50% pinot noir, 35% chardonnay, 15% pinot noir red wine from Bouzy, Ambonnay and Cumières; cold fermented below 180C; secondary fermentation in the deepest parts of the cellar (90C).

## Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill 1999

I asked D'Harcourt about the blend. He grinned. "You can ask every year and I won't let on!" I grinned back and promised I would! Sir Winston is defined by sophisticated, polished restraint. Every bit as youthful in Champagne as it was a year ago, this is an ultra-refined champagne of a very pale straw hue, singing with structural, chalky minerality that penetrates deep into the finish. The palate juxtaposes awesome power and consummate poise, with super-pure lemon, pear and apple fruits becoming flint, toast, nutmeg and honey. Its energy and silky structure carry into a never-ending story finish. 98 Points Predominantly pinot noir, with some chardonnay, all from vineyards under vine at the time of Churchill; cold settled at 60C; fermented below 180C; full malolactic fermentation; secondary fermentation in the lowest part of the cellars (90C); aged 10 years on lees.

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