

Perrier-Jouët Belle Epoque Jéroboams 1975–1998

Tom Stevenson relates the fascinating story of Perrier-Jouët's ornate Belle Epoque bottle and prestige cuvée via a 200th anniversary tasting in Jéroboam, the large format offering particular pleasures not found in bottle or magnum

It is not often that even the most privileged of Champagne tasters get to taste an entire vertical from Jéroboam, so I was looking forward to tasting Belle Epoque back to 1975, the very first vintage to be bottled in this format. This was one of Perrier-Jouët's 200th anniversary events, but unlike the big, glitzy affairs with the rich and famous and where everyone is dressed up to the nines, this was just for a small group of professional tasters. This was work, but that's not to say it was not a pleasure!

Many houses produced elaborately enameled bottles in the Art Nouveau period, or the Belle Epoque (1890s–1914), but they had an ephemeral existence, and by the 1960s they were totally forgotten. Then, Pierre Ernst found four dusty old Belle Epoque bottles in a cupboard at Perrier-Jouët. Ernst was an associate of Michel Budin, the president of Perrier-Jouët, and a future president himself. He was a man who could get things done, and when he saw that one of the dusty bottles was signed by none other than Emile Gallé, Ernst became a man on a mission. It was decorated with an enameled arabesque of anemones, and he knew that if he could mass-produce

the bottle, it would be perfect for Maxim's in Paris.

For his first vintage, 1964, Ernst needed 5,000 bottles, but everyone to whom he took the bottle told him it would be impossible to replicate. Gallé was, after all, the great Belle Epoque glassmaker, a master of his art, and Ernst soon discovered why. To fire the embossed enamel design on to the bottle, Gallé had to work at 1,112°F (600°C), just 90°F (50°C) below the melting point of the glass. Eventually, Ernst discovered an artisanal enamel specialist in Argenteuil by the name of Jean Bigou who did not know how it might be achieved but was determined to have a go. A single bottle was one thing, but 5,000 bottles required a reliable, repeatable process. Bigou started by applying very fine layers of the enamel, successively firing these at lower temperatures to build up the embossing, but this did not work until he mixed a proprietary neutral flux into the enamel powders. He excitedly informed Ernst that he could begin production. Perrier-Jouët delivered 5,000 bottles, and they all went through just two ovens, firing each bottle several times.

While the first vintage of Belle Epoque was resting on its lees, Ernst took a sample of the bottle to Louis Vaudable, who used to be the proprietor of Maxim's and was still in day-to-day charge under the new ownership of Pierre Cardin. Vaudable went ballistic with delight and immediately demanded exclusive rights. Eventually a deal was done to give Maxim's exclusive rights for the on-trade and Fauchon, the elite grocery store, exclusive retail distribution, but only for the first two years. A final twist to the story is that, prior to Maxim's and Fauchon's arrangement, the first bottles of Perrier-Jouët 1964 Belle Epoque were opened at the Alcazar in Paris to celebrate Duke Ellington's 70th birthday on April 29, 1969.

Belle Epoque

All of the following vintages are composed of more or less 50% Chardonnay (primarily Cramant and Avize, but also Mesnil-sur-Oger, Chouilly, and Vertus), 40–45% Pinot Noir (Mailly, Verzy, and Aÿ, but also Verzenay), and 5–10% Pinot Meunier (Dizy and Venteuil). Given time, almost every vintage of Belle Epoque becomes dominated by Chardonnay from Cramant, with 1985 possibly the only exception.

Belle Epoque in Jéroboam

All Jéroboams of Belle Epoque receive a *liquer de tirage* of just 18g/l, rather than the 24g/l that is used for the regular 75cl bottles of Belle Epoque. While 24g/l produces a pressure of approximately 6 atmospheres, 18g/l obviously provides only 4.5 atmospheres, which is closer to the old *crémant* style than fully *mousseux*. Since part of the delight of drinking a mature vintage is the natural softening of the mousse that comes with time, any Champagne aficionado who prefers a softer mousse but also prefers fresher aromas to more mellow ones should always buy Belle Epoque in Jéroboams! Thanks to this softer mousse, we tasted wines of a slightly different structure than the same vintages in regular 75cl bottles. In addition to this, the wines have aged more slowly in the larger bottle format due to roughly the same volume of oxygen found in the head space and approximately the same volume of oxygen ingress through the cork. The wines should thus be fresher than their 75cl-bottle equivalents. It should also be pointed out that, apart from the three youngest Champagnes, all the vintages tasted were historically disgorged. This was brave of Perrier-Jouët (because recently disgorged old vintages are much safer) and more relevant for readers who have had these bottles in their own cellars since they were released. The first vintage to be bottled in Jéroboam was 1975. All the vintages tasted underwent second fermentation and lees aging sealed by corks, not crown caps.

1998

Disgorged June 2007; *dosage* 8g/l. The "Living Legacy" vintage (see p.42), thus Perrier-Jouët is staking its reputation on this Champagne surviving 100 years! It certainly has a very youthful, pale-lemon hue. Very pure, linear, and crisp, with toasty minerality on the nose leading to crisp, citrus fruits on the palate, with fine acidity dominating the finish and grapefruit with smoky toast on the aftertaste. **18.5**

1996

Disgorged May 2007; *dosage* 8g/l. Noticeably deeper color than the 1998 and even deeper than the 1995, yet hugely better than in 75cl bottle. The aromas are more winy than yeast-complexed, but very clean, with a lovely purity of fruit on the palate, firmly underscored by excitingly high acids that give way after some length to a delightful peachiness of fruit on the aftertaste. In bottle, the 1995 always outshines the 1996. In Jéroboam, they are equal in their own different way. **18.5**

1995

Disgorged January 2007; *dosage* 8g/l. A Champagne starting its second phase of life with immense fruit and great finesse. Though softer than the 1996, it has the purity, freshness, and focus of Cramant Chardonnay. Really quite *viv* (brisk) at the end, leading to a long, smooth finish and great finesse on the aftertaste. **18.5**

1990

Disgorged March 1999; *dosage* 10g/l. Great Belle Epoque typicality of toasty Cramant Chardonnay on the nose, but the toasty notes have not really penetrated the palate, though it is mellow and developed, with the fruit pitching in halfway and extending on to the finish, with quite a bit of toast returning on the aftertaste. Rather surprisingly, this seems more relaxed than the 1990 in bottle. **18.5**

1989

Disgorged November 1997; *dosage* 9g/l. The color noticeably deeper again. These color observations are all relative, though, since they would all look young and fresh in isolation, and even in comparison there are no overly developed aromas. In fact, the nose is really quite closed, though that is certainly not the case on the palate, which is rich, creamy, and exotic. In 75cl bottle, this vintage has veered back and forth between the red fruit of Pinot and the classic Chardonnay of Cramant, but in Jéroboam it is straddling both and throwing in an almost 1976-like tropical element before finishing with a hint of peach that turns to peach stone on the aftertaste (and that is Cramant). **18**

1985

Disgorged March 1993; *dosage* 9g/l. For me, 1985 has always been a great year, but with the benefit of the larger Jéroboam format, the brightness and freshness on the nose are exceptional, with slowly evolved toasty aromas mingling with the barest hints of mocha, vanilla, and roasted coffee. It is the Pinot Noir that, unusually for Belle Epoque, dominates this wine, which is extraordinarily masculine, with its forceful palate of rich, yeast-complexed dried fruits and candied peel. This Jéroboam has a bright-gold hue, great extract, intensity, and finesse. **19**

1982

Disgorged June 1987; *dosage* 9g/l.

Extraordinarily pale for a Champagne almost 30 years old—paler than the 1985, though the yield in 1985 was less than half that in 1982, thanks to frost. Very toasty on both nose and palate, with very light and delicate fruit, spoiled only by the barest hint of mushroom, though it is fresh-peeled! I have had some stunning bottles, showing a long, gentle richness that is missing here. From another Jéroboam, I imagine this must be sublime, but as is: **17**

1978

Disgorged May 1986; *dosage* 9.5g/l. The deepest gold color so far, with very toasty aromas and atypical litchi fruit on the nose. Though this was the least impressive wine of the tasting, it should be noted that 1978 was not a very good vintage in Champagne, and at the time, Belle Epoque was the best 1978 to be released. I just wish we could have tasted the 1979 in Jéroboam, which is still pure class in 75cl bottle. **16.5**

1975

Disgorged November 1983; *dosage* 11.5g/l. Exquisitely mature, with all the complexity that only time can bring, this vintage in Jéroboam is elegantly feminine with the minerality of Cramant Chardonnay controlling every facet of its character—from the toasty minerality of its nose, to the immediate impression of sweetness of its palate. Though this has a slightly higher *dosage*, its sweetness is of fruit and minerality. It is just so Cramant, so Belle Epoque! **19.5**



Photography courtesy of Perrier-Jouët

The Jéroboams have helped preserve the elegance, freshness, and youthful appearance of the wine back to the first vintage in this indulgent format, the 1975