



THE
WORLD'S
MOST ADMIRABLE
CHAMPAGNE
BRANDS
2019

DRINKS
INTERNATIONAL

1 POL ROGER

POLROGER.CO.UK

It's been a steady climb to the summit. Third in our survey in 2017 when it was sandwiched between Bollinger and Louis Roederer. Last year it was second, behind Roederer and ahead of Charles Heidsieck. Now it has made it to the podium, the top of the pile, making the smiles at 32 Avenue de Champagne – “Champagne's most drinkable address”, according to Winston Churchill – even broader.

There's a certain irony that it has pipped Krug to the post this year, given that, for the past 19 years, it has had as head winemaker Dominique Petit, poached from Krug back in the late nineties. Petit retired last March (2018) and the new boy on the block is Damien Cambres, whose two decades of winemaking experience come from various co-operative wineries, including a spell at Feuillatte in Chouilly (1997-2012).

He must be pretty smart to pick up one of the most coveted jobs in Champagne. He inherits all the modern winemaking tools you could wish for, thanks to a sustained programme of investment at Pol. And, after a challenging start with the 2017 harvest, he quickly gets what looks like a dream vintage (see our detailed report on pages 38-41) to play with.

A change of chef de cave highlights that the timescale involved in producing great champagne is considerable. The first vintage Petit made using all the new kit was the 2012, the Blanc de Blancs vintage of which is just coming on to the market now, months after his retirement. Will Cambres be handing the cellar keys to the next cellar master before the Sir



Winston Churchill Cuvée 2018 (assuming it is made) reaches its apogee in a couple of decades time? The much-trumpeted 2008 release of Sir Winston Churchill Cuvée is only just on the market and an extra decade on the cork is nothing for wine with this sort of structure and age worthiness.

It's been an eventful year for Pol Roger all round. In January, embarking on building work in the part of the cellar that collapsed in February 1900 – burying and mostly destroying some 1.5m bottles and 500 barrels – construction workers found a void. Cautiously, as all the chalky sub-soil was damp after a wet winter and they didn't want to provoke another cellar collapse, incoming and outgoing winemakers Cambres and Petit widened the cavity further. They eventually found 26 intact bottles, dating back to 1889-1898, all containing wine still on its lees with good levels in the bottle. And they hope to find more, says CEO Laurent d'Harcourt, as they continue the excavation.

In May last year Pol Roger

Brut Réserve was chosen as the official champagne for the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. No doubt d'Harcourt followed his predecessor's lead in insisting they had magnums, not bottles. Former president of the house Patrice Noyelle made that astute decision when Harry's brother walked up the aisle a few years earlier, and it hasn't done the reputation of the house any harm, clearly.

A great reputation or image is clearly part of what it takes to come top in our annual voting. But that's not all the winning brand requires. You don't get such support unless you are consistently making great wine and evidently striving to improve every aspect of the process that can be improved. A glance at recent past winners demonstrates that – Roederer last year, Bollinger the year before, Krug in 2016.

Of course, our international panel of buyers and experts are always likely to vote for the brand they personally enjoy drinking.



CONTINUITY AND FAMILY LIE AT THE HEART OF POL'S SUCCESS STORY

And one of Pol's greatest strengths is that, while some styles may divide opinion, Pol is always an attractive option that's likely to be met with widespread approval. Its style is generous, not austere. There's no oak involved in the winemaking – curiously its three predecessors in the top slot all use oak fermentation to some degree, and the overt use of oak does divide opinion, as any blind champagne tasting shows.

Another important factor past winners have in common is family. They are all champagnes made by family producers, or where, as in the case of Krug, there is still a strong family link. When the Pol Roger tasting panel meets to decide on the blends to be released it comprises fifth-generation family member Hubert de Billy, president Laurent d'Harcourt, the winemaker and his deputy, Sandra Derouillat. And then, for the final blend, the opinion is sought of fourth-generation family in the shape of Christian de Billy and Christian Pol-Roger along with past president Patrice Noyelle. (Noyelle and d'Harcourt are 'adopted family' as the two first outsiders to run the business.)

Continuity, family and striving always to improve lie at the heart of Pol's success story. They are as important to the brand image as the quality of Pol Roger vintage, the star of the range. That's why it's the Most Admired Champagne Brand. 