

40 Years of Roederer Estate

Redwood trees are like skyscrapers in the mountains around Anderson Valley, a remote slice of Mendocino County in California that seems unblemished by civilization. It was an unlikely location for Louis Roederer to establish a California outpost in 1982. Back then, most Champagne houses were investing in Napa or Sonoma, and Anderson Valley was a farflung and untested location, with only a handful of wineries and vineyards.

But then-Roederer president Jean-Claude Rouzaud believed the *terroir* was ideal, offering cool nights, lots of fog from the nearby Pacific Ocean and well-drained clay and gravel soils. Now, as the winery marks its 40th anniversary, it's clear Anderson Valley was a wise choice.

Roederer Estate is arguably the best and most consistent sparkling wine producer on the West Coast, and I say that with admiration for friendly competitors such as Domaine Carneros, Iron Horse and Schramsberg, to name a few. What's more, Roederer Estate is one of the few domestic producers embraced by my snobby (Yes, I said it!) Champagne-loving friends on the East Coast, whether it's the workhorse non-vintage brut, which debuted in 1988, or the tête de cuvée L'Ermitage, which originated with the 1989 vintage.

You can't call Roederer Estate a "grower Champagne," but it's a similar concept, if on a larger scale. Rouzaud was convinced that achieving the highest quality required the winery to farm the grapes itself. The first vines were planted in 1984 and today there are 624 acres of estate vineyards, a mix of 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay. (Some of those grapes are used by sister-wineries Scharffenberger and Domaine Anderson.)

Winemaking is another distinction: In 40 years there have been only two winemakers, both French. Founding winemaker, the late Michel Salgues, was born in Champagne, while Arnaud Weyrich, who replaced Salgues in 2002, was born in Alsace. Weyrich's Roederer Estate connection actually dates back to 1993 when he was an intern, so he has witnessed the evolution of the winery, tweaking the house style along the way and overseeing a major replanting of the vineyards because of phylloxera, a root louse that slowly devastates vines.



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To mark the 40th anniversary of the winery, Weyrich recently opened some of the oldest bottles of L'Ermitage in the winery's cellar, and what a treat it was. The tasting spanned seven vintages from the L'Ermitage debut with the 1989 vintage to the latest release, 2015, which I recently rated 94 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale.

What made this tasting particularly interesting is that Weyrich wasn't pouring late-disgorged wines. Late-disgorged sparkling wines age on the lees in the bottle for an extended period, and when the lees are finally disgorged, a sweet *dosage* is added before the final caged-cork is sealed. That allows the wine to show depth and age with a touch of freshness.

The L'Ermitage bottles we tasted were disgorged just before the wines were originally released and have aged in the winery's cellar ever since. The 2004, for example, was disgorged in 2013 and released soon after. I originally rated it 93 points and it retained a lovely combination of nutty yeastiness from age and fresh apple and lemon flavors.

The 2011 harvest was cool and rainy and Weyrich called it, "the least Californian" bottling of the tasting. It was subdued to my taste but still appealing. The 1999, originally disgorged in 2005, offered incredible aromas of hazelnut and brioche and retained a creamy, lush texture that lingered impressively.

The 1989 L'Ermitage Weyrich opened was disgorged and released in 1993, and had spent nearly 29 years untouched in the bottle. It was a rich gold in color, as you would expect, and had delicate notes of caramel, Sherry and peach pie. While it was beyond peak maturity, it was more youthful than I expected.

"There's a little global warming going through these wines," Weyrich conceded during the tasting. I've lived in Northern California for 30 years and reviewed domestic bubbly for *Wine Spectator* for 16 years, and I can't argue with that. The fog is more scarce in Anderson Valley and summer days are hotter. As a result, Weyrich is making adjustments in the vineyard and has dialed back the amount of *dosage* at disgorgement.

Another comment of Weyrich's rang even more true, and for me summed up what makes Roederer Estate great: "Something speaks underneath all these wines, and it's the sense of place."

Senior editor Tim Fish has been with Wine Spectator since 2001.