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Louis Roederer celebrates 250 years and release of Cristal 2018

As the famous Champagne house celebrates its 250th anniversary and 150 years of Cristal, Tom Hewson tastes the brand new 2018 release and looks at how independence, organic farming and a visionary cellar master continue to shape its success.



BY TOM HEWSON | PUBLISHED 10 HOURS AGO IN TASTINGS

MEMBER EXCLUSIVE



Cellar master Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon

(Image credit: David Pearce / Louis Roederer)

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If the Champagne region, navigating a testing period of slowing sales and financial pressures, needed a reminder of just how resilient its top producers can be, the house of Louis Roederer would fit the bill.

The company is celebrating its 250th anniversary, and the 150th anniversary of its emblematic cuvée Cristal.

Cristal was created for Tsar Alexander II, emperor of Russia, in 1876. Its clear bottle with a flat base was supposedly designed to ensure it could harbour no hidden poisons, or weapons, when brought to the table.

The secret to the house's success?



Celebrating 250 years of Louis Roederer

(Image credit: David Pearce / Louis Roederer)

Independence, according to CEO Frédéric Rouzaud.

'Independence is a state of mind,' he says, 'it enables us to take a long-term view'.

Roederer's success today, which includes owning vineyards not only in Champagne but also in California, Provence, Bordeaux and most recently Burgundy, was hard-won.

'When my grandmother inherited the house in 1932 it was nearly bankrupt,' he says.

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Yet the ability to rebound remained, thanks to the ultimate long-term play: the acquisition by the founder himself of much of what is known as the 'Cristal Estate' of formidable vineyards in today's grand cru villages of the north of the Montagne de Reims, Côte des Blancs and Grande Vallée.

This vine-to-glass mentality has stuck, with the house enjoying more ownership of its grape supply than any other major Champagne house.

The visionary cellar master



(Image credit: David Pearce)

The protagonist in the success story of this house over the last 30 years has been Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon.

A mercurial figure, he is responsible for everything from viticultural renewal, climate change resilience, organics and biodynamics, the preservation and study of historic variants of Champagne's Pinot and Chardonnay, to the house's precise, forward-thinking cellar work itself.

The newest release: Cristal 2018



(Image credit: David Pearce / Louis Roederer)

All the single-vintage wines at Roederer are essentially 'grower Champagnes' made entirely from the house's own vineyards.

The latest release of 2018 shows off the exceptional Pinot Noir resources in the northern Montagne de Reims villages of Verzenay and Verzy in particular.

The harvest began in August in 2018, and the vintage is remembered for its bountiful generosity.

This will likely be reflected in the coming years in a bountiful supply of vintage and prestige cuvées.

The generous yields presented a challenge for a wine usually built on intensity and longevity, though.

'We had to look for freshness…there were plots lacking salinity, a bit diluted, and we needed more depth and concentration,' says Lécaillon.

The solution was to forgo making the house's fine Blanc de Blancs, and instead use that Chardonnay – alongside younger vines of Pinot Noir from the fresh, chalky village of Verzy – to 'go for a cooler, more mineral' expression, says Lécaillon.

Has this flexibility paid off? With Roederer's whole estate worked under either organic or biodynamic viticulture, yields in 2018 were not as excessive as elsewhere in Champagne.

The resulting wines – not only Cristal, but also the vintage and the Brut Nature – all show a notable step up in depth and drive from many wines of the year that relied on fruit more susceptible to dilution.

There's no doubt this is quite a different Cristal to the tighter, more inward 2016 or the more classical 2013.

Unlike some 2018s, though, Cristal holds enough substance and tension to set it on a path that will last as long – indeed decades – as its top vintages.

How does Roederer celebrate 250 years?



Decanter's Champagne correspondent Tom Hewson tastes with cellar master Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon

(Image credit: David Pearce / Louis Roederer)

Befitting a celebration of this importance, Roederer is offering a series of rarer, long-aged releases of Cristal from the exquisite 2008 and 2002 vintages.

Both the white and rose Late Release bottlings from 2008 feature an unusual technique: '*poignettage*'.

By shaking the bottles as they age on their lees every three months, the wines receive a boost to all the savoury depth and texture that comes from this stage of ageing.

It's like adding Marmite to Cristal, Lécaillon jokes (although any fans, or otherwise, of Marmite should take the comparison figuratively).

With 2008's natural acidity, tension and energy, the end results are dramatic.

Finally, the house's other programme of limited-edition Cristal releases offers the majestic 2002 Cristal Rosé Vinothèque.

It is what Lécaillon terms an 'essentia' of Cristal, made with a programme of shaking that lasts longer than the Late Release – four to five years – followed by 11 years on lees

and seven on cork.

An ode to Pinot Noir, Cristal Rosé relies heavily on grapes from the grand cru village of Aÿ, extracting colour and aroma through a gentle infusion technique rather than via the more standard addition of a red wine to the blend.

Despite the allure of such rarities, though, the qualities of the straight, unadorned 2018 Cristal tell just as strong a story about the advances already revealing themselves by this time – and those which remain, tantalisingly, to be discovered in vintages to come.

Roederer releases: 2018 Cristal and more

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