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## **Vinous Icons: Roederer - Four Decades of Cristal & Cristal Rosé**

BY ANTONIO GALLONI | NOVEMBER 21, 2024

This magnificent retrospective tasting of Cristal and Cristal Rosé at Le Bernardin during the inaugural edition of Vinous Icons was a fabulous opportunity to taste a series of reference point vintages paired with Eric Ripert's dazzling cuisine. Could there be a better way to spend a Friday afternoon? I think not.

Although pretty much a lifelong fan of the wines, I started reviewing Champagne formally in 2008. Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon was the first Chef de Cave I tasted within my new beat. One rainy fall Saturday morning we met in New York City for a vertical of Cristal back to 1982. It was an incredible tasting, but not my first experience with older Cristals. A few years before that I tasted the 1979 in a flight of all the great Champagnes of that vintage. That's when I became seriously hooked.

In the years that followed, annual visits led me to conclude that Champagne Louis Roederer was slowly reinventing itself, taking the innovative spirit of the grower Champagne movement and bringing the best of those concepts to one of Champagne's most elite *grand marques*. The biggest changes were in farming. I had a chance to follow that evolution. *Vin clair* tastings included comparisons of wines from the same plot in sections farmed conventionally versus organically. Tastings of wines from organic versus biodynamic parcels followed in subsequent visits. Fast forward to today. Roederer farms more vineyards using biodynamic principles than any house in Champagne, small or large, including all of the parcels that are used in Cristal and Cristal Rosé.

The range also expanded meaningfully. Roederer added two Brut Nature Champagnes, introduced a Vinothèque program, launched two Coteaux Champenois and released Collection, a modern-day interpretation of what used to be Brut Premier. That's an enormous amount of change in a relatively short time, but also illustrative of the spirit of innovation Lécaillon has brought to the maison. Readers will find extensive information on Lécaillon's illustrious career and technical details on how Cristal and Cristal Rosé are made in the articles linked below.



*A chat with Roederer Chef de Cave Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon just before lunch.*

For this lunch, we decided to taste Cristal and Cristal Rosé side-by-side across several of the most important vintages of the last 20 years or so, something that is rarely done because pairing food for both wines at the same time is so challenging. The only exception was the last flight, as the wines are from different vintages. We opened the wines about an hour prior to lunch. I tasted through each bottle with Aldo Sohm, Le Bernardin's longtime Wine Director. Chef/Owner Eric Ripert and his team prepared a brilliant menu. I have worked with many chefs and sommeliers on our events, but have rarely, if ever, seen this much attention to food and pairings. That time paid off, as the pairings were sublime.



*Tasting through each bottle just prior to service.*

## **Passed Canapés**

*NV Collection 244*

The room is buzzing as guests start to arrive. A glass of the **NV Collection 244** sets the mood. Collection is a new Champagne from Roederer, essentially the former Brut Premier reinterpreted with a focus on freshness and verve. Those qualities come alive in the glass. Brisk acids cut through a core of orchard fruit, chamomile and crushed rocks. What a beautiful and expressive wine this is.

## **First Course**

Layers of Thinly Pounded Yellowfin Tuna; Foie Gras, Toasted Baguette, Chives

*2012 Cristal & 2012 Cristal Rosé*

I chose the 2012s to start this lunch, as the wines have always been quite open and seductive. That is very much the case today. Interestingly, the 2012 vintage did not have much of a buzz when I began tasting the *vins clairs* in the spring of 2013. The bottled, finished Champagnes paint a very different and much more exciting picture.

The **2012 Cristal** is quite delicate and floral, with hints of pear and white flowers that add considerable allure. This is a young Cristal still in its infant stage, but it's a Champagne that can be enjoyed now. In this setting, the **2012 Cristal Rosé** is a cut above the 2012 Cristal. The Rosé's explosive energy and vibrancy are both compelling and a very fine match for the food. Time in the glass brings out the breadth and creaminess of the year. The blend is 55% Pinot Noir from Aÿ and 45% Chardonnay from Mesnil and Avize. This is a terrific showing. We are off to the races.



*A Le Bernardin signature: Layers of Thinly Pounded Yellowfin Tuna; Foie Gras, Toasted Baguette, Chives*

## **Second Course**

Baked Striped Bass; Seasonal Mushroom Casserole "au Jus"

*2013 Cristal & 2013 Cristal Rosé*

*2008 Cristal & 2008 Cristal Rosé*

One of the things we strive to deliver at our events is high educational content. For that reason, I thought comparing Cristal and Cristal Rosé across the 2013 and 2008 harvests would be incredibly enlightening. Both are vintages with October harvests, a rarity today. The main difference between the two seasons is that 2013 had more heat during summer, while 2008 was cooler during the entire year. As a result, the 2013s generally offer a super-appealing combination of brisk acids and dense fruit, while the 2008 are decidedly leaner and more classically austere.

A dense, explosive Champagne, the **2013 Cristal** is a picture-perfect example of the year. Ripe pear, tangerine oil, white flowers and crushed rocks are all beautifully amplified. There is an exotic quality to the 2013 that simply can't be denied.

Interestingly, the **2013 Cristal Rosé** is more austere than the Blanc. It has plenty of vibrant energy and steeliness but also a touch less generosity today. I suspect the 2013 is going through a period of closure, which I take as a positive sign for its long-term prospects and aging potential—likely to be measured in decades rather than years.



wines longtime Chef de Cave Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon has made at Koederer. Bright saline and chalky notes run through a core of vibrant, red-toned fruit. The 2008 is tightly wound and nervous, yet it also has more than enough depth to keep it from being overly austere. Today, it is once again magnificent. Unforgettable.



*Baked Striped Bass; Seasonal Mushroom Casserole "au Jus"*

## **Intermezzo**

*2004 Cristal & 2004 Cristal Rosé*

The two 2004s are served as a sort of intermezzo, a bridge to the older Champagnes in this tasting. Two thousand and four was a controversial vintage in Champagne back in the day. After a brutal year in 2003, vines responded by setting a very large crop. These were the highest yields ever recorded in Champagne. The 2004s have always had a linear construction and an element of freshness I admire, which is why I rated many of them very favorably. Time has only served to reinforce my early impressions.

The **2004 Cristal** is nuanced and classy right out of the gate. Hints of lemon *confit*, marzipan, tangerine oil, spice and chamomile are all suggestive of a Champagne that has arrived at its first inflection point of early maturity. The interplay of slightly more mature notes with a good deal of freshness makes for an incredibly delicious wine to enjoy now. As it turns out, I tasted the 2004 again the following day and found it even more vibrant than the bottles we served at this lunch. The **2004 Cristal Rosé** is also stellar. Here, time in bottle has added textural depth and Pinot Noir resonance without

### Third Course

Poached Lobster; Truffled Gnocchi, Natural Jus au Poivre

*1990 Cristal 2008 Cristal & 1988 Cristal Rosé*

This last flight is mesmerizing. The **1990 Cristal** is a rich, exotic beauty. Apricot, tangerine oil, spice and baked pastry are all signatures of a mature Champagne. Even so, the 1990 is fresh, vibrant and full of life. Its volume and resonance make it impossible to resist a second taste, and then a third. The 1990 is a transitional Cristal, made by Chef de Cave Michel Pansu with a young Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon learning the ropes at his side.

The **1988 Cristal Rosé** might be even better than the 1990 Cristal served alongside it. I admire its ability to transmit concentration and depth while remaining light on its feet. Blood orange, mint, white pepper, tangerine and crushed rocks all saturate the palate. Both wines are simply exceptional. They are also sublime with the food, the wines elevating the dish and vice versa. This inspired pairing left me and our guests absolutely thrilled. What a great way to conclude this lunch.



*Poached Lobster; Truffled Gnocchi, Natural Jus au Poivre*

### Fourth

Hazelnut; Chocolate Waffle Cone, Peruvian Chocolate Ice Cream



*Hazelnut; Chocolate Waffle Cone, Peruvian Chocolate Ice Cream*

Over the years, I have been fortunate to taste more than my fair share of older vintages of Cristal and Cristal Rosé. The Vinous database includes 150 reviews for these wines across 36 vintages for Cristal and 17 for Cristal Rosé, all chronicled in the articles below. Aged wines have an undeniable fascination. They have a story to tell, an ability to transport us to another time. That said, it is easy to over-romanticize older wines, to think those wines represent a time when things were better than they are today. Based on the sheer quality, precision and consistency of the wines today, I am convinced the Golden Age of Cristal and Cristal Rosé is right now.

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[Cristal - The 1980s...A Decade of Change](#), Antonio Galloni, December 2018

[Roederer Cristal: That '70s Show](#), Antonio Galloni, June 2017