

# An interview with Roederer's Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon



GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

WEDNESDAY 13 MAY 2026 • 1 MIN READ

CHAMPAGNE



*Tim Hall discusses market trends, climate challenges and  
punk with Champagne Louis Roederer's vice-president and chef de caves.  
See also Hall's report on the five-day Champagne Printemps 2026 event  
[here](#).*

## **What do you say to millions of people who are drinking far less wine and young people, too, many of whom seem not to like wine much?**

*Serves **Cuvée Collection 246, launched in 2025***

*Multi-vintage, 55%, 2021, harvested 13–30 September 2021, 54% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir, 11% Meunier, 35% perpetual reserve 2012–2020, 10% large foudre, oak-aged reserve 2012–2017, three years' ageing before release, 30% malolactic done, dosage 7 g/l, 12.5% abv. The main wine of the house and the only one not single-vintage and using a proportion of bought-in fruit.*

*Everything else is vintage and solely from estate-grown grapes.*

We have to be relevant. This is fresh white wine, very precise. The acidity is striking, citric – a bad word 30 years ago, not now. This kind of wine is now seen as ‘cool’ by a younger generation. And at 12.5%, it’s lowish alcohol, not heavy. It’s for sharing, meeting, good times, and I think it’s on-trend. Pure enjoyment.

When I was younger, 37 years ago, I was frustrated as champagne was all ‘celebration’. I thought champagne had to be more serious – terroir, biodynamic, organic. Fine wine. But today we stand on both legs, we work at terroir, viticulture and we can make a ‘cool’, celebratory wine. People love it. Some people may not know or care it’s from Champagne; some are really interested in all that. We can do both.

So let’s make sure we connect with people. Wine has lost some relationship with consumers. We went away. There has been too much branding. All our efforts now, as producers, should be to know our consumers better, be closer to them. Literally, travel to meet them and pour champagne. Be generous. If the young don’t drink much champagne, pour them champagne. My travel costs doubled going to explain what we do. And I manage to do that because we have trained such a great team here, I am becoming more a ‘transmitter’ of what we do, to the team and then to our consumers. We have a wonderful team of people at Louis Roederer.

So this is Collection 246. This is a very important moment for Collection because it's based on 2021. As you know, 2021 was a disaster, lots of downy mildew. Meunier was destroyed in the Marne Valley, and Meunier from the Marne Valley is important in our wines. We had a little Pinot Noir, but good Chardonnay. So because now we have the concept of Collection, which is not like the old Brut Premier, which was always the same, we make the best wine based on the conditions of each harvest. For Collection, I took the decision in 2021 to major on Chardonnay.

Usually I'm 42% Chardonnay. This is 54%. So lots of Chardonnay because it was a good year for it, so we had to express that.

And that's what I like about 'multi-vintage', or the kind we want to create, which is not 'non-vintage'. Non-vintage is the same as 'house style'. Multi-vintage for me is halfway between 'vintage' and 'non-vintage'. It has to keep some of the signature of the vintage. But rely a lot on the reserves to make a 'multi'-vintage. There's quite a high percentage of reserves here. It's 45%, from 10 different years.

### **You are quite high on reserve wines.**

I used to be lower. And I've increased that because of climate change, because I think increasing the reserves is a good way to neutralise the extremes of harvests that we are facing. Climate change is what we are facing in Champagne. Of course it's warm, but this is not the main issue. I prefer warming to cooling. The worst thing for vines is cold. Cold and frost. Frost is synonymous with death. If it's not death, the fruit you get is less good and the harvest will be down. Frost is not good news. I prefer to have a warm year! I even prefer to have a hot year. It means a very quick cycle at the end, but that's my job as a farmer. I can 'harass' the speed of ripening by farming to mitigate climate warming, but I can do little about the cold. So generally we are in a good spot.

## **This is hard to guess as base 2021.**

Yes, because it's been mitigated. But I think two elements reflect 2021. First, it's very chalky, at the limit of ripeness. Also, it's a lighter style. It's not a rich Pinot Noir style like 2020, which was warm, Pinot-ey, as in 2019 or 2018. This 2021 is more classic.

## **You've made something that contradicts some recent softer styles in Champagne. You often say you're not worried about acidity, but you're obsessed with pH.**

Low pH for me means two things. Aromatic brightness. The lower the pH, the brighter the aroma, the more floral, the more elegant. So we need low PH to get this linearity. Not just fruitiness. To get an extra 'verticality' in the aromatics.

That's pH driven. And on the palate low pH means salinity, too. That is very Champagne, the salty, saline finish, which is not Chablis. Chablis is oyster shell. Chablis is smokier. We are more powdery, more fresh, chiselled, very detailed acidity, more 'pixels', so to speak, in champagne. And so I like this idea of being low pH because I think low pH is about 'slow life'. It's like the 'slow food' movement. If you want slow life in a wine, it's low pH. Because low pH retards the enzyme activity of decay, spoilage, loss of freshness, softening. Everything is low speed. It's antioxidative, antiseptic. You preserve your original fruit and the taste of terroir.

## **How does champagne keep low pH?**

One key dimension: soil. Build as much soil as you can. Low pH is made in the soil. Not by sunshine. Sunshine makes high pH! Paul Claudel, a French philosopher, said, 'Wine is the son of soil and sunshine.' So, maybe if you want low pH, get more than 50% soil. Especially with climate change where we already have more sunshine. We need deep-rooted vines, deep onto the bedrock; soil high in organisms.

## **But the paradox is the deeper the roots, the more they are in a high-pH environment in Champagne: the chalk.**

Yes. Because they are in high pH, there is poor mineralisation [the breakdown of soil organic matter into essential nutrients the roots can absorb] – no food,

nothing, just water. You have to build the organic matter in your soils, encourage soil organisms and deeper, extensive roots. There are all the elements – copper, nitrogen, sulphur, potassium, whatever, they are all here. You need to have lots of them, but you have high-pH chalkiness. So there is reduced enzymatic work and limited mineralisation, with those elements bound, locked, not free for the vines. With better soils and bigger roots, and mycorrhiza, we can create much greater variety of available ions so they compete with potassium uptake. And pH is a function of potassium. So if you have reduced potassium in the juice, that helps make low-pH wine. And this is the beauty of champagne, its fresh precision.

**So the ions you want fewer of stay stuck.**

Exactly. Copper stays stuck as well. Everybody says copper is a toxic element, but in champagne it's not, because it's not available. It's locked. So it doesn't come to the wine, it's not toxic for the vines or for anybody. It's just an element in the soil. You know, we have a saying in Champagne, that chalk eats everything. So you bring manure, you bring organic matter to your soil, you apply it on Monday, you come back on Friday, you don't see your manure anymore. The roots have been sucking. Because the soils are so poor, they suck everything that is available. This is why we have high maintenance. We put a lot of food there, develop nitrogenous matter in the poor soil, because the cycle of nitrogen and carbon is so slow that you need to help it. So we are a bit more active than other regions.

And I am a strong believer in high density. I plant my vines at 10,000–12,000 vines per hectare. Very small vines with lots of roots underground that interconnect and explore the whole root zone. I want mycorrhizae, more soil. That's also why I shifted to organic and biodynamic. High density is not so much for competition. I want roots to collaborate. When one vine is a bit weak, it will be supported by the next one. When one has a mildew, it can be supported by the next one. There is an underground world, that should be full of fungi and bacteria, full of life, full of connections, and I think if you create this, you get more resilience.

**You have a big mass-selection programme.**

I have the largest private nursery (Roederer) collection in France, with 150 different Pinot Noirs, and others, replanted in series of 30, to be trialled. If you have a coherent programme, you will discover stuff.

And you have a duty also, a duty to your company, region, humanity even, to explore and be humble to see what works. I think the mistake of our predecessors was to narrow the options, thinking that it was what they have to do, what is good, what is bad. And the result is that today we have a very small choice of clonal Pinot Noir, a slightly bigger choice of clonal Chardonnay, very few choices of everything. So the clonal options must expand. I've been working on it for 25 years. And we are increasing it.

*Serves **Louis Roederer + Starck Brut Nature Blanc 2018***

*55% Pinot Noir, 25% Meunier, 20% Chardonnay and some Pinot Blanc, from Cumières in the Marne (they call it the 'Rivière' vineyard area), some 7 ha (17 acres), biodynamically farmed. 31% vinified in oak. 100% 2018. No malolactic. About five years on lees. Bottled with lower 4.5 bar pressure. 0 g/l dosage.*

So this our Brut Nature, single vineyard, in Cumières, 2018 vintage. A field blend that we pick the same day. There is Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Meunier, a little bit of Pinot Blanc here, and now I have planted Arbane, Petit Meslier and Pinot Gris. And I'm also, next year, planting some Chardonnay Rose, because this is a new variety. I will have all the eight varieties of Champagne. All my own *massale* selection, to create this wine.

I only make this cuvée in hot and dry years, so I call it my laboratory of climate change. We make it every time there is an August harvest. We first made it in 2006, always vintage. I think it was trailblazing, a very important wine for us. Starck came here and said, I'm the King of Punk, you are like the Queen of England.

## **And it was a punky label.**

He said, you are the Queen of England because you are so earnest, very precise, very organised, very serious. So let's do something unique together.

I think without this experience with Starck, we would have been slower. The dosage issue also sped up, I think, because we went to zero dosage and that helped us go to 7 g from 11 g with Collection.

This is one parcel of Cumières, a 7-ha [17-acre] plot, over three lieux-dits. When you come outside of Cumières village to Damery it is on the right, on the middle slope. And you have Les Hauts Chèvres, which is quite clayey, Chèvres Pierreuses, which is chalkier, and Le Clos that is west facing. On the Clos, we are more Meunier. On Chèvres, the clayey one, we have more Pinot Noir. And above on Pierreuses, we have a bit more Chardonnay. And all of that is picked in one day on the second of September 2018. We co-press; there is no blending here. Just, the plot itself, we spin and wash out. Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Meunier, Pinot Blanc. Fermented together, bit of oak, one-third, two-thirds is stainless steel, no malolactic. Long ageing on lees, before bottling, with bâtonnage. We need no chaptalisation; it doesn't need sugar,

And Cumières is also our source for rosé, but the chalky part, which still gives you this energetic must. But for the Brut Nature we use this rather clayey, strange area, which we call 'Boudin Noir'. When we decided with Philip Starck to do a new cuvée I did not want a chalk focus, like Cristal. Cristal is about white chalk, So, my choice is to go for clay and make something different. So there is no competition with Cristal.

## **Do these wines reply to the criticism that Brut Nature champagnes could not develop with age?**

Last harvest, I had Peter Liem and Essi Avellan for one day and I said: What shall we taste? They said Brut Nature 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. Essi is very much an ambassador of this idea with Tom Stevenson, that champagne with no sugar does not age. But the 2006 was just beautiful. It was reductive, not oxidised at all. So that was very interesting. But the 2009 on the other hand was a little bit developed. So it's not always easy to say!

## **What do you say to people about herbicide and champagne?**

It's an issue. So, I believe in the dynamic of the soil, our signature, first and foremost and it will be our survival. So we need to do everything that doesn't bother the soil. Herbicide kills fungi and organisms. So this is why all my vineyards are zero herbicide. But having said that, I can also understand that some people just cannot afford this. It can be very expensive. The yield will go down 20 to 30%. The cost of cultivating yourself is expensive. At the end of the day, this is an expensive bottom line. And I can understand that some people cannot do it.

So I don't want to give lessons. I'm lucky to be in this house, owned by the Rouzaud family, who have created something very special which gives me the chance to do what I want to do. But I'm really upset when I see the orange vineyards we have. I call them the Trump vineyards; not nice. But outright condemnation does not work; it does the opposite. This is not the time to be a moralist, nor the time of pros and cons. It is the time to be an example.

## **Flavescence dorée?**

Champagne is a very powerful animal. When it wakes up, it really wakes up. With [flavescence dorée](#) [[grapevine yellows](#) disease that recently appeared in Champagne], we said, let's fight together, and we made a loud noise. It's worse in Burgundy, but there is less noise. We don't hear much about it, because it's not the same collective spirit. This is a threat, but it's not the end of the world. Scientists will find a solution. Where does it come from? Well, it came from the south. It comes from nurseries, *pepinières*. People not being careful, wanting to pay the minimum price for Pinot Noir and rootstocks. So I think we need to be serious about that. And make sure the nurseries we use are secure. But last year, it stabilised a bit; it's going down a bit, which is good news.

### *Serves **Cristal 2016***

*60% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay, no malo, 31% oak, 7 g/l dosage, from 32 selected plots.*

## Tell me about Cristal 2016

This is the Cristal parcel, the Cristal estate. So, our chalkiest parcels, grand cru, mid-slope in Aÿ, Verzy, Verzenay and one parcel in Beaumont-sur-Vesle, and in Côte des Blancs: Avize, Le Mesnil and Cramant, 45 parcels over 80 ha [198 acres]. It's all organic and certified since 2019, completely for the Cristal estate, the viticulture and winemaking. I'm not certified biodynamic, but I use *biodynamie* everywhere.

So this is from 32 plots we selected from the total of 45 of the Cristal estate. I think 2016 is an under-the-radar vintage. 2015 was so impressive to everybody. Big, ripe, rich, but the next year 2016 had a cool and wet spring, so it was lighter. It was a fight in the vineyards against downy mildew. So people were not very excited about 2016. But I think 2016 now shows everything we like in champagne. It's more classic. The more I taste 2016s I think it's a real vintage for champagne lovers.

So this is the fifth edition since being organic with Cristal, making 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016, fully organic and with biodynamic techniques. And I think we get more precision now compared to the first four Cristals,

You know, often Cristal was seen in the past as very beautiful, but restrained and needed a lot of time. I think we now get more fruit, more texture early on, which doesn't interfere with the ageing potential. So we have to amplify that character. It's like comparing burgundies, I like to compare Bâtard-Montrachet and Chevalier-Montrachet, where you have the body of Bâtard and the finesse of Chevalier.

*All photos are by Tim Hall.*

See reviews of Louis Roederer champagnes, including the Starck cuvée, in [our tastings note database](#).

---

CHAMPAGNE



GUEST CONTRIBUTOR