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The Luxury Champagne Sparkling Wine That Expresses Intense Sense Of Place

Champagne Cristal is in a class of its own when it comes to multidimensional expression of sense of place from those extraordinary vineyards classified over 100 years ago.

By **Cathrine Todd**, Contributor. ⓘ Cathrine Todd is a New York City-base... 

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Grape vines in Champagne during a sunrise



Champagne vineyards with dormant vines during the winter

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The cold air brought a serene silence that washed out all the angst-filled thoughts that constantly plagued her mind. Among the snow-covered landscape, there seemed to be little, bare bonsai trees without their foliage that whimsically curved to the side with such grace, adding to the otherworldliness of this place. These plants are dormant during their winter rest, yet it is a perfect opportunity to

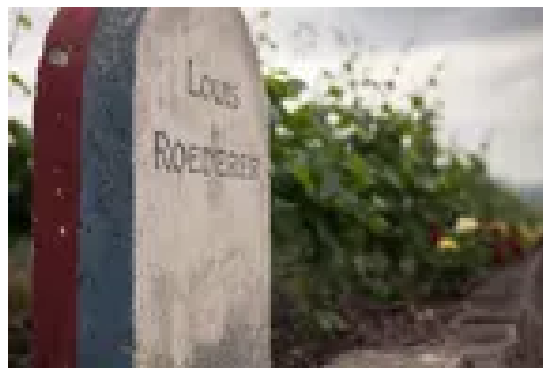
truly view their diminutive stature without their canopies giving the false impression of heft. Although this place, happily, didn't resemble anything in the daily grind of the woman experiencing this much-needed escape, it was indeed very real; so real that the expression of this land in a glass of Champagne was so distinctive that the drinker was taken aback of how much the sense of chalk within the soil dominated every nuance of this libation.

These were the exceptional vineyards of [Champagne Cristal](#), where the nutrient-poor, chalk dominant soils caused the grape vines to struggle so much that they seemed more like tiny bonsai than the typical big, broad vines that are more prevalent worldwide. That is why the chef de caves of Cristal, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, nicknamed these particular vines "bonsai" because they were rare, even compared to the other vines in his beloved wine region of Champagne, France.

Champagne Cristal

In a world where many of the top luxury wines are being bought out by corporate entities, the Louis Roederer Champagne house has remained an independent, family-owned company with seventh-generation Frédéric Rouzaud currently leading the way. In 1876, they selected their best vineyards to craft one of the most distinguished Champagnes ever, Champagne Cristal, and part of their success has been rooted in the family's knowing from very early on that the greatness of Champagne laid in the vineyards that would express the depth of terroir a.k.a. sense of place.

In 1816, a man named André Jullien published a seminal book called *Topography of All Known Vineyards* (*Topographie de tous les vignobles connus*) that included a classification of vineyards in the Champagne region. Louis Roederer inherited the Champagne House in 1833 and just a little over a decade later, followed André Jullien's classification and started to make a significant investment in buying stellar vineyards.



Louis Roederer Tombstone
CHAMPAGNE LOUIS ROEDERER



Louis Roederer vineyards
CHAMPAGNE LOUIS ROEDERER

Today, many of the best vineyards in Champagne are the ones that Jullien chose over a century ago, and the easiest way to take a tour of some of Jullien's noted top sites is to visit the vineyards that go into making Champagne Cristal.

Whether it is the Basses Coutures vineyard in the Champagne village of Verzenay, where there is silt and chalk in the soil, or the biodynamic Bonnotte-Pierre-Robert vineyard with its limestone bedrock in the Aÿ village, all of the plots blended into Cristal express a multifaceted picture of the most outstanding aspects of the Champagne region. Even the various chalky soils that differ in form will make different qualities within the wines - as chef de caves Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon says, the Verzenay vineyard is like the Burgundy Grand Cru vineyard of Chambertin, with its "power and strength," and the Aÿ vineyard is like the Grand Cru Musigny in Burgundy so it has a lovely "perfume and softness."

But Louis Roederer is not resting on their laurels as they have implemented many programs to explore ways to find an ideal balance within the vines and protecting their longevity to encourage long life. They also use modern scientific disciplines to

identify the broad diversity of clones within their vineyards that have thrived through massal selection (using the cuttings of exceptional, old vines to propagate new ones).

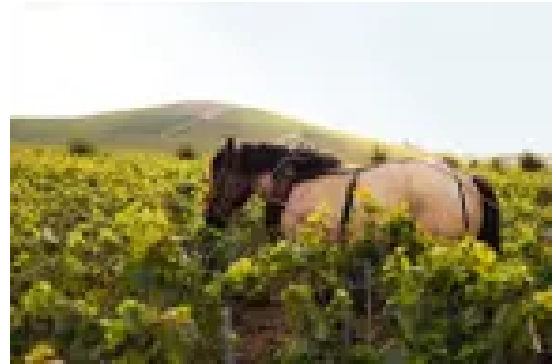
In 2002, they started a project called In Vinifera Aeternitas, gathering experts such as Lilian Bérillon, a nursery owner specializing in massal selection of the best estates all over the world, and Professor Jean-Michel Boursiquot, one of the most talented ampelographers (a person who identifies and classifies grapevines) to help accomplish their goals. One of the things they have achieved is employing pruning techniques of the vines that "respect the sap flow" to ensure a longer life while also implementing a permaculture philosophy that centers around creating sustainable and resilient systems that mimic natural ecosystems, which goes hand in hand with their organic and biodynamic practices.

When it comes to their organic and biodynamic practices, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon said that he has noticed that the pH of their wines is lower than before they converted to organic, increasing their acidity.

Finding Terroir In Champagne



Vineyards in the Champagne region during sunset
GETTY



Champagne Louis Roederer uses horses to plow the vineyards so the roots aren't damaged by tractors
CHAMPAGNE LOUIS ROEDERER

The wine region of Champagne is a worldwide marketing success story as many houses have created brands that dominate the luxury wine market with incredible packaging, lavish events and placement in some of the top high-end clubs around the world, yet many of those luxury brands are owned by big corporations. Although that success has hurt the family-owned houses that avoid such marketing

blitzes as they don't want such a frenzy to overshadow the soul of their Champagnes, expressing some of the best vineyards.

There has been a backlash against these famous brands with a revolution of grower Champagnes, where growers make tiny quantities of Champagne wines, many who used to sell their grapes to large brands, and many times their bottlings are single vineyard wines. Despite many of these Champagnes being excellent examples of an expression of a particular plot, it is wrong to think these bottlings are the only true expression of place coming out of the region. Historically, Champagne is a blended wine, and yes, in many cases, it is for this reason that it can develop a consistency of style, even to a certain degree with the vintage bottlings. Yet the vintage Champagne Cristal wines take it to another level when creating an intricately layered experience of those soils that initially made this region legendary.

That is part of the reason why Cristal can shock the first-time drinker who is used to drinking a wide variety of top Champagnes, as it can come across as not being big enough or bold enough to knock one's socks off at the first sip. But it is intense and concentrated in ways like no other Champagne on this level, as its power is not in the fruit but in the intensity of terroir expression. Once a drinker surrenders to the unknown, a type of depth they have not experienced, they understand why some connoisseurs consider this Champagne to be in its own category. When it comes to a multidimensional expression of the sense of place from those extraordinary vineyards classified over 100 years ago, there is a strong argument that no other luxury Champagne can live up to Cristal.



Bottles of Cristal
CATHRINE TODD

Vertical of Champagne Cristal

2002 Champagne Cristal, Champagne, France: 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay. Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon became the chef de cave in 1999, so he considers 2002 his “Welcome to the Roederer family gift” as the vintage had almost perfect growing conditions. A gorgeous evolution that happened to this beauty over two decades with peach cobbler and lemon meringue flavors with a broad body and a creamy texture with crisp acidity highlighted by mineral aromas and a long finish with notes of hazelnut.

2012 Champagne Cristal, Champagne, France: 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay. This is from a warmer vintage, yet one could not tell at this stage as Jean-Baptiste said that he thought that, through time, it would become bigger and richer, as that is what tends to happen with Cristal. Still, this vintage is returning to the heart of their vineyards with oyster shells and wet stones dominating with a touch of honeysuckle in the background and a mouthwatering acidity with a weighty yet linear-driven palate.

2008 Champagne Cristal, Champagne, France: 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay. Jean-Baptiste compared 2008 to the iconic 1996 vintage. However, '96

is a controversial vintage - some note it is one of Champagne's best in modern history while others feel the wines were too austere with sky-rocketing acidity. But learning from the '96s, Jean-Baptiste decided to wait a week longer than 1996 to harvest this 2008. An addictive, fierce acidity with that Cristal minerality that intertwines itself in every aspect of the wine with a very lifted floral note and plenty of nectarine fleshy fruit to balance out the acidity that gives thrilling electricity to this vintage.

2016 Champagne Cristal, Champagne, France: 58% Pinot Noir and 42% Chardonnay. This vintage was challenging and broke many growers' backs as they battled a wet spring with mildew. Surprisingly, especially considering that all of the vineyards used for this vintage were farmed organically, it is an outstanding showing. There is a breathtaking purity; I would have never guessed this was from a vintage that battled mildew. The 2015 vintage received more fanfare as it was a riper vintage with few problems. Jean-Baptiste said that some challenging vintages, such as this 2016, get unfairly judged with a sweeping statement that all the Champagnes are lesser quality, but for those who dare, who are extremely vigilant with their practices in the vineyards, like Roederer, something special can be produced. And the results are indeed impressive. A nose of lemon blossom, white peaches and crumbled chalk with a marked acidity laced with a saline quality and a salivating finish.

2013 Champagne Cristal Rosé, Champagne, France: 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay. This makes my list for one of the greatest Champagnes I have ever had... not just the greatest rosé but one of the greatest, period. I was not expecting such an experience since the 2013s were typically noted to be lovely in their youth yet subtle and not worth blockbuster status. But this 2013 evolved into such an exquisite example of what makes Cristal in a class of its own as the terroir is so defined and powerful with the right amount of fruit and acidity. Jean-Baptiste noted that making rosé for them is about adding another layer of terroir expression to the wine. Starting in 2008, with their new experimental winery, they began experimenting with a gentle "infusion" technique for the Pinot Noir grapes before the fermentation, allowing for more sense of place extraction from the skins without the astringency. Alluring bouquet of a labyrinth of aromas with cherry blossoms, wild strawberries, saline minerality and hint of marzipan dance and prance along the enthralling maze of

flavors and textures that are lifted by an exhilarating acidity, which gives the wine a fierce tension and a very fine structure with bubbles that are so tiny that they caress like satin while still tantalizing with their hundreds of micro bursts along an extremely prolonged finish that keeps those delightful aromatics in one's head for several minutes.

2014 Champagne Cristal Rosé, Champagne, France: 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay. A gorgeous nose with pear drop, peach tart and singed orange peel, and is open in its relative youth according to Cristal standards, yet the minerality of crushed rocks and pulverized chalk still dominates despite having a generous fruit flavor with a round body that has a long, flavorful finish, but the minerality is what stays with the taster the longest.

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By [Cathrine Todd](#) . Cathrine Todd has been a Forbes contributor writing about wine since 2019 and is located in Manhattan, NYC. She has covered the inaugural release of exciting new [wine producers](#) in Napa, leaders in the [AI](#) and [Telecom](#) industries buying top wine estates and so...

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