

THE POUR

A Perpetual Champagne, Built One Year at a Time

A new method of making nonvintage Champagnes is taking hold. Producers see it as a hedge against climate change while improving overall quality.



Listen to this article · 10:37 min [Learn more](#)



By Eric Asimov

Reporting from Reims, Ay, Ludes, Vreigny and Le Mesnil-sur-Oger in France.

Dec. 23, 2024

All most people need to know about Champagne is how to safely uncork a bottle. Pouring and savoring the wine are the easy parts.

Few Champagne drinkers will interrupt their holiday celebrations to dwell on the laborious process of creating this wine, which can feel so elegant, refined and delicious.

But in the Champagne region of France now, many producers are adapting a new element to their production method. They see it not only as a significant improvement in nonvintage Champagnes, the vast majority of the bottles produced each year, but as a major hedge against the effects of climate change, which for many producers has altered both the way they farm the grapes and how they make the Champagne.

First, a bit of background on how nonvintage Champagnes are created, or, to use the term that many Champenois prefer, multivintage Champagnes.



With climate change, Champagne producers rush picking grapes too ripe, said Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, the cellar master at Louis Roederer. James Hill for The New York Times

These cuvées are, as the name suggests, blends of several vintages. To create one, producers will use as a base wine from the most recent harvest, itself most often a blend of different grapes from different areas within the region. To this base, producers add wines from older harvests that they've kept in reserve, experimenting and tasting until they find what they consider the best possible blend.

Why do they do this? Blending wines and vintages permits a producer to aim for stylistic consistency while hedging against the highs and lows of single harvests. While vintage Champagnes vary from year to year, reflecting the characteristics of the growing season, multivintage wines are intended to transcend the nature of any single year.

Small producers, who have limited storage space and resources may only have a few vintages on hand to blend. Big houses, especially the most prestigious like Krug, have access to far more reserve wines and so are able to create more complex blends.

Here's where the new method comes in. Instead of storing their reserve wines separately and discretely, by vintage or even plot by plot, a growing number of producers are blending significant portions of their reserve wines together, creating what they call a perpetual reserve.



At Louis Roederer, the multivintages made with the perpetual reserve are called Collection. James Hill for The New

York Times

Each year, producers will add wine from the most recent harvest to this store, while removing an equal amount to use for the next multivintage cuvée. Over time, this perpetual reserve will get more and more complex as more vintages are mixed in, and the wines removed for the next multivintage cuvée will likewise gain complexity.

The perpetual reserve method is reminiscent of sherry's solera system, in which newer wines are gradually mixed with older ones over decades to produce a sherry encompassing many vintages. But soleras are far more complicated, involving many different barrels, and are more labor intensive. The perpetual reserve is simpler, and generally stored in fewer, much larger containers.

Most obviously, the perpetual cuvée aids small producers, giving them a tool to create more multifaceted reserve wines. Not surprisingly, it was small producers who first developed and adopted this method.

But big producers are also embracing it, most prominently Louis Roederer, which, under Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, the executive vice president and cellar master, has become a progressive leader among the big Champagne houses.



Mr. Lécaillon of Louis Roederer, uses a perpetual reserve to maintain consistency in the face of climate change. James Hill for The New York Times

“The perpetual reserve gives you the ability to make a consistent wine in an inconsistent place,” Mr. Lécaillon told me during a visit to Roederer in late November. “You create a sense of Champagne, neutralize the climate impact and emphasize the soil impact.”

Climate change has created more extreme conditions in many years, he said, resulting in higher levels of alcohol and lower levels of acidity. He called the perpetual reserve a strong tool for mitigating these extremes.

“The risk for Champagne is to get too ripe, to lose minerality and freshness,” he said. “Perpetual reserve is a tool for bringing minerality. I want the wines to be as much about the soil as fruity. The climate is increasing fruitiness. I had to rebalance.”

Roederer started its perpetual reserve in 2012, adding a proportion of the new vintage to it each year, generally half chardonnay and half pinot noir, two of the three major grapes of Champagne, along with pinot meunier. It's stored in 1,000-hectoliter steel tanks, each the equivalent of about 26,400 gallons.

Each time Roederer creates a multivintage cuvée, it will typically comprise 55 percent current vintage, 35 percent perpetual reserve and 10 percent other reserve wines, stored separately in oak casks.

“That equates to: 55 percent vintage character, 35 percent Champagne character, 10 percent Roederer character,” Mr. Lécaillon said.



Huré Frères' Memoire cuvée is made entirely from a perpetual reserve. James Hill for The New York Times

Before the perpetual reserve, Roederer's multivintage Champagne, Brut Premier, was a fine, reliable wine. Its composition included about 15 percent reserve wines.

Now, the multivintages made with the perpetual reserve are called Collection and labeled by number, representing the number of multivintage cuvées issues since Roederer was founded in 1776. With reserves making up 45 percent of the blend, they have gotten much better, more complex and chalky, rich yet paradoxically light-bodied and elegant. The first to incorporate the perpetual reserve was Collection 242, issued in 2021. Collection 245 is now on the market.

Among those who use a perpetual reserve, Roederer is a relative newcomer. Billecart-Salmon started its perpetual reserve in 2006 and actually has three different ones going, one with chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier, another just with pinot meunier and the third solely of pinot noir. About 35 percent of the blend in Le Réserve, its primary multivintage Champagne, is made up of perpetual reserve wines.

Far more small growers than big houses are using perpetual reserves, and they've been doing it longer. Few agree on which grower was the first to employ the technique, but most say the most influential was Anselme Selosse of Jacques Selosse, the groundbreaking grower-producer whose Champagnes now go for hundreds of dollars a bottle.

One of the Selosse cuvées, Substance, is composed entirely of a perpetual reserve from a single chardonnay vineyard that includes wines going back to 1987. His reasoning in starting this reserve, he told me in 2008, was to emphasize the qualities of the vineyard by eliminating variables like the effects of weather.

"It takes all the different years — the good, the bad, the wet, the dry, the sunny — and neutralizes the elements to bring out the terroir," he said.

Few producers are that idealistic. More typically, the perpetual reserve permits producers to keep a steady supply of reserve wines with a consistent character, regardless of the ups and downs of particular vintages.



François Huré, left, and his brother Pierre took charge of their father's estate in 2007. They began bottling Mémoire separately in 2010. James Hill for The New York Times

At Pierre Péters in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, François Péters started the perpetual reserve in 1997 after a very small harvest. Rather than accept a shortage of reserve wines in the future, Mr. Péters put them together into one perpetual reserve.

Rodolphe Péters, who took charge of the domaine from his father in 2007, has maintained the perpetual reserve. He finds it particularly useful because, he said, wines from Le Mesnil, where most of his vines grow, are reticent when young. Blending wines from elsewhere, he said, balances the nature of the Mesnil wines.

“The old wines educate the young,” he said, “and the young wines keep the old fresh.”

The perpetual reserve wines now make up roughly half of the Péters Cuvée de Réserve, its flagship multivintage wine.

“The character of Péters is in the perpetual reserve,” he said. “The new vintage adds the spice. I don’t want to mask the new vintage, but we want consistency. The perpetual reserve makes my life so much easier, it amazes me.”

Many of my favorite growers use the perpetual reserve. Lelarge-Peugeot, which makes excellent natural Champagnes, says it hedges against both climate change as well as market fluctuations. Ruppert-Leroy, another natural Champagne producer, makes 11, 12, 13 ..., a cuvée made entirely of a perpetual reserve started in 2011. Dhondt-Grellet, Bérèche et Fils, Etienne Calsac, R. Pouillon and the midsize house Bruno Paillard are among those who use perpetual reserves. I’m sure they’re not alone.



The Pierre Péters flagship Champagne, grown in the chalky soils of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, is made half of the most recent vintage and half from a perpetual reserve. James Hill for The New York Times

One that I particularly like is Mémoire by Huré Frères, a cuvée made entirely from a perpetual reserve. The reserve was started by Raoul Huré in 1982 because, his son Pierre Huré told me, he didn’t have room to store the different vintages of

reserve wines separately.

After Pierre Huré and his brother, François, took charge of the estate in 2007, they kept tasting the perpetual reserve and loved it. Finally, they took a portion of it to store in two foudres, big oak vats, rather than steel tanks. They used the reserve in the foudres to bottle their first *Mémoire* in 2010.

Each year now they take out 20 percent of the foudre wines for the *Mémoire* and add back a similar proportion from the latest vintage. The result is a fresh, savory, complex Champagne with great depth and finesse that is a pleasure to savor. And each year it gets even more so.

Champagnes Made With a Perpetual Reserve

Bruno Paillard

The **Première Cuvée** (\$75) is a graceful Champagne of great finesse.

Billecart-Salmon

Le Réserve (\$65) is elegant and refined.

Dhondt-Grellet

Both **Dans Un Premier Temps** (\$85) and **Les Terres Fines**, a blanc de blancs, are excellent (\$110).

Huré Frères

Invitation (\$65) is lively and harmonious, and **Mémoire** (\$110) is superb.

Lelarge-Pugeot

Tradition (\$60) is delicate and subtle.

Louis Roederer

Collection No. 245 (\$65) is fresh and chalky.

Pierre Péters

Cuvée de Réserve (\$70) is energetic and exquisite, while **Réserve Oubliée** (\$140) is savory and complex.

Ruppert-Leroy

The naturally made **11, 12, 13 ...** (\$90) is lively and deep.

Follow New York Times Cooking on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Pinterest. Get regular updates from New York Times Cooking, with recipe suggestions, cooking tips and shopping advice.

Eric Asimov, the chief wine critic of The Times since 2004, has been writing about wine, food and restaurants for more than 30 years. More about Eric Asimov