
HORSES AMONG THE VINES



Horses are a common sight in the vineyards of Champagne Gaston Révolte, helping to plough the land

The Ardennais draught horse worked the Champagne vineyards for centuries, until mechanization spelled its doom. Today, producers like Champagne Gaston Révolte are reviving its use. **Ruma Singh** looks into the benefits it brings to the wines

One of the most visited counters at Prowine India a few months ago was that of Champagne Gaston Révolte within the Cellar 33 stall. The counter, helmed by the very affable young owner, Nicolas Révolte, found crowds queueing up to taste the wines showcased by the Premier Cru Champagne house. The three champagnes showcased included the **Brut Tradition 1er Cru non-vintage**, the **Cuvée Speciale Brut 1er Cru** and the **Rosé Eglantine 1er Cru**.

As I watched him pour his wines, my eye was caught by the champagne house's emblem on the backdrop of the stall: it showed a horse pulling a plough in the vineyard. This was intriguing. While most producers are quick to tom-tom advances in technology that they believe enhances the wine in the glass, here was a champagne house focusing on its use of heritage viticultural techniques.

Horse power

To get some perspective on equine involvement in agro-ecological viticulture, horses and mules are not unheard of today in several of the world's most challenging vineyards. In Mosel, Alsace, Burgundy and Priorat, among others, precipitous hillsides and demanding access points make mechanisation difficult to use, so horses and mules become the sole options. However, for the majority of wine producers located on less rugged terrains, mechanisation is the key to efficient winemaking and vineyard management. Tractors replaced horses to bump up speed of harvest and deliver effective vineyard maintenance.

However, history tells us that draught horses have long been a part of a winery team. The Ardennais horses, originally from the Ardennes region of France and Belgium, have always been sought after for their size, height and temperament. They were believed to be the favourites of Julius Caesar and later, Napoleon Bonaparte, who used them in their military campaigns.

In France in the early 20th century, it is estimated that there were almost 3,200,000 draught horses across all breeds. By 1995, this number dropped drastically to 27,000. The reduction coincided with the arrival of the tractor in Europe's farmlands. The tractor required less money and effort to maintain, vis-à-vis the horse, and also covered large areas more quickly when time was critical; speed having a positive impact on the quality of the wine. Unsurprisingly, the draught horse bore the brunt of modernization. The numbers

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began to dwindle rapidly.

But with time, and an awareness of the need to be sustainable, many forward-thinking modern producers have turned back to historically popular forms of viticulture. Enter, once again, the Ardennais draught horse.

I asked Nicolas Révolte about his horses. "The Ardennais horse is very docile, intelligent and hardworking. On hillsides or in small plots, it is an undeniable asset. For us, the choice of the Ardennais breed was obvious, as it is bred very close to the Champagne region."

But this is more than a simple revival project. Scientific data has revealed that the use of horses plays a significant role in aerating the soil, which helps turn vineyards into thriving ecosystems that actively sustain the grapevine, making it healthier, and producing better fruit.

Despite this growing awareness, the number of draught horses in the vineyards continues to shrink, Révolte says. "Today, some 400 Ardennes draught horses remain in use in France. In the past 10 years, a small section



Nicolas Révolte pictured holding a bottle of his Premier Cru champagne

of the Champagne industry has been taking an interest in this subject – as we have at Champagne Gaston Révolte – to reintroduce this animal to the vineyards."

Obviously, this decision comes with costs. The expenses in terms of manpower to train the horses, the cost and upkeep of the horses themselves are factors that mean added time and money. "But it is right to preserve this breed, which has played a part in the glory days of French agriculture and is now threatened with extinction," he says.

Historic Premier Cru champagnes

A look into the history of Champagne Gaston Révolte helps to better understand their commitment to historic traditions. Gaston Révolte is a third-generation-run champagne house, with Nicolas, 25, and his brother Alexandre, 26, taking over the reins from their father last year. Its vineyards are in the famous Montagne de Reims

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sub-region of Champagne on south-west facing slopes – the perfect exposure to ensure perfectly ripe grapes.

"Avenay Val d'Or, our home, is one of the oldest villages in Champagne – almost a thousand years old. We are located in the historical heart of Champagne between Reims and Epernay and we farm seven hectares, all designated Premier Cru," Nicolas explains.

Premier Cru champagne is considered very special – only 44 out of Champagne's 319 villages are entitled to add this designation, indicating high quality, to their bottles. All of Gaston Révolte's 12 champagne cuvées are Premier Cru. The portfolio is divided between the classic range, and the Révolte Hélène range, the latter made in tiny quantities from very old vines with Pinot Noir ruling the portfolio wines.

Nicolas explains the relevance of their location. "The Montagne de Reims deserves its reputation as one of Champagne's great sub-regions, and Pinot Noir is very much at home here. It is a grape variety that does not like excessively warm temperatures or frost, and likes a bit of height. It is a delicate grape that is difficult to work with. But oh! how generous it is when we take care of it the way it should be!" he exclaims, adding passionately, "It is this grape variety that gives us our identity. It is the king of grape varieties in many regions, a delight to our Burgundian neighbours, but here it is unique, providing us with fine, generous bubbles that express its aromatic potential."

Champagne Gaston Révolte produces about 40,000 bottles a year, not a large number compared to some of Champagne's top maisons. It is proud of the fact that it is family-owned; this gives it complete control and freedom to make its own choices, whether in the vineyards or the winery. Ergo, with such a limited production, Gaston Révolte sells its wine strictly by allocation, and at controlled prices. "We believe in trying to

offer honest value for money, which has earned us a presence in most of Europe, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and soon, I hope, in the beautiful country of India.”

Each wine has its distinct character. Their rosé champagne, for instance is made by the rarer *saignée* method, where red grapes are ‘bled’ to create a deeper hued, more structured wine, darker pink than many fashionably pale wines.

“Our rosé de saignée is quite unique,” Nicolas asserts, “Maceration of the grapes, which are 100% Pinot Noir, gives us the most intense expression possible.”

My personal favourite at the tasting was the Cuvée Speciale Brut 1er Cru – a pale gold wine made of 80% Pinot Noir and 20% Chardonnay, full-bodied with aromas of citrus and a hint of spice, a fine, persistent mousse, and a lingering finish of brioche and toast. It undergoes 48 months ageing in bottle, evident in the richness of the flavour it delivers in the glass.

Sustainability gives quality

The quality of the *maison’s* wines is directly tied in to the steps they take in the vineyard. And that brings us back to the draught horse. The horse works the land by uprooting weeds, loosening the soil and preventing its compaction. Compacted soil, which is commonplace in vineyards that are heavily mechanized, prevents nutrients from reaching vine roots; while soil that is aerated reduces erosion and prevents accumulation of surface water. These are factors that critically affect vine health, which in turn has a positive impact on the flavours and health of the grapes harvested.

The winery’s present Ardennais horse is a 12-year-old male named Theo, the fifth Ardennais to work the Révolte vineyards. Nicolas’s face lights up talking about him. “He’s a pure force, full of energy, and we pamper him as best we can. We are keen to add a young mare this year.”

Their logo, however, shows an earlier star Ardennais of the winery, a mare named Perle who passed away a while ago. “Perle helped us

“The horse is part of a whole, part of our biodiversity, part of the family, part of the company, which is why it takes pride of place on our bottle labels”



Cuvée Speciale Brut 1er Cru Champagne from Gaston Révolte

launch our Ardennais project and worked in the vineyards for over 15 years. We feature her as she truly represented the soul of this project. She was one of the first Ardennes mares to return to the Champenois vineyards,” says Nicolas, smiling proudly. “The horse is part of a whole, part of our biodiversity, part of the family, part of the company, which is why it takes pride of place on our bottle labels.”

The tasting of Champagne Gaston Révolte wines has already seen success. Nicolas recounts the story of a visitor to his Prowine counter. This gentleman, a lover of champagne, enjoyed tasting the champagnes so much that he made it his business to talk to every importer and restaurateur he encountered at the trade fair to coax them into placing the Gaston Révolte wines on their wine lists.

“He actually did that!” Nicolas exclaims, surprised. “I received messages from various people that he was spreading the word about my champagnes.”

The great response and enthusiasm he received during his two days in India made him happy that he had decided to attend the trade fair. “It was the first big trade fair I attended myself as a producer and I’m so glad it was in India.” ❖

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