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THE WINE MAGAZINE

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questions how champagne so strongly associated with celebration and joy can survive change and uncertain times

Resilience in a Bottle: The Pol Roger Way Through Conflict and Change

Pol Roger is no stranger to strife. Located in Épernay, the maison is famous for its association with British wartime prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill, after whom its prestige cuvée is named

Today, as the world faces uncertainty due to precipitous war, crippling tariffs and global warming, no one is exempt, especially not the global wine industry which might be facing its most difficult time yet.

While war spares no one, history is chock-full of instances of heroism and resilience in times of conflict. Wine lovers might find especially fascinating war tales that centre around wine and wartime fortitude. Some have been documented by Don and Petie Kladstrup in their WWII book “Wine & War: the French, the Nazis and the Battle for France’s Greatest Treasure”.

History reveals that the Champagne region has often been front and centre in the theatre of war, especially during the 20th century. And Champagne’s grande marque, Pol Roger is no stranger to strife. Located in Épernay, the maison is coincidentally famous for its association with British wartime prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill, after whom its prestige cuvée is named. Churchill is said to have imbibed a whopping 42,000 bottles of Pol Roger in his lifetime!

Pol Roger, now with generations five and six at its helm, has been led by men and women of exceptional courage in the past – notable among them Maurice Pol Roger. During the First Battle of the Marne in 1914, as mayor of

Épernay, he struggled to save the year’s grape harvest, standing up against tyranny and deceit despite multiple threats to his life. After the war, he was named *maire d’honneur* (honorary mayor) to the Town Council until his death in 1959. Ergo, the ringing phrase “harvested to the sound of guns and drunk to the sound of trumpets” represents the resilience of the Champagne region in general, and Pol Roger in particular. The legendary 1914 vintage was produced under Maurice while Champagne lay under military siege.

Today, the world is changing at warp speed, and the wine industry, regarded as notoriously slow and process-driven, is expected to show resilience in a world beset with uncertainty. Can wine survive this devastation? I pondered. It came to me that, given its history, there could be no better respondent to this question than Champagne Pol Roger. So, I turned to the descendants of Maurice to see how they were coping.

How does a wine so strongly associated with celebration and joy survive difficult times? The answer came from 6th generation scion and secretary general of Pol Roger, Bastien Collard de Billy. “Yes, the current context does not call for light-heartedness and celebration. Nevertheless, the gloomy and anxiety-provoking period of the

COVID pandemic has shown that troubled times do not necessarily hinder champagne consumption – quite the contrary.”

The wine market has been in decline for a while, although in 2024, champagne had registered a relatively low 2% decline, according to Comité Champagne. Was it time to pivot to new strategies? After all, marketing, believed Kladstrup, has “always been the blood” of the Champenois. Bastien agreed. Looking to the future, Pol Roger had begun shifting focus to markets like eastern Europe and Latin America. “Our company is positioned in the fine wine market segment more than the celebration wine segment – the quality of our product being our best ambassador.” Ergo, a focus on celebrations is less important than Pol Roger’s ongoing pursuit of excellence, he added.

Turned the discussion to Churchill, their most steadfast and loyal consumer. What would he have done in times like these? “Churchill would have urged us to remain calm in peaceful times and not panic in times of turmoil – the most important quality expected of a head of state,” said Bastien, recalling Churchill’s consistent stance against the ‘dishonourable choice’ of appeasement as futile since war was inevitable. He is said to have told then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in 1938 as a ‘lesson for life’: “You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war.”

I persisted. As the 6th generation of the family, what are you doing differently that your forefathers might not have done? “The challenge lies in each generation’s ability to demonstrate its own personality, while respecting the legacy of the past. For a maison like ours, it is important not to be trendy – without becoming outdated – and pass on a taste for things done well, for handcrafted products and great collective adventures.”

Sustained efforts in vineyard management against global warming count among essential lessons for new generations. While climate-



Bastien Collard de Billy, secretary-general of Pol Roger and 6th generation of the family

related events have not yet impacted Champagne in full force, there is still much to tackle, he added. “For ages we have been challenged by cold spells and a climate hostile to vine growth. While global warming will be an issue in the near future, our immediate concern is for the people and the conditions of vineyard workers.” In 2024, Pol Roger signed the VitiArgos charter published by the Comité Champagne, that ensures humane working conditions for workers.

As for Gen Z and its reported disdain for alcohol in general and fine wine in particular, he was not entirely in agreement. “The common culture surrounding alcohol has evolved towards quality over quantity. And Gen Z is as sensitive to this as other generations were in the past. As for Asian markets – these are always complex markets for champagne. India’s big move by signing a free trade agreement with the European Union significantly reduces taxes on our products and is a positive sign after decades in which barriers into the Indian market prevented any real development for champagnes,” he said. But, “The challenge will be to convert the demographic and economic potential of this market into actual sales.”

Despite it all, the maison upholds Sir Winston Churchill’s belief in Napoleon Bonaparte’s famous quote on champagne: ‘In victory I deserve it, in defeat I need it.’ “The sentence sums up the universality of champagne and the place it occupies in people’s lives.” ♦

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