

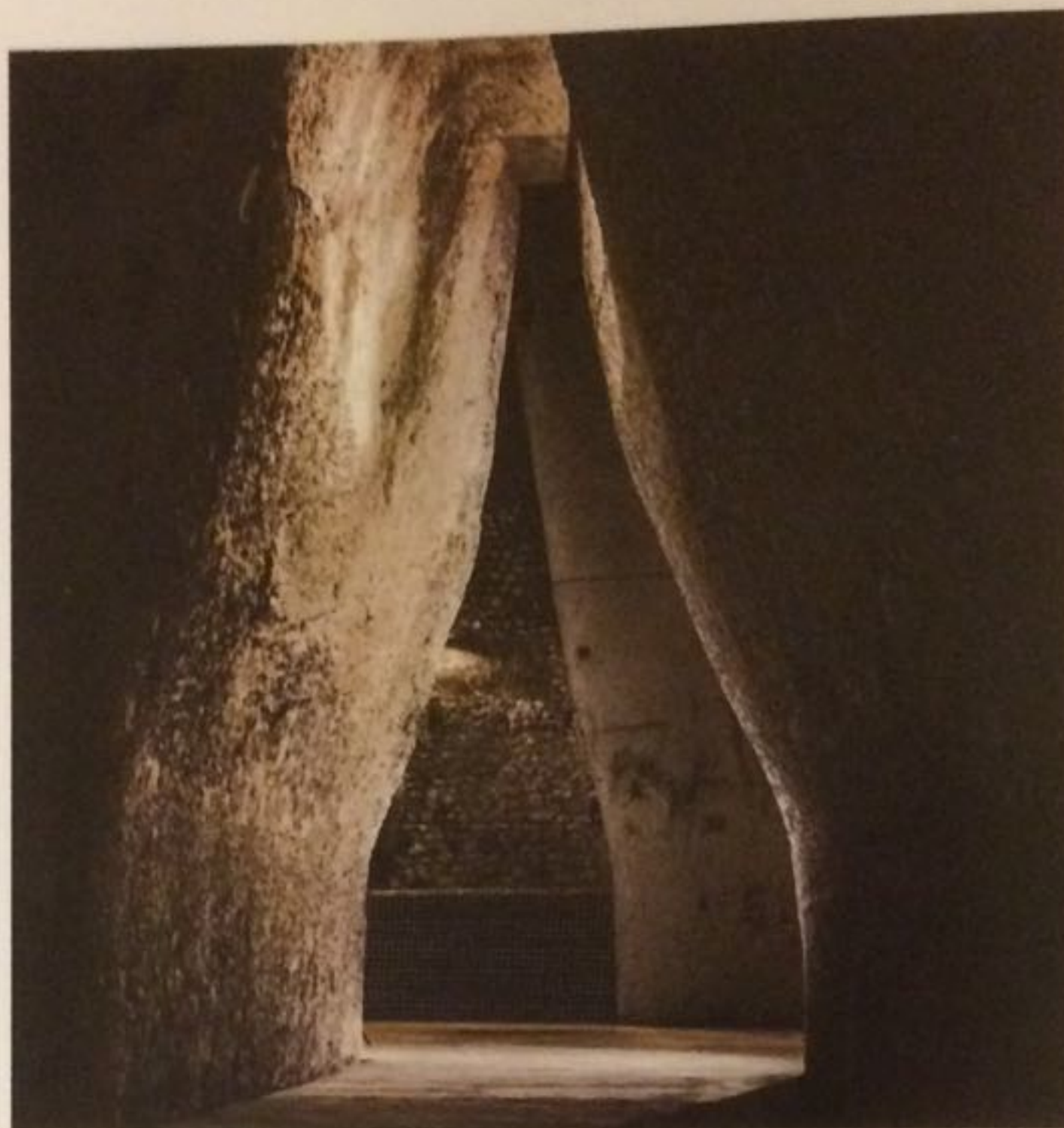
3 CHARLES HEIDSIECK

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The biggest mover in the upper echelons of our Most Admired Champagne Brands report is Charles Heidsieck. It's been placed sixth and seventh in the past two years and in 2015 it was only 14th. This past performance doesn't, however, represent a fair assessment of the wine. It has been consistently one of the finest non-vintage blends since Daniel Thibault was given the freedom to make it so in 1985, when then owner Rémy Cointreau bought Charles and Piper Heidsieck.

Although Thibault had made earlier versions based on the 1986, '87 and '89 harvests, the Brut Réserve was commercially launched in 1997 as Brut Réserve Mise en Caves 1992, with 60% of the wine from the 1991 vintage plus 40% reserve wines. This was a bold new step for any significant producer, giving the base year for its non-vintage cuvée. At this time it was pretty well unheard of for anyone to be using such a large amount of reserve wine in a mainstream non-vintage brut. Though today many producers have as much as a third of reserve wine in their non-vintage blends, in most cases it won't be a stock that goes back over many past vintages.

As Nick Faith has observed in his writing on the subject, there was a price to pay for this extravagance as it involved a large drop in the volume of non-vintage brut champagne Charles Heidsieck was producing. This, Faith says, was the decision of "the far-sighted André Hériard-Dubreuil, of Rémy Cointreau" who, in an effort to transform the quality of the wine, "allowed sales to



DEMAND FOR ALL CHARLES HEIDSIECK WINES HAS REGENERATED

fall by millions of bottles so that Thibault could build up some reserve stocks".

Fast-forward to 2018 and the house's current executive director, Stephen Leroux, is telling everyone that 30 years ago, before the decision to change the style was made, Charles Heidsieck was a larger brand than Veuve Clicquot, selling 4.5m bottles. But under Rémy Cointreau's ownership this dwindled to a few hundred thousand bottles as the company lost interest in drinks outside its core spirits business.

There was, of course, also the

small distraction of owning Krug. That, though, was sold off to LVMH in January 1999, less than two years after Charles Mise en Cave was launched, to help stave off a financial crisis at Rémy.

The new era for Charles Heidsieck and sister brand Piper began in 2011 when both were bought by Entreprise Patrimoniale d'Investissements, run by Christopher Descours.

The first issue was to sort out the brand's distribution, an easier job than with Piper as the volume had dwindled to around 250,000 bottles.

While the image of the brand had weakened over the years under Rémy Cointreau, which failed to communicate what Mise en Cave was all about, the wines remained top class across the board and continued to win countless awards.

PR activity and tastings of great older vintage wines, many in magnum and jeroboam, have helped strike a much more upbeat note as Charles

re-establishes itself among the most distinguished brands. The availability over a period of nearly a decade of the top-class Blanc des Millénaires 1995 – which Daniel Thibault took the decision of making in far larger volumes than the then brand owners required – has not been a hindrance to the cause.

When Leroux was in London in mid-January to launch the next 2004 vintage of Blanc des Millénaires, we tasted through the current range, starting not with the white but the Rosé Brut Réserve.

This has recently moved from a base of 2008 to a base of 2012, quite a jump. Partly as a result it seems a much fresher style. This is the direction new winemaker Cyril Brun, the red wine specialist in his previous position at Veuve Clicquot, had been talking about taking this cuvée. This predates his arrival at Charles, however, and is more about the more youthful, though similarly high quality, base year.

Until very recently the available blend of Charles Brut Réserve was based on the 2008 harvest. Now it has moved, but only to 2010.

Faithful to the original Thibault model, it still has 40% reserve wines in it and shines in a most appealing way, so you know that it's only going to get better with time.

Blanc des Millénaires 2004 may not be around for quite as long as its predecessor, now that demand for and interest in all Charles Heidsieck wines has regenerated, but it's likely to give similar pleasure.

Asked how many bottles are now selling, Leroux says it's under 1m.

"The strategy is not to create a big volume brand, but be a meaningful player in the high-end sector."