

TSAR trek

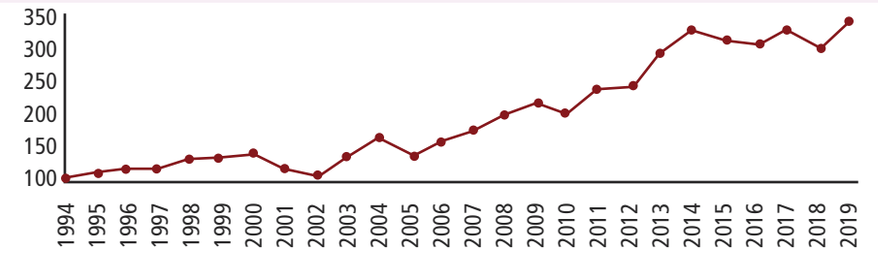
With a long history, Louis Roederer's Cristal has become one of the world's most expensive and sought-after Champagnes. Combining a luxury reputation with the finest artisanal quality, mature vintages are commanding ever-higher auction prices

A PRECURSOR to the prestige cuvée brand, Cristal was created in 1876 at the behest of Tsar Alexander II, who had deemed it risky to imbibe the same Champagne as his court-goers. Fearing assassination attempts, the Tsar requested a transparent bottle – at the time made of crystal glass – allowing him to immediately detect poison. To quell the Tsar's fears that someone might hide something lethal inside the punt, the bottom of the bottle was made flat.

Befitting the bespoke design of the bottle, the prestigious Champagne also had to satisfy the Tsar's discerning tastes: Cristal was to be an exemplar of elegance, concentration and finesse. To produce a cuvée suitable for a royal palate, the Roederer family spared no effort, using exclusively estate-grown fruit from the oldest vines grown in chalk-rich soils. Cristal was created.

Yet Roederer's history began before the creation of Cristal. Founded as Dubois Père & Fils in 1776, and inherited and renamed Louis Roederer in 1833, from the outset, this Champagne house targeted overseas markets, even being named official wine supplier to the Imperial Court of Russia. From 1933, and for several decades, Léon-Orly Roederer's widow, Camille – remembered for her strong-mindedness and intellect – oversaw the running of the estate, bringing refinement and elegance to the wines. The estate is now overseen by Frédéric Rouzaud, the seventh generation of the family, with Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon as cellarmaster.

Price estimate breakdown of Louis Roderer Cristal 1985 (€)



Unlike many of the grandes marques, Louis Roederer is family-owned, and has retained a decidedly human scale that is not always evident in Champagne. It is also unusual in that it owns substantial vineyard holdings – 240 hectares – distributed across the Montagne de Reims, the Vallée de la Marne, and the Côte des Blancs; it produces two thirds of the grapes needed for its production. In 2002 – a "dream vintage" by Lécaillon's reckoning – the house stopped using pesticides and began its conversion to biodynamics. Viticulture is traditional, with some parcels ploughed by horses to preserve the most fragile rootstocks. All of Roederer's vineyards are now farmed organically, and the parcels destined for Cristal biodynamically.

FLAGSHIP CUVÉE

As Cristal was made for the exclusive use of the tsars, when the Russian monarchy fell in 1917, the label disappeared. In 1945, however, Roederer started to remake the expression, and it was made commercially available for the first time. It is now Roederer's flagship cuvée.

Every bottle of Cristal is produced with grapes from Roederer's own vineyards, from 80 hectares of grand cru holdings in Verzenay, Verzy, Beaumont-sur-Vesle, Aÿ and Mareuil-sur-Aÿ for the Pinots, and Avize, Mesnil and Cramant for the Chardonnays.

Generally a blend of 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay, the plots are fermented separately so as to retain the characteristics of each vineyard. Cristal is left to mature on its lees for six years in the house's cellars, and rests for eight months after disgorgement.

Some of the wines are fermented in oak foudres, creating the delicate vinosity characteristic of Cristal. Over time, the bright pale-gold colour develops complex aromas of almonds and hazelnuts, with a reverberation of bright fruit. Full bodied, round and creamy, yet boasting an ethereal lightness and delicate tension, Cristal is characterised by its impressive balance. The Cristal brand now includes a rosé and Vinothèque version, the latter an innovative idea from Lécaillon to release Cristal only after a prolonged stay in the house's cellar.

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Champagnes are indeed often drunk too young, and it's exactly this that makes mature vintages of prestige cuvées so interesting on the auction market. Recent vintages of a house's prestigious cuvée are already sold at premium prices on the primary market, and while houses tend to keep the exact quantities of bottles produced a secret, it is generally known that production is rather large. Stocks of undrunk mature vintages, however, are very low, making them all the more attractive for a collector. Clearly reflected in the auction market, the price evolution of mature Cristal is on the up. Much sought-after bottles of the mythic 1988 vintage, for instance, frequently fetch prices upwards of €350 (£313) a bottle, sometimes reaching €400.

In April 2019, a bottle of Cristal 1990 went under the hammer for €365, and the 1983 vintage has consistently reached the €300 mark. In February 2019, the price of the 1973 almost crossed the €500 threshold, selling at €499. The auction results for Cristal 2009 – the last vintage to be released – which sold at €146, and even the highly qualitative and critically acclaimed 2008, which was sold at €191, illustrate the comparative attraction for mature vintages.

With much of its production still destined for Russia and other overseas markets, it's clear that Cristal has lost none of its allure. db

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