

1 LOUIS ROEDERER

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Louis Roederer is back at the head of the Top 30 in our Most Admired Champagne Brands survey. It is one of two champagnes that have never been outside the top five in the six years I have written this report. And it's the second time it has topped the table, the last time being in 2018.

Such a strong and consistent performance is not an accident, of course. It's the result of constantly striving to be better, examining every part of the business from grape to bottle and making lots of small improvements based on experiment and trial. Roederer, like other famous houses in Champagne, may be steeped in history, but it doesn't allow tradition to halt progress.

The person who sits at the heart of this approach is head winemaker Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon. If there is an issue that Champagne as a whole needs to address, now or in the near future, it's a pretty safe bet that Lécaillon and his team will have been considering it already. And, as co-president of the technical and environmental commission of CIVC, he is also involved at a generic level.

The warming climate in Champagne is probably the major challenge for producers over the next few years. They may not be able to halt the increase in sunshine hours or the higher average temperatures – as featured in the 2019 harvest (see report, pages 34-37). But they need to adapt their practices.

Last summer Lécaillon gave a masterclass in London entitled Fighting for Freshness, which sought to address how Champagne should go about preserving one of its greatest



assets, the freshness and zip that distinguishes its wines from the first sip. "Freshness is in the DNA of champagne. It's more than just acidity, it's about precision, purity, length, salinity, sapidity and, yes, acidity," Lécaillon says.

"Everything is done to preserve it in the winemaking method – high acidity, low pH, quick fermentation, quick bottling. It's kept on its lees for a long time and last, but not least, there's the CO₂ and dosage. It's all about the reductive preservation of flavours and freshness."

Riper fruit is not new to the region. Lécaillon believes Champagne picked fruit that was a little less ripe during the '70s, '80s and '90s to help meet the rapid growth in sales [it's easier to achieve high yields if you are less worried about how ripe you get the fruit]. If you go back to the years of '45, '47, '49, '52, '55, '59 and '62, they were all harvests with very ripe grapes. "In 1898 and 1900 the harvest had a potential alcohol of 11.7° and acidity of 5.6 or 5.5g/l. But if you

have much riper fruit it is even more important to up your game in preserving freshness."

For Lécaillon the idea that champagne is made [entirely] in the cellar has changed and, over the past 20 years, the Champenois have gone back to the vineyards, identifying the characteristics of individual parcels and the unique personality they can bring. The modern approach at Roederer is very much tied in with how it chooses to farm its own extensive vineyards, where over 125ha are now certified organic and it stopped using herbicides 20 years ago.

Using five vintage wines sourced from different soils in the Roederer estate, Lécaillon details what's done, where necessary, to preserve freshness. The 2012 vintage comes from pure chalk soils of Verzy and Verzenay for Pinot Noir with Chouilly Chardonnay. "When the north-facing Pinot is very austere and a bit too fresh, we use a bit more Chardonnay from Chouilly to give it a bit of a smile."

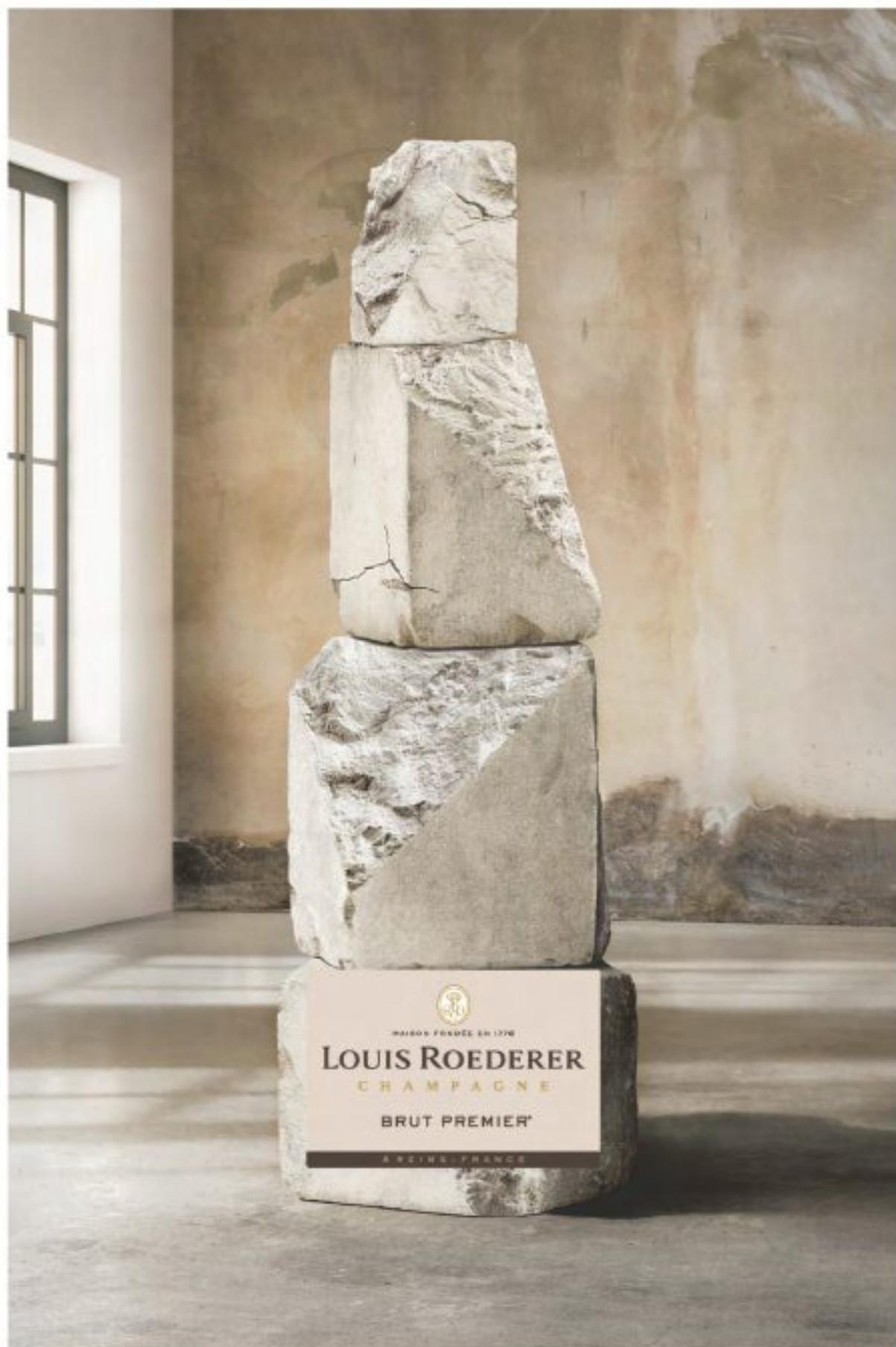


ROEDERER DOESN'T ALLOW TRADITION TO HALT PROGRESS

Made from a 10ha block in the premier cru of Cumières that's dark clay in a warm, ripe year, there are subtly different aspects to 2009 Brut Nature's production, says Lécaillon. With all three varieties picked together at around 11.6-11.7° – this is a vineyard blend – he has drawn on his experiences making wine at Roederer's operation in California's Anderson Valley, where higher ripeness levels are the norm. "There's a good cross-fertilisation of ideas to provide solutions in Champagne."

With no dosage, it's made at a lower pressure of some five bars and the malolactic is largely suppressed. "Stopping the malolactic fermentation didn't happen before the '60s because we didn't know what it was. Too high a pressure on a non-malo style with high CO₂ content can be a problem – you need a softer mousse." It is half aged in stainless steel and half in oak, the oak is a good oxidation preventer.

While last summer's presentation used exclusively vintage wine, Lécaillon is very clear about where his priorities lie, as came to light in an early January tweet. "The next two months will be dedicated to the final blending of Brut Premier. It is probably our most important task and responsibility as Brut Premier carries out the vision and aesthetic that has made Louis Roederer unique over the past 244 harvests."



LOUIS ROEDERER
HAND IN HAND WITH NATURE