

DEALWINE UPDATE: BOLLY'S GAME

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Bollinger is fiercely independent, and its own way of doing things has resulted in increasing popularity for its special edition cuvées, including the jewel in the crown – Vieilles Vignes Françaises



TODAY, BOLLINGER proudly stands as one of the few remaining independent estates in Champagne. The illustrious house was formed in 1829 by nobleman Athense de Villermont, local winemaker Paul Renaudin and the German entrepreneur Joseph Bollinger. With no heirs to assume Paul Renaudin's stake in the business after his death in 1854, and the union of Athense de Villermont's daughter to Joseph Bollinger in 1837, the Bollinger family soon became sole proprietors of the company.

When the exuberant Mme Lily Bollinger (Emily Law de Lauriston Boubers) took over in 1941, she sought to develop the vineyard, acquiring more land and travelling the world to promote the brand. Lily's charm and business acumen helped steer the Champagne house through the difficult wartime period. She was succeeded in 1971 by her nephews, Claude d'Hautefeuille and Christian Bizot, who fanned the flames of Britain's long standing love affair with Bollinger. The Bollinger brand permeates British culture. Queen Victoria issued a royal warrant for the drink in 1884. A century later, Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer served the R.D. 1973 cuvée at their wedding. But it was James Bond's predilection for a bottle of Bollinger that turned the Champagne into a household name. Christian Bizot's close friendship with the Bond film producer Albert 'Cubby' Broccoli saw Bollinger make its debut on the silver screen.

Today, the property spans 174 hectares in the Marne area of Champagne, 85% of which are grand cru and premier cru plots. Always dominated by Pinot Noir, the cuvées are imbued with an unmistakable

identity: rich, muscular and toasty, they carry structure and an ability to age gracefully. Barrel fermenting 80% of the harvest, and lees ageing for an extended period of time are famous hallmarks of the estate. Bollinger is also one of the few Champagne producers to still honour the tradition of storing reserve wines in magnums rather than in stainless steel vats or oak. An impressive 700,000 reserve magnums are at the house's disposal for blending the house's non-vintage Special Cuvée.

EXCEPTIONAL

In exceptional years, Bollinger also produces three vintage Champagnes. The Grande Année seeks to convey the expression of a certain vintage, and spends five years on its lees. Mme Lily Bollinger's staunch refusal to produce a rosé Champagne (a drink popular in brothels in the 1960s) was finally defied in 2007, when increasing pressure from distributors led Bollinger to produce a Grande Année and a Special Cuvée rosé. The R.D. cuvée (standing for *récentement dégorgé*, or recently disgorged) is a registered trademark of the house, and like Grande Année, is a vintage cuvée in which the best wines are selected cru by cru. The R.D. undergoes an extended ageing on the lees for eight years. As a cuvée destined to be cellared, it's not surprising that prices rise with time. An iDealwine auction in September 2018 saw the 1976 vintage go for €535 (+28%), the 1982 for €444 (+53%) and the 1975 for €426 (+65%).

YEARS

The crowning jewel of the house's production is the Vieilles Vignes Françaises, a vintage Champagne produced from the fruit of two prestigious enclosed vineyards: Clos Saint Jacques and Clos Chaudes Terres. These vines aren't as old as the name might suggest (around 50 years), but are significant for being the only two plots in Champagne to have eluded the phylloxera disease that devastated European vines in the early 20th century, not grafted to American rootstocks. Gilles Descôtes, an expert on the vines of this famed house, joined in 2003 and became cellar master in 2013. He notes that the Vieilles Vignes Françaises cuvée is living on borrowed time because the extraordinarily fragile vines could succumb to the disease at any moment. A wine in danger of extinction, the Vieilles Vignes consistently fetches impressive prices at auction. In October 2018, a bottle of the 1985 crossed the €1,000 threshold with a hammer price of €1,094.

iDealwine average auction prices of selected cuvées from Bollinger

Source: iDealwine

Cuvée	Vintage	iDealwine price estimate in 2018	iDealwine price estimate in 2013	Variation over five years
Bollinger R.D.	1973	€224	€328	46%
Bollinger R.D.	1975	€216	€426	97%
Bollinger R.D.	1976	€152	€535	252%
Bollinger R.D.	1982	€223	€444	99%
Bollinger R.D.	1988	€160	€292	83%
Bollinger R.D.	2002	–	€231	–
Bollinger Grande Année	1982	€123	€274	123%
Bollinger Grande Année	1985	€184	€219	19%
Bollinger Grande Année	1989	€128	€158	23%
Bollinger Grande Année	1990	€135	€182	35%
Bollinger Grande Année	1996	€130	€162	25%
Bollinger Grande Année	2002	€112	€134	20%
Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises	1985	€798	€1,094	37%
Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises	1999	€355	€547	54%
Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises	2002	€575	€881	53%

The company is managed by Charles- Armand de Belenet, who, although not a family member, works closely with the house to uphold its prestigious legacy. Recent auction results show that such a legacy prevails, and it's not just British enthusiasts that are succumbing to the rich and powerful Bollinger style.

Many European enthusiasts, particularly those from France and northern European countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Norway are on the hunt at iDealwine for prestigious bottles. But they're now facing competition from Asian bidders from Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and Singapore.