

WINE
On the
Grapevine

THE



A Real Corker

TWO CHARISMATIC ENTREPRENEURS ARE SHAKING UP THE CHAMPAGNE INDUSTRY WITH THEIR HIGH-PRICED BUBBLES. JAKKI PHILLIPS HEARS THE CURIOUS TALE OF **BOËRL & KROFF**



IT'S THE MOST EXPENSIVE champagne in the world – one magnum will set you back a whopping HK\$50,000. It's also one of the rarest with only 3,000 of the finest vintages sold each year. But have you ever heard of Boërl & Kroff? Probably not. That's because, unlike long-standing champagne-producers such as Bollinger, Krug and Moët & Chandon, this aspiring French company only popped its first corks in 1995. But, if founders Patrick Sabaté and Stéphane Sésé have anything to do with it, Boërl and Kroff will soon be the champagne fizzing on every connoisseur's tongue.

The story behind this extravagant bubbly is as remarkable as the sparkling wine itself. Sabaté's grandfather was a well-known maker of corks and oak barrels, a profession he handed down to his grandson. During family dinners he would regale the table with tales of a beautiful vineyard in the Urville area of Champagne, which was owned by one of his long-standing clients, Michel Drappier.

Back in the 1950s, three vineyard parcels on this verdant estate were used to produce an elegant cuvee exclusively for the then French president Charles de Gaulle and his family. When De Gaulle died in 1970, Drappier stopped separately vinifying those prized patches and reintroduced the grapes back into his major cuvees.

It was the great fortune of Sabaté and Sésé to cross paths with Drappier in the early '90s. With a clink of wine glasses, Drappier agreed to re-vinify those special parcels exclusively for Boërl and Kroff and also consented to their unique specifications.

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It is these strict set of conditions that make their champagne the most rare and expensive in the world today. Sabaté explains: “Boërl and Kroff is made from only three vineyard parcels, only in magnums, only from great vintages and with only one type of grape – pinot noir. I don’t know of any other champagne made this way. This means we can only produce around 3,000 magnums a year because we only vinify when the grapes are of extremely high quality.”

Boërl and Kroff’s first vintage was produced in 1995 but was soon overshadowed by their 1996 champagne, which Sabaté describes as “one of the best vintages of the twentieth century.” In contrast, nothing was produced in 1999 and 2001, when the grapes were of poor quality, or in 2012 when their entire crop was destroyed by hail.

For those reluctant to splash out HK\$50,000 on a magnum, there is a more wallet-friendly option. “When the grapes don’t meet the extremely high quality required for our magnums, but are still very good, we vinify in bottles and produce around 6,000 of our second wine, B by Boërl and Kroff.” Also produced entirely of pinot noir, B by Boërl and Kroff costs around HK\$3,500 a bottle.

Protecting the precious bubbles in each magnum are very special, and very expensive, corks. “Each one costs around HK\$100 to produce, which is a very high cost, but it is totally worth it. They are like handmade pieces of art,” says the eloquent wine maker.

Boërl and Kroff’s corks were actually inspired by Sabaté’s grandfather, who created the revolutionary design exclusively for Dom Perignon in the 1930s. Sadly, Sabaté did not make this surprise discovery until after his grandfather had passed away. “Many years ago I had the honour of hosting a group of top management from two world-famous champagne houses at my cork factory in southern Spain. I managed to track down a rare 1935 vintage Dom Perignon, which I was sure they would never have tasted before.” Sabaté was correct and his visitors were amazed at his extraordinary find. “I saw genuine emotion in their eyes when I opened the bottle and, even after more than 45 years, we still heard that all-important fizz.” As the group



of oenophiles admired the antique cork, Sabaté was met with an astonishing sight. “When I examined it, I saw the initials of my grandfather. He had made it all those years ago. It was that cork which led me to investigate his career and unearth information about his groundbreaking work with Dom Perignon.”

Delving once again into his family’s rich history, Sabaté chose his great grandfather’s name, Kroff, as one half of his champagne house’s moniker. His partner Sésé contributed the other, Boërl. Like almost every aspect of this intriguing venture, the name comes with an incredible story. Sabaté explains: “During the Second World War, Stéphane’s grandfather was captured and released six times by the Germans. He was French but his language skills were so good that he was able to convince his captors that he was actually German. He spent so much time pretending to be German that after the war, when he spoke his native French, he did so with a German accent. As a result he earned the nickname The Berliner. We wanted to use the name Berliner but it had already been registered so we shortened it to Boërl.”

In the coming year Sabaté will be travelling across Asia, sharing his stories and spreading the word about his much sought-after champagne. Raising a flute of their 1996 vintage to his lips, he says: “It is a truly remarkable champagne. It has all the complexities and character of a world-class wine. But there is only so much talking I can do. If you are a true connoisseur, words will not be enough, you will simply have to try it for yourself.”

Boërl & Kroff is available exclusively from One Red Dot in Hong Kong. Visit www.onereddot.com



RICH PICKINGS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Boërl & Kroff co-founder Patrick Sabaté sipping a glass of his 1996 vintage champagne; B by Boërl & Kroff is the brand’s second wine; co-owner Stéphane Sésé; Boërl & Kroff’s 1996 vintage brut and the company’s distinctive corks