



FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

INSIDE THE WORLD
OF DESIGN POLYMATH
KARIM RASHID

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Monsieur Fox pocket square from the Gift Guide

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From a vineyard less than a hectare in size comes an industry first: a champagne so exceptional it is bottled only in magnums or larger formats. John Stimpfig reports

magnum opus

In 2011, when Glencore became London's biggest-ever stock market flotation, there was an interesting exchange of gifts between the Glencore boss Ivan Glasenberg and the LSE CEO Xavier Rolet. To mark the event, Glasenberg gave Rolet an oversized toy truck, which the latter politely promised to add to the LSE's collection. In return, Rolet presented Glasenberg with a magnum of 1996 Boërl & Kroff champagne, which one city newspaper (not this one) said was "thought to be worth £1,000".

In point of fact, that particular bottle would have set you back around €4,600 even at its release four years earlier, a price that catapults Boërl & Kroff into being one of the world's rarest and most expensive

champagnes on release. Rolet, himself a vintner, had clearly done his homework.

All the same, if you have never heard of, let alone tasted, this new and utterly extraordinary champagne, don't be too alarmed: neither have most wine professionals, critics or collectors. Indeed, it's so far under the radar that, according to, João Pires, former head sommelier at Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, "even among champagne producers in Reims and Epernay, the luxury brand is not well-known". All that, however, is about to change.

The Boërl & Kroff story begins in 1994, when a 24-year-old Patrick Sabaté and his friend Stéphane Sésé (both pictured above) were invited to lunch by Michel Drappier of the eponymous champagne house. Sabaté

had just joined his family's global cork business and was there to meet the region's leading houses. For his part, Sésé was simply tagging along for an enjoyable gastronomic tour of some of its very best tables d'hôte.

"It was towards the end of the meal that Drappier began to tell us about a special cuvée that his father used to make back in the 1960s," recalls Sabaté. "He explained that the champagne would often be served at prestigious dinners hosted by Charles de Gaulle. What's more, the

grapes came from three tiny adjoining south-facing pinot noir vineyards in Champagne's southerly Aube Valley, which still belonged to the Drappier family."

The two young men could hardly believe their ears. Even though neither was in the winemaking business, they could not resist

From top: Stéphane Sésé (left) and Patrick Sabaté. The Boërl & Kroff collector's casket of five magnums, from €43,250



“These champagnes are genuinely unique. Any aficionado who can afford to buy them should drink them at least once in their lifetime”

the challenge and opportunity that appeared to have fallen into their laps. The only question was whether they could convince a surprised Michel Drappier to bring this remarkable champagne back to life.

As it turned out, Drappier didn't require much persuading. By the time the coffee was poured, the plan was more or less hatched. Sabaté and Sésé would have exclusive access to the vines from the three adjacent vineyard parcels – Les Egrilles, Le Montouillet and La Belle Haie. And Drappier would make the wine.

“At first, it was only conceived as a passion project for our personal use and consumption – because the vineyard is less than a hectare in size,” says Sabaté. “And as it was so small, it was always the intention to handcraft something truly special from this unique terroir. So we gave Michel a brief to make the greatest champagne in the world together with whatever resources he needed to do it.”

When Drappier tasted the base wines from the debut 1995 vintage, he knew he had something remarkable. In fact, it was so exceptional that he recommended (or rather, insisted on) bottling the tiny crop in just 2,500 magnums, as well as a handful of three-litre Jeroboams (from €12,000, pictured right) and 30-litre Melchizedeks. He also told the business partners that he planned to age it in his cellars (pictured above) for at least 12 years, longer than most other prestige cuvées. Now it was Sabaté and Sésé's turn to be surprised.

The '95 set the bar breathtakingly high and firmly established the Boërl & Kroff practice of long ageing on the lees before disgorgement and release. Meanwhile, the annus mirabilis 1996 vintage proved that the '95 was no flash in the pan. It too was bottled in magnums (from €5,110, pictured overleaf) and destined for greatness.

However, not even Boërl & Kroff vintage can hit such heights year in year out – primarily because of the vagaries of Champagne's northerly, marginal climate.

In 1997, Drappier decided to bottle the crop in standard 75cl bottles. And in difficult years, like 1999 and 2001, the trio took the costly and painful decision not to make anything at all. “If it's not exceptional, it can't be Boërl & Kroff,” says Sabaté.

A decade ago, Sabaté and Sésé began to think seriously about turning their private passion into a brand and selling it to

aficionados. “By that stage, we had several years' worth of very expensive, superlative champagne, which we were never realistically going to drink on our own. Moreover, we had this unique concept and proposition,” says Sésé. “Our top wine is only pinot noir, only vintage and comes from one minuscule vineyard. We only bottle it in magnums or larger formats. No one else in Champagne had ever done this.”

Their respective circumstances had also altered. The Sabaté cork business had changed hands, which freed up Patrick's energies to concentrate on Boërl & Kroff full-time. And having established his hugely successful web-marketing agency during the 1990s, Stéphane Sésé was able to devote even more of his time to promoting the fledgling fizz.

The brand was finally launched in 2007 with the compelling 1996. Since then only a handful of releases have trickled onto the market, including magnums of 1995 and 1998 (from €4,410, pictured far right), and a fabulously rich and intense 2007 rosé de saignée. Five are available in the Boërl & Kroff collector's casket (from €43,250, pictured on previous page).

Because so little is made, only one critic has tasted each and every Boërl & Kroff vintage. Richard Juhlin, regarded by many as the world's foremost champagne expert, first heard about it in 2009. “Initially, I thought it was another marketing-driven champagne. However, when I talked to Michel Drappier about it in Hong Kong, I began to realise that this was something completely different and extremely serious. Naturally, I was intrigued,” says Juhlin.

A tasting of nine champagnes representing Boërl & Kroff's entire range was set up in Stockholm. Juhlin's scores weren't his highest ever but his notes and comments were fulsome. “I have to admit that I was surprised and impressed by their uncompromising quality and style,” says Juhlin. “They are superbly crafted and genuinely unique. Any



From top: Drappier's 12th-century Cistercian cellars. The 1998 magnum, from €4,410. The 1995 Jeroboam, from €12,000

Invitation to View

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CHRISTIE'S
The Art People

aficionado who can afford to buy them should drink them at least once in their lifetime."

What do they taste like? Juhlin points out that they are completely different from the Drappier house style and have their own precise identity. "There's a tension there between this silky, smooth freshness and elegance, which is counterbalanced by a feeling of power, opulence and vinous concentration. Usually, you have to choose one or the other. That's a phenomenally difficult thing for Michel Drappier to pull off." You could say that Boërl & Kroff's top vintages have the vinosity of Bollinger, the rich toastiness of Krug and the elegance of Veuve Clicquot's La Grande Dame. Some have even made comparisons with red burgundy, partly no doubt because of the pinot noir connection. Sabaté

leading distributors, merchants and restaurants, who are very happy indeed to take it. It's not a hard sell because when people actually taste the wine, the price becomes much less of an issue."

It's also worth noting that "B de Boërl & Kroff" vintages, in regular bottles, are a much more affordable £250. The 2002 "B", in particular, is so sublimely and seductively good that Sabaté claims it would have been worthy of bottling in magnums. "Perhaps it was a mistake not to do so," he says. They also sold a little too much of some of the earlier vintages and now have no 1997 left in their cellars. "We're actually trying to buy some of it back."

However, that is proving difficult. "People don't want to part with it because it's so rare and unusual. Naturally, they want it in their collections to drink. But I also think

people are looking at it as an investment," adds Sabaté.

Left: a magnum of
the rare 1996
cuvée, from £5,110

Creating the bijou brand has been a vertiginous learning curve. Yet Sabaté and Sésé appear to have

steered a clever and confident course. In particular, the packaging is brilliantly understated and the antithesis of bling. They've also positioned it in just the right places. The brand has selectively supported and sponsored high-profile charitable society events, including the Bal de Paris and the Ampa Gala dinner in Monaco.

However, if you want to get the full money-can't-buy Boërl & Kroff experience, you really have to take part in its invitation-only Snow Golf tournament at Gstaad in Switzerland. The glamorous, hedonistic event takes place every March and was dreamed up by Sésé to thank Boërl & Kroff's very best friends, customers and collectors, who fly in from all over the world to attend. The golf isn't particularly serious. But it's one hell of a party; one regular attendee describes it as "le posh du posh".

For those not on the Gstaad guest list, the merest handful of bottles can be found in a very select number of the world's best restaurants and retailers. For instance, in London, you can buy it at Hedonism Wines and Heston Blumenthal's Dinner at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park. In Macau, it's on the list of Robuchon au Dôme at the top of the Grand Lisboa Hotel. In Tokyo, it's at Il Ristorante in the Bulgari Ginza Tower.

According to Pires, who first introduced it to the UK at Dinner, Boërl & Kroff will always be challenging for people to understand. However, that can also work to its advantage because it adds kudos and cachet. "It's an incredible, authentic gastronomic champagne and probably the ultimate hand-sell for any sommelier," he says. "The secret is always to offer it to the right customer in the right way."

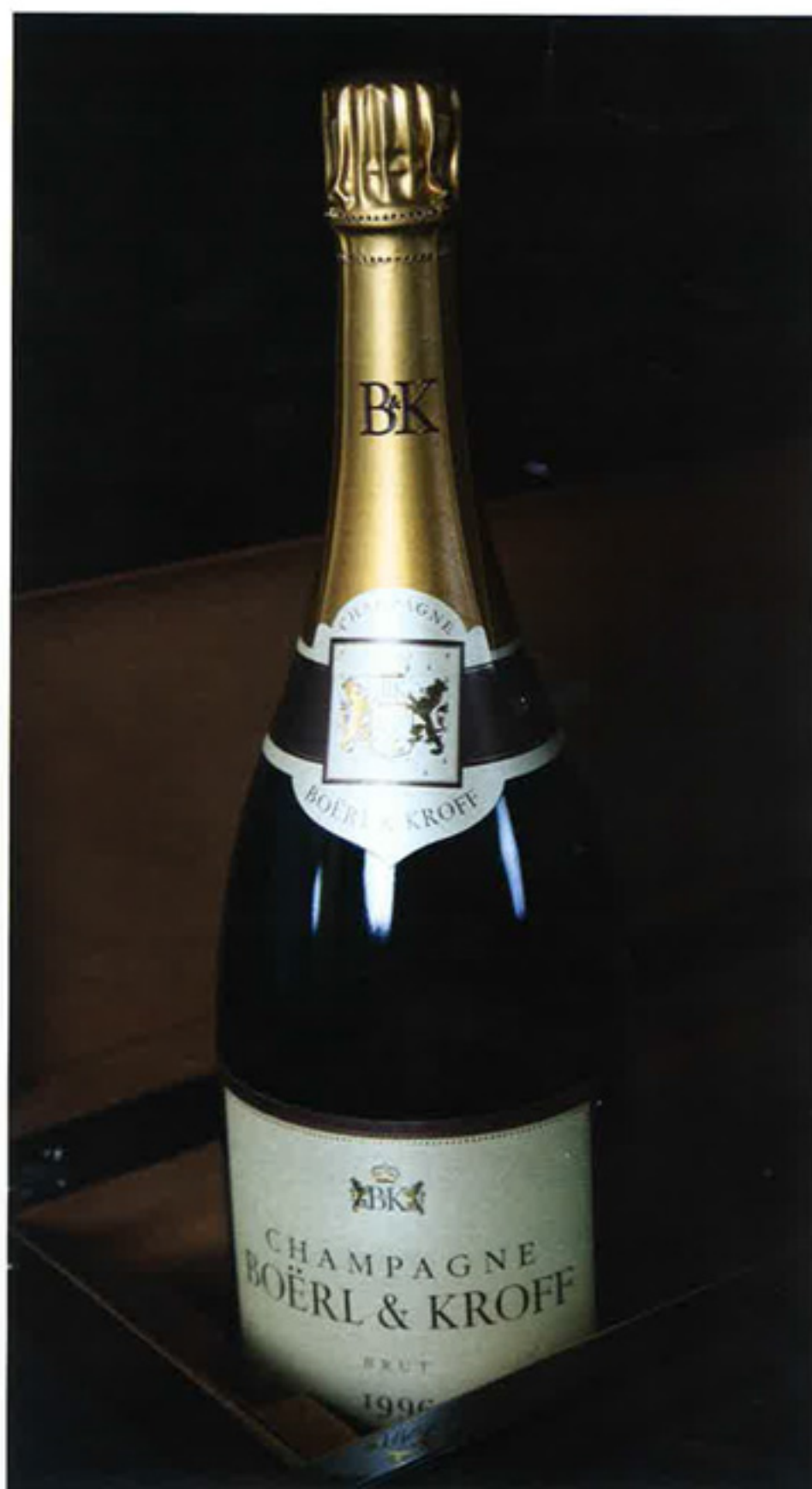
Meanwhile, the word continues to spread, albeit, ever so discreetly. "We're now listed in Shanghai, Beijing, Dubai, Moscow, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami and Marrakech," says Sabaté. "But what I am most proud of is how well represented we are in France – at Le Taillevent and at Epicure, the three-Michelin-starred restaurant at Le Bristol, in Paris – as well as other Michelin-starred restaurants in the Alps, the Côte d'Azur and Deauville."

Despite all the success, Sabaté does have one minor regret. "I wish I could drink more of my champagne at home. Ten years ago, the problem was I had too much. Now, my biggest problem is that I have too little." ♦

FIZZIBLE DIFFERENCE

Boërl & Kroff, +334-6836 2117; www.boerl-and-kroff.com.

Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, 66 Knightsbridge, London SW1 (020-7201 3833; www.dinnerbyheston.com). **Epicure**, Hôtel Le Bristol, 112 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris 75008 (+331-5343 4340; www.lebristolparis.com). **Hedonism Wines**, 3-7 Davies St, London W1 (020-7989 0085; www.hedonism.co.uk). **Il Ristorante**, Bulgari Ginza Tower, 2-7-12 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo (+813-6362 0555; www.bulgarihotels.com). **Le Taillevent**, 15 Rue Lamennais, Paris (+331-4495 1501; www.taillevent.com). **Robuchon au Dôme**, 43rd Floor, Grand Lisboa Hotel, Avenida de Lisboa, Macau (+853-8803 7878; www.grandlisboahotel.com).



says this is for others to comment on. "Our job is to create a great vin de plaisir, which will age and improve for decades. Some vintages will last a century, for sure." To enjoy the champagne at its best, Sabaté advises decanting it and serving it in burgundy glasses.

Inevitably, Boërl & Kroff's eye-watering price has raised eyebrows, which in turn brings up the question of why it is more expensive than more established prestige cuvées on the market. "Not only is this an incredibly costly champagne to produce, we also have very little to sell. So it's a combination of rarity and quality," says Sabaté.

"It's certainly nothing to do with marketing because we don't have a big budget. Of course, I couldn't sell at this price if I was making half-a-million bottles, or a larger range of champagnes. Instead, I only have one wine per vintage and only 2,500 magnums for a world market."

According to Sabaté, 90 per cent of sales are to private customers. "And the rest we sell to the world's