



Bertrand de Fleurian,
President, Laurent-Perrier U.S.

My Dinner With Bertrand

We have a wide-ranging discussion with Champagne Laurent-Perrier's man in America.

TOM HYLAND

Given the celebratory image of Champagne, it should hardly come as a surprise that sales of this famous sparkling wine have sharply decreased during the recent economic downturn. Some accounts have sales figures of Champagne showing as much as a 50 percent decline in the United States with relatively similar numbers throughout Europe. But if Bertrand de Fleurian, President of Laurent-Perrier U.S., is worried, he doesn't show it. "We're a niche player," he says. "We have the potential to double our sales."

This may strike some as boastful, but for de Fleurian, it's merely a summary of what he truly believes his company can accomplish over the next ten years. A native of Burgundy who moved to Champagne at an early age, de Fleurian has been employed by Laurent-Perrier since 1987, serving as sales director and managing director in several markets, ranging from Northern Europe to South America to Asia Pacific. This past August, he was promoted to his new role and relishes the opportunity to revive sales of the company's Champagnes during the economic recovery.

De Fleurian has several growth plans (more on that later), but he is a smart enough businessman to realize that through

thick and thin times, his company can only succeed if their products are of the highest quality, and with the Champagnes of Laurent-Perrier, he knows he has a strong base. As with any Champagne producer, the non-vintage Brut is the measuring stick for the company's identity of quality and consistency; it is also the wine that represents the top position in sales. In the previous issue of this magazine (Winter 2009) the *QRW* Tasting Staff named the Laurent-Perrier the "Co-Best of Show" among bottlings of non-vintage Brut for \$45 and less; the tasting notes focused on the wine's "pear, toasted nut and brioche flavors" and the "crisp and long finish." I am in complete agreement with this review and would add only that this non-vintage Brut has an impressive depth of fruit combined with a stylish elegance that few of its competitors can match.

While this wine represents the company's biggest production, de Fleurian is proud to point out that more than 40 percent of the sales of the entire line of Laurent-Perrier Champagnes are with products other than the non-vintage Brut, one of the highest percentages for any Champagne producer. A principal reason for that is the Cuvée Rosé Brut, which is arguably the firm's most important product and the one that de Fleurian and

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his sales team profile for the finest dining rooms across the country. "When people know the Rosé, they have a high image of the house," he reasons. One of the few Rosé Champagnes made in the *saignée* method, where the skins of the Pinot Noir grapes provide the color (instead of blending in a still red wine), the wine offers sumptuous aromas and flavors of strawberries, raspberries and wild cherries backed by a rich mid-palate and a lengthy finish with pinpoint acidity.

On its own, the Cuvée Rosé Brut is a marvelous wine, but with food, it is a striking success. What's remarkable about this particular Rosé is its affinity with so many types of cuisine. This past fall, I was fortunate enough to be invited along with another local journalist to experience dinner at Charlie Trotter's Restaurant in my home town of Chicago, which is where I met de Fleurian. What made this dinner so unique was that every dish was paired with the Rosé; after 15 courses I had to agree with his thoughts on how well this wine works with a variety of foodstuffs; from oysters and fresh water eel to suckling pig and ricotta cheese with arugula, the Rosé complemented each dish wonderfully. This was admittedly a pretty special showcase for this wine, but for those evenings at home when all of us dine on more humble fare, I'd recommend it with duck breast with cherry or orange sauce or even some simple take-out Chinese food, be it chicken, pork or beef.

Rounding out the Laurent-Perrier lineup are two bottlings of vintage Brut (one of which is a premium Rosé named Cuvée Alexandra); the Ultra Brut, a very dry Champagne with no dosage that would be ideal with oysters or mussels; a medium-sweet Demi-Sec and their luxury cuvée known as Grand Siècle. The name means "great century"

and refers to the 17th century when King Louis XIV, the famous "Sun King," became the first French king to drink Champagne. Produced from an equal mix of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the wine is a blend of three vintages and offers that wonderful combination of dazzling aromatics, richness on the palate and a delicacy in the finish that is found only in the finest bottlings of Champagne.

Armed with a foundation of excellent products, de Fleurian has set about his plans on recapturing recently decreasing sales. He believes the principal way to do this is by focusing on the best accounts in the key markets in this country, such as New York City, Chicago, Miami, San Francisco and Los Angeles. For de Fleurian it's all about proper distribution of the product in the finest restaurants and hotels. "We need exposure in the right places. Laurent-Perrier has always been known to be in the top entrée places all over the world. This is more important than advertising." To that extent, he has a staff of five regional managers that concentrate on the major on-premise accounts in the cities mentioned above. About two-thirds of his travel itinerary for the year takes him around the U.S. and while those cities are vital, he's also dined at some special restaurants in Texas and even Rhode Island, so no stone goes unturned.

One of the built-in tribulations selling Champagne, as de Fleurian notes, is that any producer is at the mercy of the weather. As the non-vintage Brut is crafted from wines coming from several years, a producer must keep stocks of inventory from each vintage in their cellars. This can be a problem when the demand isn't what it should be in the market place. "We are a natural product," de Fleurian explains. "We are not producing spirits where if you plan to sell 100 cases, you produce

100 cases. In Champagne, we take what the weather gives us."

De Fleurian notes that the current financial mess is, unfortunately, right on schedule. "About every ten years, there seems to be a downturn in the economy. It happened in 1981, 1992 and 2001." He believes that Champagne producers must find a balance between production and demand, given the identity of Champagne. "As it is seen as a luxury product, Champagne suffers more than wine in an economic crisis."

Yet despite the momentary sales slump, de Fleurian remains positive about Champagne in general and Laurent-Perrier in particular. He notes that his company is not a large Champagne house, so sales have not fallen off as dramatically as with other firms. He has not entered into a price war and has no plans to do so, preferring instead to communicate the message of the quality of his products in the proper channels. While his company never releases sales figures, as they believe this would create problems for customers or specific accounts, he does think he can achieve sales similar to the levels experienced before this latest financial turmoil.

Finally, de Fleurian knows how much consumers around the world know and love Champagne, so he is unflinchingly optimistic about the immediate future. "The United States, Germany and Australia are all large sparkling wine producers. They know what sparkling wine is, they love it and they are used to it. Sooner or later, they want to go to the top of the range." As Champagne only represents ten percent of all sparkling wine production, it is not difficult for producers such as Laurent-Perrier to get their point across. "Champagne is the highest quality sparkling wine in the world," de Fleurian remarks. "We as producers have been strong in that message." ☞