

APERITIF

sparkling trinity...

Toast
Of
The Town



Even if you're the Rothschilds, you need a strategy in the wine marketplace. Especially if you're dipping your toes into the big Champagne vat where there are many more experienced and even larger players.

And so, since mid-2012, Philippe Sereys de Rothschild has been personally leading the introduction of the year-old Barons de Rothschild Champagne venture, the first joint product of all three branches of the Rothschild wine empire. Philippe, who is the son of Baroness Philippine de Rothschild, hails from the branch that owns Château Mouton-Rothschild. Another branch headed by Baron Eric de Rothschild camps out at Château Lafite-Rothschild, while a third (Baron Benjamin de Rothschild) is at Château Clarke. All, of course, have additional wine brands in Bordeaux or globally, and the family is even better known for its banking acumen.

It's not that the Rothschilds have no Champagne experience entirely. They have been individually involved in managing or financing Champagne brands, such as Ruinart and Henriot, and Philippe's grandfather, the famous Baron Philippe de Rothschild, once had his own Champagne brand. "He was fond of celebrating whatever he could find to celebrate," his grandson says. But that was long ago and involved only individuals and not the whole family.

Philippe tells a fascinating story on why and how the family came together around Champagne. "The first decision we made was that we would have one brand, not three individual brands," explains Philippe, a charismatic man with a great command of English and of English dry wit. Having one label, of course, avoided potential confusion in the marketplace with no questions about brand differentiation.

Second was supply. "This was our north face" or most-difficult problem, he said. "The challenge was to get good supplies of grapes, not just from vintage to vintage, but for the long term." The Rothschilds decided to become partners with a group of small growers in the Côte de Blancs, the Chardonnay-growing region, which meant that their three introductory labels — Brut, Blanc de Blancs and Rosé — would all be Chardonnay heavy. Even the Rosé is 85 per cent white juice.

Third, "We needed a winemaker. We have great experience in winemaking, but making a wine and making Champagne are two different things." So they chose an experienced Champagne maker to lead their production.

Fourth — "What do we call our Champagne?" Philippe explained that he took the job of heading the brand only after making sure there would be a governing board and that all three branches had to show up for meetings. Furthermore, any decision had to be unanimous — not two against one. "It's the closest the family will get to being communists," he joked. "In the end, we decided to do what every other family Champagne has done and call the brand by the family name."

Fifth was the packaging, and the decision was to make it look different, though classical. Mission accomplished on all counts.

At present, Rothschild Champagne is producing only the three basic non-vintage brands. "We have seven to eight years of inventory," Philippe says, which has barely been touched by the 250,000 to 300,000 bottles currently on the market. They could sell more. They also know they soon will have to make a tête de cuvée or vintage or both, and the latest news is that they will be unveiling their first vintage brut, 2006, in 2014.

Oh yes, all three Champagnes are delicious, but pour us the Blanc de Blancs as first choice any time.

Champagne Barons de Rothschild wines are available at selected restaurants and from Énoteca, 391 Orchard Road, #B2-02-1 Ngee Ann City. Tel: 6836 3068.