

# The greatest-ever champagne vintage?



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CHAMPAGNE FRANCE SPARKLING WINE



*A comparative tasting of champagne from the highly acclaimed 1996 vintage and the overshadowed 1995. And a daring way to remove a recalcitrant champagne cork.*

Was 1996 the greatest-ever champagne vintage? Usually referred to in revered tones, this vintage – characterised in its early life by very high levels of acidity – has been

challenged by more recent years. Today, champagne aficionados might argue that 2008 has usurped 1996's place at the top (although 2002 and 2012 might also feature in that rather rarefied debate).

But slipping under the radar is 1995 – a year overshadowed by the adulation showered on 1996, yet a fine vintage in its own right. The 1995 vintage brings a fascinating contrast to this champagne party, as the wines have blossomed and have added balance and finesse to the fruit-driven palate they presented when young. 1995 was a high-yielding vintage where Chardonnay performed very well, with the best wines continuing to show breadth and complexity on their ample palates.

In contrast, 1996 was shaped by alternating spells of warm and cool weather and especially the strong winds and cold, clear autumn nights which drove acidity to almost unprecedented levels. For many years, those high acidity levels were seen as the justification for thinking 1996 to be the best vintage ever. But since then, there have been instances where all the fruit has now gone, leaving behind a liquid where the acidity is strident and out of balance.

So, which of these two contrasting years is better? This was a question posed by Bordeaux Index champagne buyer Katherine Fisher, who put on a horizontal tasting of many of the top names at their offices in Fitzrovia back in October.



MAISON FONDÉE EN 1735  
**COMTES DE CHAMPAGNE**  
**TAITTINGER**  
*Reims, France*

BRUT 1995  
CHAMPAGNE \*\*\* BLANC DE BLANCS  
PRODUIT DE FRANCE  
750ml ELABORÉ PAR TAITTINGER - REIMS, FRANCE  
28cl

**COMTES**  
**DE CHAMPAGNE**  
GRANDS CRUS - BLANC DE BLANCS  
**TAITTINGER**  
1996  
*Reims, France*  
CHAMPAGNE

The mouth-watering list was a veritable who's who of champagne royalty, including both vintages of Ayala Cuvée Perle, Cristal, Krug, Philipponnat Clos des Goisses, Bollinger RD, Taittinger Comtes de Champagne and Charles Heidsieck Collection Crayères. In addition, the tasting was bolstered by single vintages of Pol Roger Cuvée Winston Churchill, Pommery Cuvée Louise, Krug Collection and Duval-Leroy Femme de Champagne.

The tasting line-up was completed by a bottle of 1996 Salon. This stumped the assembled Bordeaux Index crew with a remarkably stubborn (seemingly glued-in) cork. Fortunately, Charles Philipponnat had been invited to the tasting and proceeded to show the assembled group what to do in such circumstances.



I'd suggest, in the words of the longest-running BBC Children's show *Blue Peter*, 'don't try this at home'. Philipponnat proceeded to remove the recalcitrant stopper

with a corkscrew – he has obviously had to do this before. But his efforts were most welcome – for me this was the wine of the day.

As for the answer to Fisher’s question, there was no clear winner. What seems to be more critical to the success of either 1995 or 1996 is the condition of a particular bottle. In some cases 1995 held the upper hand with complex and layered flavours, all supported by surprising levels of acidity. But the best 1996s combined finesse and complex flavours all supported by the linear freshness that characterises the year.

If you have 1995s in your cellar, then I would advocate drinking them in the near future. These are unlikely to improve and, at the moment, they are in a great place. The 1996s could be kept for longer but be aware that bottle variation will increase, making future enjoyment rather more of a lottery.

The final point to note is that availability of these wines is very limited. Bordeaux Index worked with several houses to obtain bottles direct from their cellars. A few were sourced from reliable contacts on the secondary market. Fisher confirmed that in some cases BI believed there to be only a couple of bottles available anywhere in the UK.

Reviews of the 20 champagnes below are grouped by vintage (the Pommery Cuvée Louise 1995 and Pol Roger Cuvée Winston Churchill 1996 were corked and therefore not reviewed). Each vintage’s wines are ordered alphabetically but you can reorder them by score if you wish.

Select sorting option

## 1995

### Ayala, Cuvée Perle d'Ayala Brut 1995 Champagne

17.5/20

WHITE

*80% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir. Disgorged in 2024.*

Full, fleshy warmth on the nose and palate. Enveloping and luxurious style. The acidity remains pretty bracing and a little ‘edgy’ – just a little jarring on the finish. But certainly no sign of this falling over. A complex, layered vintage champagne but not quite as well balanced as some. (AWH)

Drink: 2024 – 2030

### Bollinger, RD Extra Brut 1995 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

*Disgorged in 2025.*

Super-complex nose! Deeper in hue – looks like it has age but, on the palate, it is so fresh! Testament to the late-disgorging approach. Toasty, woody, nutty – very pure flavours. An intriguing lick of spice on the finish adds an extra dimension. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2025 – 2032

### Duval-Leroy, Femme de Champagne Brut 1995 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

The Femme comes in probably the least cellar/fridge-friendly bottle in the world of wine! Golden colour, with notes of golden raisins. Well into its drinking window, the Chardonnay here provides structure and acidity, coupled with mushroom and nutty characters. Generous in the mouth, with a very fine, gentle mousse – a very elegant wine. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2005 – 2028

### Charles Heidsieck, Collection Crayères Brut 1995 Champagne

17.5/20

WHITE

*60% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay. Cellared in 1997. Disgorged in 2021. RS 9.5 g/l.*

Lively, linear. Lacking a bit of the density expected but makes up for this with focus and freshness. Toasty notes on the palate but is tighter and more direct than many of the 1995s. Acidity is pretty evident and just on the right side of not being exaggerated. (AWH)

Drink: 2021 – 2030

### Krug, Collection Brut 1995 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

*48% Pinot Noir, 35% Chardonnay and 17% Meunier. Disgorged in 2021.*

Full-on – typical Krug style with the anticipated wood-influenced, mature characters. Almost orange/amber in hue. Marmalade and toast! Distinct mushroom, savoury flavours on the finish. Certainly intriguing but more of an intellectual exercise to taste, rather than one primarily about enjoyment. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2021 – 2035

### Krug, Brut 1995 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

Straw-coloured. Wood/toast-driven (but it is Krug, after all) – more accentuated over time. Baked bread and croissant on the nose, a touch of vanillin on the palate. Certainly hugely complex, with acidity close to that of the 1996 Krug. Just a little disjointed on the finish? (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2008 – 2030

### Philipponnat, Clos des Goisses LV Extra Brut 1995 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

*Disgorged in October 2020. Dosage 4.5 g/l.*

À point – fine combination of richness, ripeness, warmth and the aged flavours from lengthy autolysis – biscuit/brioche/toast. Gentle mousse compliments the many layers of flavour. Enough acidity to balance but certainly not one of the briskest examples of acidity tasted here. 13% alcohol in 1995! (AWH)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2020 – 2030

### Louis Roederer, Cristal Brut 1995 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

Intriguing, super-complex nose with a deep, verging on orangey hue. Umami seaweed character on the nose combining with toasty/marmalade notes – sounds odd (and not what I'd expect from Cristal) but so interesting. Light, fresh, bright palate, still with plenty of acidity, which carries the abundance of leesy flavours so well. Certainly a fine, thought-provoking wine. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2010 – 2030

### Taittinger, Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut 1995 Champagne

18.5/20

WHITE

Remarkably close to the 1996 in colour. Toasty notes dominate here with some sweetcorn, nutty and biscuity characters giving almost a warming character on the palate. Full-bodied, loads of complexity – love the purity of flavour. A glorious champagne with a winning combination of ripeness, maturation and plentiful acidity to keep everything fresh. (AWH)

Drink: 2008 – 2032

# 1996

## Ayala, Cuvée Perle d'Ayala Brut 1996 Champagne

18/20

WHITE

*80% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir. Disgorged in 2024.*

Golden hue. Still smells so fresh and youthful. With a bit of swirling, complexity builds in the glass. Perhaps doesn't have the multiple layers of some, but there is a long way for this to go. Great precision and purity of flavour – just a vague hint of Perle's 'aged on the cork' style. This is going to develop further over the next five years. (AWH)

Drink: 2024 – 2038

## Bollinger, RD Extra Brut 1996 Champagne

18.5 ++/20

WHITE

*Disgorged in 2025.*

Acidity takes more of the centre stage, compared with the 1995. Very clean, focused acidity – pretty forthright and evident. I'd give this another two to three years and expect the acidity to soften just a little. When that happens, this will be a spectacular, hard-to-beat champagne. But the flavours (albeit subtle) are so very Bollinger. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2025 – 2040

## Dom Pérignon, Rosé Brut 1996 Champagne

17/20

ROSÉ

*From magnum.*

Burnished colour, copper hue. Drying on the palate and lacking some charm. Very savoury, taut, rather lacking fruit and not a lot of fun. One of those 1996s where the fruit has lessened while the acid hasn't softened. Not likely to improve much. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2005 – 2028

## Charles Heidsieck, Collection Crayères Brut 1996 Champagne

18.5/20

WHITE

*60% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay. Cellared in 1997. Disgorged in 2021. Dosage 9 g/l.* Mushroom and cool-cellar notes, weighty and concentrated – layers of flavour and very long. Zesty orange/marmalade notes with a hint of appetising bitterness, powerful biscuity/lees-driven flavours. Plenty of acidity on the finish but all in very harmonious balance. Further to go. (AWH)

Drink: 2021 – 2035

## Krug, Brut 1996 Champagne

19/20

WHITE

Mushroom on the nose – this is still very focused, clean and fresh. Marries precision with complexity – a glorious amalgam of biscuity, lessy notes, a hint of cool cellars, a long, lingering and (still) tight finish at the end. Still has a long way to go. Shows the art of Krug in a very pure form. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2012 – 2035

## Philipponnat, Clos des Goisses LV Extra Brut 1996 Champagne

18.5/20

WHITE

*No malolactic conversion. Disgorged March 2022. Dosage 4.5 g/l.*

Tight, linear – much tighter than the 1995. Has less breadth but more intensity. Great freshness on the palate – this clearly still has a long way to go. Mineral, flinty edge on the finish combined with notable acidity which is prominent but not over the top. I'd try this again in another two to three years. Feels very much like the site-specific champagne that it is. (AWH)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2022 – 2038

## Pommery, Royal Brut 1996 Champagne

16/20

WHITE

*Bordeaux Index think this was probably the last bottle in the UK. Disgorged in 2006.*

Deep, evolved, rich style with just a hint of mushroom (or could it be a touch of TCA?). Almost sweet on the palate, yet retains plenty of 1996-style acidity. Mushroom and celery notes to finish. Not a fan. (AWH)

Drink: 2006 – 2025

## Louis Roederer, Cristal Brut 1996 Champagne

19/20

WHITE

Fresh, linear, tight and focused. In appearance this looks like a champagne with loads of age, yet the palate displays precision and drive. Has a hint of a floral note on the nose, counteracting the restrained biscuity/leesy characters. Lovely champagne – very fine and still with a long, long way to go. (AWH)

Drink: 2018 – 2038

## Salon, Le Mesnil Blanc de Blancs Brut 1996 Champagne

19.5/20

WHITE

A great wine from a great vintage. Understated, cool, great focus. Still remarkably youthful, little obvious development. With a bit of aeration in the glass some notes of brioche and biscuit start to emerge, but all is very restrained. If you have this in your cellar, lucky you. But don't rush in yet – there is still more to come. Needs another four to five years. Too good to spit out! (AWH)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2010 – 2035

### Taittinger, Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut 1996 Champagne

18.5/20

WHITE

Tighter on the nose than the luxurious 1995. Intriguing mushroom/mineral character more evident than biscuity autolysis. The acidity stands out in comparison – a linear, racy style which is probably more for the cognoscenti. Intense, just on the right side of the acidity being excessive. No danger of this falling over, but I wonder how long it will take to soften. (AWH)

Drink: 2018 – 2038

### Veuve Clicquot, La Grande Dame Brut 1996 Champagne

17.5/20

WHITE

There's not a lot of mistaking the Veuve Clicquot style here! Full-bodied, weighty, toasty, all cut with a plentiful supply of acidity. Definitely more about heft than elegance. Nutty, orange zest. Not a shrinking violet! (AWH)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2006 – 2028

*For more readily available champagnes, see Andy and Jancis's report on [Vintage champagne at the ready](#) and Jancis's article, [Sparkling wine for the 2025 festive season](#).*

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