

CHAMPAGNE

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FORWARD march

Champagne Bollinger has been one of the region's flagship houses for almost 200 years – but managing director Charles-Armand de Belenet is looking to the future, not the past, as *Patrick Schmitt MW* discovers

AS CHAMPAGNE Bollinger approaches its bicentenary in 2029, managing director Charles-Armand de Belenet is not dwelling on the past. Instead, he is focused on what the next 200 years should look like – and, crucially, how to prepare for them.

That long-term mindset underpins a series of major investments and strategic shifts now under way at the house, from vineyard practices to production infrastructure, sustainability initiatives and market positioning. The message is clear: Bollinger is not marking its anniversary with nostalgia, but with structural change.

A BICENTENARY BUILT ON INVESTMENT

The first visible milestone came in March this year with the release of Bollinger La Grande Année 2018 – but, more significantly, with the unveiling of a vast new barrel cellar.

Seven years in the making, the facility represents a substantial expansion of

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Bollinger’s vinification capacity in oak. The house is increasing its number of barrels from 3,000 to 5,000 – each the traditional 228-litre Burgundy format – making it one of the largest barrel programmes in Champagne.

For de Belenet, this is not just about scale, but also style.

“Oak is a key part of Bollinger’s identity,” he explains. “By increasing capacity, we can vinify a greater proportion of our wines in barrel, which supports our focus on Pinot Noir and adds complexity.”

The average age of the barrels – around 20 years – is deliberate, allowing texture

and micro-oxygenation without overt wood influence. Alongside the new cellar, Bollinger has also invested in a dedicated cooperage, reinforcing its control over this critical element of production.

This is just the beginning. A new visitor centre and renovated historic house are due in 2027, followed by a hotel and restaurant in 2028 – all leading up to the bicentenary itself.

SUSTAINABILITY AT SCALE

Alongside infrastructure, sustainability is central to Bollinger’s plans. As of October 2025, 115 hectares of the house’s 180ha of vineyards are certified organic – placing it among the largest organically certified estates in Champagne.

“That scale matters,” emphasises de Belenet. “It’s not a small pilot – it’s almost the whole estate.”

The transition has not been without cost. Moving from conventional viticulture to organic farming reduces yields by around 25%, compared to a 15% drop for sustainable (VDC) practices. The

difference is significant, particularly in a region that is already particularly prone to climatic volatility.

“In years with heavy mildew pressure, yields can fall dramatically – even to 4,000kg per hectare,” de Belenet notes. “That’s why reserve wines are so important. They are our insurance.”

Bollinger has responded by increasing both vineyard resources and reserve capacity, ensuring resilience in difficult vintages. At the same time, the house is investing in research and innovation, particularly around alternatives to copper treatments – a key challenge for organic growers.

Beyond the vineyard, carbon reduction is another priority. From 2026, Bollinger will introduce a new, lighter bottle weighing 800g – an 11% reduction. Achieving this while maintaining the house’s distinctive bottle shape required three years of development and extensive testing.

“It’s a major investment,” says de Belenet. “But it’s a clear way to reduce our footprint.”

Charles-Armand de Belenet at a glance

Aged 55 and originally from Burgundy, Charles-Armand de Belenet is a graduate of the Institut Commercial de Nancy, and has 20 years’ experience in marketing and sales roles, both in France and internationally.

After starting his career with the Bacardi-Martini Group in 1996 as a product manager, he joined the Lindt & Sprüngli Group in 1999. In 2000, he joined the internet start-up MagnumVinum.fr, followed by moving to Allied Domecq in 2002.

In 2006, he became marketing director at Pernod France, then marketing director at Pernod Ricard Korea in 2008. In 2011, he was appointed as international marketing director at Martell Mumm Perrier-Jouët.

On 5 September 2017, de Belenet joined Champagne Bollinger as managing director.

THE PINOT NOIR VISION

If there is a unifying theme to Bollinger’s technical strategy, it is Pinot Noir.

The house is steadily increasing both the proportion of wines vinified in oak and the volume of reserve wines aged in magnum – now reaching one million bottles, up from 700,000 bottles in 2017. These reserves, aged for between seven and 10 years, provide what de Belenet describes as “a library” of blending options.

This flexibility is particularly valuable in challenging vintages. In 2015, for example, careful barrel selection allowed Bollinger to exclude wines with undesirable vegetal notes, maintaining quality despite difficult conditions.



New addition: Bollinger La Grande Année 2018 was unveiled in March



Celebration: de Belenet is planning more investment prior to Bollinger's bicentenary

"Having more reserves and more barrel vinification gives us precision," de Belenet explains.

The broader ambition is to explore the full expression of Pinot Noir – a grape variety that, while more sensitive to climate and terroir than Chardonnay, offers greater complexity.

MARKET PRESSURES AND PRICING REALITIES

While Bollinger is investing heavily for the future, the present market is far from straightforward.

Premium Champagne – particularly vintage and prestige cuvée – remains under pressure globally. Although Bollinger performed well in 2025,

aided in part by a successful Special Cuvée 007 limited-edition collaboration linked to James Bond, de Belenet acknowledges ongoing challenges.

Three factors dominate: rising production costs, unfavourable exchange rates and uncertain demand.

"Costs of goods have increased significantly, particularly due to grape prices and glass," he says. "At the same time, currency movements are working against us in key markets like the US, Japan, Australia and the UK."

Despite this, Bollinger has only passed on minimal price increases in an effort to maintain stability. That may soon change, although de Belenet suggests any rises will still be measured.

At a regional level, the Champagne market itself is also at a turning point. Volumes have fallen from around 300 million bottles to fewer than 270m, with domestic consumption in the largest market, France, declining sharply.

The question now is whether the industry should aim to rebuild those volumes – or accept a smaller, more premium-focused market.

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RETHINKING CHAMPAGNE'S FUTURE

For de Belenet, the answer lies in balance.

Reducing yields – potentially to around 8,000kg per hectare – may be necessary to align supply with demand and reduce excess stock. But this must be managed carefully to protect growers' livelihoods.

At the same time, he argues that too much of the industry's value has shifted into grape prices, limiting investment in marketing and consumer engagement.

"There needs to be the right balance between supporting growers and investing in the desirability of Champagne," he says.

That concept of "desirability" is central to the region's long-term strategy. Consumption habits are changing, with less formal drinking occasions and a shift away from traditional celebratory settings.

"Champagne has always been about celebration," de Belenet says. "But the way people celebrate is evolving."

To address this, the Comité Champagne is planning a major global



Major investment: Bollinger's new facilities were seven years in the making

event in 2027 aimed at reconnecting with consumers – particularly younger drinkers – and redefining Champagne's role in modern lifestyles.

At the same time, oenotourism is becoming increasingly important, with annual visitors to the region rising from 1m to 3m over the past decade.

With this in mind, in time for the bicentenary celebrations in 2029, Bollinger is renovating its historical house, and opening a new visitor centre next year. Then, in 2028, it will unveil its first hotel – a high-end hospitality offer, complete with a restaurant.

A LONG-TERM VIEW

For Bollinger, initiatives such as organic certification and barrel expansion, along with lighter bottles and market repositioning, are part of a single philosophy: stewardship.

As a family-owned house, the emphasis is not on short-term gains, but on transmission.

"Our role is to pass the house on in the best possible condition," says de Belenet.

That means planning decades ahead – whether in vineyard renewal cycles (aiming for an average vine age of 20–25 years), investment in infrastructure or adaptation to climate change.

It also means accepting that the future of Champagne may look different from its past. Volumes may stabilise at lower levels. Styles may evolve. Occasions may become more casual. But, for de Belenet, the category's potential remains intact – provided it is willing to adapt.

"The fundamentals are strong," he says, before concluding: "But we have to keep moving." db

Bollinger launches latest vintage with Ritz takeover

On Wednesday, 25 March, Champagne Bollinger became the first brand to instigate a private takeover of London's The Ritz Restaurant, according to managing director Charles-Armand de Belenet.

Undertaken to celebrate the launch of the 2018 vintage of Bollinger's prestige cuvée, La Grande Année, only the British Royal Family has previously had the full run of the restaurant, said de Belenet.

Speaking during the dinner, which featured six courses, he stressed the importance of the single-harvest release, not only because it hails from the critically-acclaimed 2018 vintage, but also because that year was the start of Champagne Bollinger's bicentenary plan.

It was in 2018 that the house began putting in place various ambitious developments to ready itself for its 200th anniversary in 2029 – Champagne Bollinger was founded in 1829.

Part of this has included the creation of "a cathedral-like cellar open to the vines", as well as "a unique oenotourism site" – which will comprise a visitor centre, slated for completion next year, as well as a Bollinger hotel that will open its doors in 2028.

The London launch of La Grande Année 2018 followed a first showing of the Champagne earlier in the month at Bollinger's base in Aÿ.

Both a blanc and rosé expression have been created from 2018, which is the first in a trio of exceptional, warm vintages in Champagne, similar to the famed 1988 to 1990 trilogy of fine harvests.

Also addressing attendees at the London launch was The Ritz executive chef John Williams MBE, who pointed out that both Bollinger and The Ritz London have Royal Warrants, before commenting that each operator "strives for perfection", while applauding the Champagne's strong connection with the hospitality sector through its partnership with the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts, the patron of which is HRH King Charles III.

According to Williams, a team of over 80 people was on hand to look after the guests for the event, which attracted a similar number of attendees.

The UK market is the largest for Champagne Bollinger, and Mentzendorff, the UK importer of Champagne Bollinger, is owned predominantly by the family group.