

Pommery Cuvée Louise (1979–2006): Marina's Louisiana extravaganza

Essi Avellan MW reports from an unprecedented vertical tasting of the prestige cuvée in Malmö organized by the Swedish collector, Marina Olsson

Putting together complete verticals of Champagne's iconic prestige cuvées is becoming increasingly laborious. As a result of climate change, the accelerating frequency of vintage years is contributing to the numbers, while the oldest vintages are growing alarmingly scarce. For the likes of Pommery Cuvée Louise, sourcing is particularly challenging, since the wine has never been a collectible to rival Dom Pérignon or Cristal.

I was all the more thrilled, therefore, to receive an invitation from Marina Olsson to share in this extensive Cuvée Louise and Cuvée Louise Rosé tasting. Her very Champagne-savvy wine club in Sweden, Gomseglät Wine & Champagne Connoisseurs, is privileged to savor the spectacular collections that Marina passionately and painstakingly assembles. It took her five years to acquire all of the Cuvée Louise bottles in this tasting, and with some help from Pommery's *vinothèque* we ended up missing only one of the 29 released vintages (1988 rosé), but compensated for that with one wine that was never commercially available (1997 blanc). We also lacked the one-off Cuvée Louise Blanc de Blancs, made exclusively in the 1985 vintage. Additionally, however, *chef de cave* Clément Pierlot threw in a couple of future releases from the house's *futurothèque*. The stage was set for a challenging yet hugely pleasurable and rewarding day of tasting, going through 21 vintages of Cuvée Louise and 11 vintages of Cuvée Louise Rosé in Malmö's Café Live.

The essence of Louise

Cuvée Louise was the brainchild of Prince Alain de Polignac. A member of the owning family and the strong yet charming face of the company, Prince Alain worked as Pommery's



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cellar master from 1971 until 1992. In the typical Champenois fashion, Alain de Polignac decided to name his prestige cuvée creation in honor of an individual. The house's famous *veuve*, Madame Jeanne Alexandrine Louise, and her prematurely deceased husband had two children, named Louis and Jeanne Alexandrine Louise. The cuvée was to be a tribute first and foremost to Madame Pommery, who had surely been the powerhouse

behind the brand, but her daughter also deserved a share of the honor. After all, it was she who married Marquis Guy de Polignac in 1879, thus sealing the link between the Champagne house and the noble family. When first crafted in 1979, the cuvée was thus also an act of homage to 100 years of de Polignac rule of the house.

To respect Pommery's historical terroirs, Prince Alain identified three grand cru villages noble enough for Cuvée Louise. The intended two thirds Chardonnay were to come from Avize and Cramant in the Côte des Blancs, and the third of Pinot Noir from Aÿ in the Grande Vallée de la Marne. Over the vintages, the proportion of Chardonnay has varied between 60 and 70 percent, but the variety always carries a clear lead role in both the aroma profile and the structure of this coolly restrained, purely fruity, and elegant cuvée. The complementary depth and richness from Pinot Noir balances the whole. Thanks largely to Pommery meticulously minimizing unwanted oxygen contact in the making, the style is notably reductive, classy toastiness intermingling with the fragrantly floral Chardonnay aromas and Pinot Noir's biscuity richness. Sometimes a distinct mild toffee note is present, perhaps a clue that the wine has gone through its malolactic fermentation.

The winemaking follows Pommery's classic recipe of temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless-steel vats. After extended cellar aging (which currently stretches to nearly 15 years), the wine receives a splash of Avize Chardonnay and a light (approximately 5g/l) dose of sugar at disgorgement.

Above: Marina Olsson herself pouring at the tasting. Opposite: Most of the bottles in the grand lineup.

Photography (left) courtesy of Marina Olsson, (right) by Jon Plougmann

NOTES

CUVÉE LOUISE AND LOUISE NATURE

Cuvée Louise Nature 2006 (pre-release)

A very pale-green hue to the lemon color. Youthful and for the time being closed on the nose, where floral characters meet smoke, pear, wool, and vegetal notes. Tight on the palate, too, but there is a fine oiliness to the texture and brisk acidity carrying it through the long and bone-dry, mineral finish. The pieces are not yet all in place, but some additional post-disgorgement time should remedy that. | 91

Cuvée Louise 2005 (pre-release)

Glossy lemon-green color. The youthful and fruit-forward nose oozes sweet tropical fruit but has less toast than usual. Over time in the glass, the vintage's typical ash-and-potato-peel aroma starts to emerge, detracting from the appeal. Dry on the voluminous, slightly short palate, which might benefit from some more sugar. | 90

Cuvée Louise Nature 2004

Youthful lemon color. The charming nose comes with fruity layers generating yellow plums, white flowers, lemon, straw, and vanilla. There is even sweet honey evolution to it, despite the slightly contrasting bone-dry palate. Despite the evident dryness, the fruitiness remains voluptuous and round on the palate, which finishes with a stylish, mineral, saline kick. | 92

Cuvée Louise 2004

Such a welcoming, mild, and pure nose, with attractive smoky toastiness and luscious honeycomb sweetness. Youthful, pure, and refined palate, finely balanced by *dosage*, bringing extra deliciousness compared to the bone-dry Nature. It comes with generous body and sweet, leesy richness, combined with vivid, fresh acidity and fine, focused length with an oceanic twist. | 93

Cuvée Louise 2003

Pale, youthful color. Fragrant vanilla, white-flower,

and lemon nose, with impressive toasty layers. Lovely, crisp, tropical fruitiness, with melon and guava notes. It sits beautifully on the reductive side. Mellow, fluffy mousse on the creamy-smooth palate. Round and fruit-forward, with fine fruit intensity for further keeping. There is a refreshing phenolic bite on the back palate. Impressively slow-aging for the vintage. | 93

Cuvée Louise 2002

Pale, healthy, youthful color. Unfortunately, there is some unwanted oxidation on the nose of toffee apple, white pepper, fennel, and honey. The bruised-apple note blows off somewhat, and underneath there is a firm, structured wine full of character. Still lovely, but better bottles exist. | 93

Cuvée Louise Vinothèque 2000 (magnum)

Fine bright color. The come-hither nose stuns, with its spectacular magnum effect boosting glorious, super-complex toastiness. The sweet fruit is opulently tropical, with a heady, perfumed fragrance, a cool, vegetal, gooseberry and licorice twist, and chalky refinement. Rich and softly lingering palate, full of pure and radiant fruit. A stunning magnum direct from Pommery's *vinothèque*. | 97

Cuvée Louise 1999

There is already some evolution to the color. The nose is strong on fudge, white chocolate, brioche, nectar and honey. Plenty of evolution but largely positively so. Round, concentrated palate, approaching winy, but the fine mousse and acidity still keeping it lively. Voluminous, long, sweet finish. At the perfect drinking age. | 95

Cuvée Louise 1998

Regrettably corked. | NS

Cuvée Louise Vinothèque 1997

Intense yet youthfully green-hued color. Glorious nose, with delicate white fruit meeting gunpowder and vanilla. Beautifully balanced on the firm, fruity palate, which is taking time very well. A really

positive surprise, considering that the wine was never commercially released, but it has clearly benefited from never leaving the house's cellars. A perfect example of the way in which limited amounts of great Champagne can be made even in challenging years. | 94

Cuvée Louise 1996

Bright lemon-yellow. This vintage is easy to recognize, so accentuated is its lemon-juice-like acidity. But the nose comes with a surprisingly mushroomy aroma profile, fresh wood, chalk, red apple, and lemon playing second fiddle. Slightly oxidative aromatics. This bottle was no longer improving. | 93

Cuvée Louise 1995

This bottle was far from ideally stored. Already the color was deep and developed. The aromatics were a little stewed, and the honey and toffee fruitiness was weighty, but the acidity stuck out in an unbalanced way. | 90

Cuvée Louise 1990

The 1990 received no *dosage*, thus it was the first Louise Nature, even if not labeled as such. It was released before the 1989. Deep, developed color with orange hues. Soft, somewhat autumnal nose, with golden raisins, baked apricots, brioche, and dried fruits. Mature and tertiary, but there is life left to it. The palate is rich and plump, with just enough acidity preventing it from being heavy. Slightly past its peak now. | 92

Cuvée Louise 1989

This bottle seemed to suffer from poor storage; very mature, dull, stewed, cellar-like notes. | 90

Cuvée Louise 1988

Still-pale color. The harmonious nose is sweetly fruity, with ripe strawberry and cherry, dried apricots, soft spiciness, wax, and tea notes. Firm and structured body, still going strong, with fine mousse and zingy acidity amplifying the classy impression. Still on its way up, with a touch more complexity to gain. | 94





Cuvée Louise 1987

Deep golden color. Soft nose, with mature, waxy, apple fruitiness and a pleasant white-pepper twist. Crisp, lean, and long on the palate, which ends with a biting firmness. There is charming seamlessness and restrained elegance to this wine. Not one of Cuvée Louise's most majestic iterations but complete and just peaking now. | 94

Cuvée Louise 1985

Deep orange-toned color. Earthy, old-wine nose, with sweet fruitiness of caramel, windfall apple, almond, and rum. Withering fruitiness on the edgy palate. The bottle did not seem to be in the best possible condition. | 91

Cuvée Louise 1982

Deep, developed color. Big and bold on the nose, with umami-like evolution, mushroomy notes, pecan nuts, and baking spices. There is great concentration to the monumental palate, which seems much fresher than the nose. Complex, even if now fully mature, and fresher bottles probably exist. | 93

Cuvée Louise 1981

Orange-hued color. Rich, sweetly fruity nose, right across the dried-fruit spectrum. Baking spices, honey, fruit drops, and white chocolate adding to the sweet attack. There is firm acidity, which feels a little disjointed from the concentrated fruitiness. Big on entry, but the taste fades rather quickly. A monumental wine but one now slightly past its peak. | 94

Cuvée Louise Vinothèque 1980 (magnum)

Bright lemon color. Super-youthful, beautifully toasty, and gunpowdery magnum nose. There is so much crisp and crunchy fruit left. Vanilla, brioche, ripe pear, peach, lemon, fragrant floral notes and roasted nuts. There is a lovely lightness and delicacy to the wine. A little tart and driven on the racy palate. So much vitality here. | 95

Cuvée Louise 1979 (magnum)

Deep orange-hued color. Bold and sweet, coconut and pastry nose, with vanilla, white flowers, lime, honey, straw, and roasted nuts. Glorious wine, packed with complexity and character. Superbly concentrated and velvety on the vibrant palate. Sheer pleasure, like liquid gold. Based on this, magnums coming directly from the house's cellars must be approaching 100-point perfection. | 96

CUVÉE LOUISE ROSÉ

Cuvée Louise Rosé 2004

Light peachy color. Evolving nose, with stewed peach, windfall apple, and toffee. This particular bottle had some oxidative tones to it, which should not have been there. It seems more youthful on the fresh, lemony palate, which ends with a touch of phenolics at the very finish. Not a perfect bottle. | 91

Cuvée Louise Rosé 2003

The palest peachy color. An immediately captivating nose, with its soft, fragrant, and stunningly toasty nose. Lovely coffee, gunpowder, apricot, and wild-strawberry tones blending together in the most elegant way. The palate is supple, lacy, and caressing, with the soft mousse contributing to the gentle yet fresh and expressive character. Stunningly light and invigoratingly tense wine. At a beautiful age to drink now, even if still surprisingly youthful. | 95

Cuvée Louise Rosé 2000

Pretty onion-skin color. Evolving nose with elegant floral complexity and ripe peach, grapefruit and vanilla deliciousness. A touch of spicy toast and sweet-toffee richness alongside some vegetal tones. Fresh and feisty on the moderately long, creamy palate. A classy whole, if rather more blanc than rosé in style. Drinking beautifully now and approaching its peak. Tasted 15 times in total, but worryingly there have been many corky bottles. | 94

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1999

Yellow color, barely a rosé. Corked, sadly. | NS

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1996

Developed onion-skin color. The soft and deep nose invites with its sweet baked-apricot and apple-pie aromatics. There is a rare delicacy to the pretty fruitiness and vibrant palate of brisk acidity. Succulently fruity and youthful on the long, linear palate, suggesting a still-promising future. | 93

Cuvée Louise Rosé Vinothèque 1995

Very pale color. Standout nose of absolute perfection. Reserved and stylishly reductive, with gorgeous toastiness lining the purely fruity and gracefully maturing palate. What elegance on the palate, too, soft and fluffy, with the smallest creamy bubbles. This bottle came directly from the Pommery *vinothèque*. | 96

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1992

Deeper orange color, with a touch of brown. A very mature nose, with toffee, peach marmalade, cardamom, dried nuts, and iron. Fading fruitiness taken over by oxidative tones. Opens up in the glass, with some of the oxidative characters blowing away. The palate is hanging on better, being still fresh and lively, though possessing a mature wine's vinous concentration. Our bottle was somewhat past its peak already. | 91

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1990

Bright peachy color. There is mature richness to the nose, but a slight corky note underneath. Chunky and winey, with ripe-year phenolics but spoiled by the mild cork taint. | NS

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1989

The 1989 was released after the 1990. Evolving onion-skin color with orange hues. The nose is pronouncedly tertiary with mushroom, forest floor, and tar taking the lead role. The honey-toned and spicy fruitiness is already withering, but the wine's acid line was refreshing and brought life to the palate. Better-kept bottles probably exist. | 91

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1983

Bright onion-skin color. Pronounced, sweet, apricot-jam nose, with raisins, leather, and undergrowth. Highly evolved, complex aromatics, with charred and spicy generosity. Full-on, mellow, and mouth-filling palate, with mature Champagne's glorious vinosity. The palate is in superb shape, muscular and still fruit-packed. The bold whole is energized by a fine acid line. Peaking today. | 95

Cuvée Louise Rosé 1982

Deeper orange color with red hues. The expressive nose has a ripe, sun-kissed feel to it. There is red-fruit opulence to the exotic nose of apricot marmalade and apple jam. Plentiful fruit but not as complex in aromatics as many other vintages. Fresh and generous on the very long, vinous palate. Still potential for development. | 95

Louise becomes three

As the climate has gradually become more favorable for the production of completely dry Champagnes, Pommery recently launched a bone-dry version of the wine, called Cuvée Louise Nature. Back in 1990, the conditions of the year were already such that cellar master Thierry Gasco felt able to avoid any *dosage* in the Vintage wines, hence that particular Cuvée Louise was also *brut nature*, even though not labeled as such. And Madame Pommery had actually pioneered drier Champagne as early as 1874, when her *cuvée* Nature was created for the English market at a time when Champagne was as sweet as many a dessert wine is today. Thus, in 2002, when Jean-Paul Vranken acquired Pommery from Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy, he immediately requested a bone-dry Cuvée Louise from *chef de cave* Thierry Gasco, to draw a link between the house's pioneering past and its innovative present. Gasco pondered over it for a couple of years until, in 2004, he thought the base wine's profile was just right for showing without added sugar. In 2011, Cuvée Louise 2004 was released as both brut (technically, extra-brut, with a *dosage* of only 5g/l) and *brut nature*.

There is also the rarely encountered pink Cuvée Louise, one of Champagne's best-hidden rosé gems. First officially crafted in 1982, it has been sparingly produced in terms of both vintage and volume. Only 12 vintages have so far seen the light of day. Such great vintages as 2002 and 1985 were passed over for some reason, while 1992 (Thierry Gasco's first vintage as *chef de cave*) exists only in isolated pink splendor. The volume of rosé equates to only 5 percent or so of the white, so it is truly a limited edition, typical production being a precious 5,000 bottles. This exquisitely refined rosé derives its pale yellowish hue from a mere 5–6 percent of Aÿ red wine. Over time, its color tends to develop toward that of its white counterpart. I confess that it is my favorite Pommery *cuvée*, and one with which I often challenge my Champagne connoisseur friends in blind tastings. Most have never even seen a bottle, let alone tasted one.

Pommery today

Like the Pommery range as a whole, Cuvée Louise can be trusted for its consistency of style and quality.



Pink Cuvée Louise is one of Champagne's best-hidden rosé gems. Only 12 vintages have seen the light of day. This exquisitely refined rosé is my favorite Pommery *cuvée*

This might come as a surprise to some, since the Pommery name does not carry such a strong quality image today. But it is more the reputation than the reality that needs revising. In the Vranken era, the house has systematically addressed its biggest weakness—the loss of most of its 300ha (750 acres) of vineyards during its acquisition by LVMH. Today, the Vranken-Pommery Monopole group as a whole controls, directly or indirectly, some 400ha (1,000 acres) of vineyards in Champagne. And Cuvée Louise comes only from Pommery's own vines.

Vineyards are the great passion of Pommery's current *chef de cave* Clément Pierlot. He joined Pommery in 2004 to manage its vineyards, before becoming its cellar master as well in 2017. A young, dynamic, and amicable figure, Pierlot is the right man to break the silence of wine communication that has long hindered Pommery's brand-building. He has rightly assumed a much more communicative role, shedding light on what takes place inside Pommery's 19th-century fairytale castle and in the seemingly distant Vranken universe.

The tasting

As always tends to be case with deep vertical tastings like this, inconsistency in the winemaking was not an issue, but inconsistency in bottle condition was. Even if Marina spares no effort in finding the best available bottles, several of these seemed to suffer to some degree from storage-related problems. The magnificent condition of all the Pommery Vinothèques coming directly from the maison efficiently underlined the sensitivity of Champagne as a wine. There were also cork-taint problems with a few bottles from the 1990s, which was a sad period for closures in Champagne. Until 2000, crown caps were equipped with cork liners at Pommery, so there was twice the risk of TCA contamination. As a result, the 1998 and 1999 Cuvée Louise blanc and the 1990 rosé were regrettably corked to a greater or lesser extent.

In a strong series overall, the absolute showstopper was the tasting's very last wine—the inaugural 1979 vintage, served to us in magnum. The much more youthful 2000 Vinothèque magnum was equally impressive. The best rosé experience was generated by another sensational bottle direct from Pommery, the 1995 Vinothèque. But it had contenders in the magnificent 1983 and 1982 rosés. Of all the more recent vintages, 2003 deserves a special mention: Both the Cuvée Louise blanc and the rosé are so delightfully light and elegant that one can scarcely believe they were born in that notoriously hot and concentrated harvest.

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Photography (left) by Jan Plogmann; (right) courtesy of Marina Olsson