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Olivier Krug sits on a stately blue couch in the sitting room of an elegant New York City private club, a bottle of his family's namesake Champagne in a sterling bucket close at hand. As he talks quickly but easily about his role as Director du la Maison, in which role he looks after everything related to taste, growers, and production, it becomes clear that that bottle is not just a bottle of Champagne—it is a bottle of Krug, which is truly something spe-

cial. Each bottle represents six generations of family expertise, dozens of specialized, exclusive vineyards, and the work of many others to create some of the world's best, most exclusive Champagne.

Not least among these efforts are those of Olivier Krug himself. The trim, elegant 41-year-old serves as a sort of brand ambassador for Krug, spending about a third of his year on the road maintaining a personal touch not seen in many marketing efforts today. "I try to travel the world regularly—Krug is not a big brand. We are 0.2% of the worldwide market—you

would need a sampling of 600 bottles worldwide to find 1 bottle of Krug, but we have some of the best distribution in the world, through Moët-Hennessy," he says. Moët-Hennessy targets new markets ripe for introduction to Krug, including countries in Asia and even the US, where it is not as widely appreciated.

As a certain class of Americans continue to grow their interest in high-end wines and liquors, Krug is a natural step up for those drinkers. In terms of price, Olivier says, "Krug starts where champagne stops—most champagnes go up to about \$150 or so, but Krug is





The Krug house is an extremely beautiful place, with a myriad of sights, smells, and tastes that will enlighten the senses. Here are some casks reflecting the nearby trees and a close up look at a trademark Krug logo.



anywhere from \$160 to \$4000 a bottle. We are all about bespoke quality brands over big brands.” It takes 10 years to make a bottle of Krug, something he calls “the new luxury”—the luxury of time as well as money.

Olivier is reluctant to discuss in technical terms the process of making his champagne. “When you go to Ducasse, or you go to Robuchon, and you have an incredible meal, you don’t care what time of day he went to the market or whether the sea bass was caught north or south of New York City—so what? You just say, wow, I’ve never had anything like that before.” He speaks fondly, however, of working with growers all over Champagne country to find the best grapes at each, and emphasizes that they are the only house that still ferments all their wine in small oak casks, where it is hand-yeasted and able to breathe, the old casks allowing in oxygen without imparting the oaky flavor of newer vineyards.

The Grand Cuvee is the top of the line—there are no famous vintages, as they aim carefully to get the same sensation and taste every time. Every year the wine is blended fresh—30%-40% of the annual crop is banked so there are wines from the last 12 years to rebuild the taste and compensate for anything off about the wine from the environment that year. The Grand Cuvee is about 80% of the market, but even then, it is a mere fraction of the amount of champagne produced annually overall.

In terms of the drink’s image, it has an individualistic bent—people serve it because they love it, but also because it’s different and special. To make his point, he opens a bottle of the Grand Cuvee for a tasting, and it is truly magnificent. It drinks more like a great wine than any bubbly New Years’ brew—the distinctive gold color and tiny, tiny bubbles are accompanied by a strong, fresh nose, light at the front of the mouth but strong in the back of throat, sweet and strong. As we taste, Olivier mentions that one of the highlights of his job is hearing people recount their stories of the first



time they ever tasted Krug. A chef from New Zealand told his uncle, Remy Krug, this story completely unprompted; he was 20 years old, taking a beautiful girl out to a very expensive dinner, at the best table in the best restaurant in Auckland, and he looked at the wine list and ordered the most expensive champagne on the menu, which was a bottle of Krug, even though he had no idea what it might be. The man told Remy, “I took a sip...I took another sip...and it blew my socks off!” That is the relationship that Krug has with its public—a Champagne that demands attention, a Champagne good enough to almost make you forget about the girl.

While Krug is certainly a wine designed to impress, it’s for people who don’t need to show off. “Krug is not for everyone. Celebrities drink it at private parties, they drink Krug at home,” he says. Krug recently issued a series of cases of the 1995 vintage with engraved personalized plates that were highly sought after. Olivier was in charge of hand-signing the engraved plate editions, many of which went to celebrities, and even says he was surprised at the number and stature of the names on the list—none of which, of course, he would ever divulge, but we hear that George Clooney, Lenny Kravitz, and Robert DeNiro were among the boldface names to whom Olivier signed his cases.

As Krug spreads across countries and cultures, one fact remains constant in their strategy. Whatever the country, champagne is drunk by the same people for the same reasons—“for celebration, happiness, special days. There is no sex, no age” that is barred from enjoyment. Moët-Hennessy, an international powerhouse, helps with distribution—places like the Middle East consume champagne more than they have in years past, despite cultural reservations on the part of some. Wherever in the world they concentrate their efforts, Krug does a huge business with resorts, chalets, and yachts, because the distribution is based on personal connections



everywhere. "What we have in mind always is the final stage, the way this bottle will ultimately be drunk. This world is seasonal," Olivier says, "in the winter people migrate, maybe to Aspen or St Moritz for skiing, or to homes in Gstaad and Courcheval, and then those same people will move to fashion week, or some people will go to Cannes, and those people who drink Krug in Cannes will have it at private parties, rather than in the big official things, and then they move to maybe San Tropez, or they go to Croatia or New York, they move very fast. If the weather is not good, if the good DJ has moved from San Tropez to Sardinia overnight, they have a yacht, they have double bookings they can move." He emphasizes that the key to finding these discerning drinkers is finding the "roots" and connectors in those social circles. "We are finding a market for which money is irrelevant, this is the brand of the future for them."

In select places, they maintain "Krug rooms," a marketing tool and a simply great experience, which started at the Dorchester in London at the chef's table in the kitchen, about six years ago. "It's a great tool to connect," he says, allowing Krug's best customers to experience the unique Champagne in a unique setting. This personal touch is part of the Krug magic. "In New York, if you organize 50 dinners a year, it's nothing, it's once a week, and if you have 10 connectors at each of those dinners, at the end of the year you've reached 500 Krug people, which is almost more than the bottles of Krug we even produce each year. This is marketing that is touching people where they really are, where they live." Indeed, this same day Olivier was headed to lunch at Per Se, Thomas Keller's revolutionary restaurant, with New York City's top 12 sommeliers to help introduce them to Krug and make it a part of their eating experience. "We are selling pleasure," he says, and social experiences like these make the drink all the more pleasurable in context.



As someone who circles the globe almost annually, he still declares his love for New York City, where he comes often for work, and Japan, where he first began his career as brand ambassador. “I don’t remember a dull moment in 10 years,” he says, as even when he is in France at his office he spends much of his time personally greeting guests to the vineyard.

Krug began as a vineyard in 1843, and for years focused on simply doing what they had always done—creating the wines that were arguably some of the best. It took until 1983 to add a 3rd Krug, Krug Rose (“I hate the word launch—you create a wine, you don’t launch it,” says Olivier) of which his grandfather was initially skeptical—his reaction was quoted as, “Rose is for birthday parties and girly bars,” but the timing was right and their detour into the pink has proved to be extremely popular.

Krug has also created a couple of limited-run wines, named Krug Clos du Mesnil, made from one grape, from one vineyard, from one

great year—these are highly sought after, each bottle being “the very best in its simplicity.” Last October, around 70 people were invited for a surprise unveiling of a similar one-off wine. Created back in 1995, there were 3000 bottles selling at \$3000 each. “These wines are not better than any other Krug, but they are exceptional,” says Olivier.

One might naturally assume that a wine so sought after would be popular at auction, and indeed, the secondary market for Krug is very strong. “It is hard to find in the market when it is new and has great aging potential because of the cask fermentation,” explains Olivier. “This wine is very oxygenated, like athletes training at altitude, and lasts better in the bottle, which is why we only sell it aged 10 years.” Unlike other houses, which are famous for their good years and bad years, Krug prides itself on its dependability, creating incredible, identical wines that stay enjoyable in a fashion that is uniquely Krug. As someone with more access

to older bottles than most people, even Olivier declares, “I once did a tasting with a big collector of Krug who had bottles of the 1985, 1976, and 1973, and really, it was amazing, they were almost impossible to tell apart.”

As of this writing, the company is about to release Krug Vintage 1998, after the requisite decade of aging. “I could stop working today and you’d still be drinking Krug 7 years later,” jokes Olivier, and he does emphasize drinking. “There are 2 kinds of collectors: people building a library and people trying to fill in blanks. These buyers are not speculative, but passionate,” he says of his customers, “people who drink their wines.”

Although Olivier and other members of the Krug family maintain a strong interest and involvement in the vineyard, it is not a family business anymore—Greeks, Americans, Canadians, and Russians all work at the home office; it is a brand with an international flavor even within the storied grounds of France’s Champagne region. Olivier describes his crew as “young and hungry. The team is like the drinkers—not corporate, not influenced by marketing.” The headquarters itself is rather austere—“It’s a working place. I can see guests walking in from my office and go down and chat with them for 10 minutes, although it’s never 10 minutes with me,” he laughs, in an aside. “They can see the production, delivery, corporate offices, everything right there. I like being an entrepreneur but it’s all about people for me.”

As we finish our glasses, I cannot help but ask him, half in jest, if he remembers his own first taste of Krug. He answers with a smile, saying, “I take great pride in being one of the few people who don’t remember their first taste. We have a family tradition of putting a few drops on the baby’s lips the day he or she is born, so that is my taste.” In that case, let us drink in celebration to many more generations of Krug to come. ■



The picturesque Krug vineyards are as much a sight as any country view.