

OF BUBBLES AND BISCUITS

By Paul Foster

The bubbles that stream in your glass of Champagne are the result of an intimate act that occurs in the privacy of your bottle. A getting together that's fascinating for a wine lover, an in-bottle secondary fermentation.

The fermentation is induced by adding measures of yeast and sugar to what, till then, is a *still* wine and the result of this getting together is the making of more alcohol and, importantly, carbon dioxide. But because the bottle is immediately sealed the gas can't escape and is forced to wait, dissolved in the wine, as bubbles-to-be. It does its duty further down the track when - with that singular 'pop' - the cork is released and the CO₂ streams in those lovely lines out of the wine.

And there's something else special that happens in all of this.

The fermentation delivers a gift, a gluey deposit that's called the *lees*. It's in fact the used-up yeast and for centuries the Champenoise have known that the strains of yeast that they used in the first place, and the period of time they leave their wines exposed to the lees, is important for final flavours and crucial to complexity. They realised, too, that this was another of the secrets of Champagne and could be used as a tool in creating the character of individual House wines.

Nowadays, regulations require that Champagnes spend a specified minimum time on lees - 18 months for Non Vintage and 3 years for Vintage wines. So when writers speak of 'almond' or 'cashew' in different Champagnes they're not necessarily as nuts as you thought. Take **Bollinger**, which for years was known Vegemite-like yeast (and what, after all, is Vegemite made from?) or the biscuity yeast that's part of **Krug**.

Here are two Champagnes, quite different one from the other.

Giesler NV Brut

Fresh soft palate. Lemony, with arrowroot yeast. An historic label now used for premium wine by the Epernay-based Marne et Champagne co-operative. Exclusive to The Wine Society. Good value at \$39.

Pol Roger NV Brut

If **Pommery** is balletic, light and ethereal, **Pol** is military, square-shouldered and formal. Crisp, verging crunchy; very deep, very long, very dry. Creamy citrus flavours. Quality through and through. \$70