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The real Spain

Exploring Iberia's icons – from
Ribera del Duero to *jamon ibérico*
PLUS Champagne, Cognac and whisky

The venerable La Rioja Alta has spread its wings in recent years, even venturing into Ribera del Duero. Sarah Jane Evans MW considers how a single producer working with a single grape variety in one part of northern Spain can yield such diverse styles

Photography by Lorena Martínez

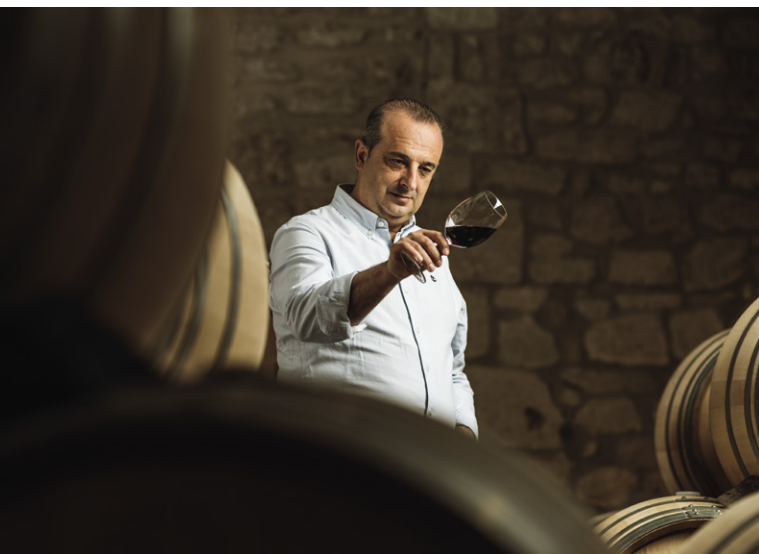
Higher and higher

I will start with a confession. When studying for my Master of Wine blind tasting exam, Tempranillo was the variety I always found hard to pick. It should be easy, what with that low acidity and cherry fruit character. But in fact, the clue was rarely in the grape itself. No, what should have made it even easier to identify was the winemaking. Back then, Tempranillo was invariably a variety that was blended with others or carried the character of American oak ageing. If you could spot the oak, or a blend of grapes, then it was very likely you were in Rioja with a Tempranillo blend.

I passed my MW tasting paper in 2004. Things have moved on a long way in Rioja and in the world of Tempranillo since, and catch-all generalisations no longer apply. For a start, there's a good quantity of the variety in Australia, as well as in Portugal and Argentina, and even Texas. But Spain will always be Tempranillo's home, under its many regional aliases, and Rioja and Ribera del Duero are still the two most famous denominations for the variety. Today, though, each render very different expressions.

Some Riojanos have set up shop in Ribera del Duero, and a few in Ribera have gone in the other direction. In my view, none has so far outshone their home wineries, which should perhaps not come as a surprise: they are in different places; they make different wines. I frequently find myself wondering why they even bother. La Rioja Alta, though, as so often, stands somewhat grandly apart – and shows why they do.

Steadily and successfully, the venerable producer has polished its wines and its vineyards. But it has also diversified, driving 20km up the road to Rioja Alavesa and launching a different, more 'modern' style of Rioja. Not content with that, it travelled two hours down the highway to Ribera del Duero to set up camp there. As such, it makes an absorbing case study of a winery that has ventured outside its homeland while remaining a guardian of classic Rioja and one of the region's bastions.



Left: La Rioja Alta winemaking director Julio Sáenz has refined the blend, oak treatment and ageing of the renowned 890 and 904 gran reservas (above)

Previous spread: the 2021 harvest at the group's second Rioja estate, Torre de Oña



**La Rioja Alta has polished its
wines and its vineyards. But it has
also diversified, launching a different,
more 'modern' style of Rioja**

La Rioja Alta has always had feet in various camps. It was founded in 1890 by five families – three Basque and two Riojan – who, like their neighbours in Haro’s station quarter, profited from shipping wine to phylloxera-devastated Bordeaux. A key influence was the French Monsieur Vigier, the estate’s first winemaker, who taught them all about barrel ageing, an art that his successors have refined ever since.

Take the winery’s two most famous bottlings. La Rioja Alta makes not one but two outstanding gran reservas. Both, as with all La Rioja Alta wines, come from their own vineyards, and each has a loyal following. Indeed, one of the pleasures for fans of La Rioja Alta is to hear winemaking director Julio Sáenz describe the differences between 904 and 890. For Sáenz, the key to their character lies in the management of ageing. While 890 (first made in 1890) has six years in American oak and six years in bottle, 904 (dating from 1904) has four years in American oak and four years in bottle. 890 has a little Graciano and Mazuelo; 904 has at least 11% Graciano. Your choice: the structured, full-bodied, explosive 890, or the elegant, delicate 904.

Under Sáenz, 904 has evolved subtly. In a reflection of vineyard management, optical selection in the winery and the changing climate, the alcohol level has crept up. La Rioja Alta chairman Guillermo de Aranzabal points out that people seem to like a little more colour in their wines, so they omitted the (small amount of) white grapes. They also gently reduced the amount of cask-ageing to retain the fruit character.

The nearby Torre de Oña winery in Páganos, a stone’s throw from the excellent Héctor Oribe restaurant, came into the group’s portfolio in 1995. But why have two Tempranillo bodegas in the same denomination? Aranzabal gives the corporate answer: ‘We wanted to grow as a company, but we also wanted to increase the

quality of our wines at La Rioja Alta.’ The way to do so without jeopardising La Rioja Alta was to launch other wineries and grow their quality, too. But Sáenz provides a more telling, romantic insight: ‘The difference in just 20km is amazing. You find such different versions of Tempranillo in the two.’

Within that 20km journey to Torre de Oña, you also cross into a different subzone – Rioja Alavesa. The issue of subzones has become politically charged in recent times, in particular because Álava is part of the Basque Country, with its own language, its own winemaking traditions and a reputation for generous wines. Aranzabal explains that La Rioja Alta is about producing a consistent style from year to year through blending, while with a wine like Finca Martelo – the top selection from Torre de Oña – the task is to get the best expression of the vineyard. As a result, there will be more vintage variation.

In a similar vein, while the La Rioja Alta wines have seen gentle evolution, the work on Finca Martelo (first vintage 2012) is actively continuing. This is not a single-vineyard wine, so it doesn’t qualify for one of the new categories in DOCa Rioja (see p.20). It is made from three vineyards, with vines over 60 years old, and effectively blended in the vineyard; the ‘recipe’ is 95% Tempranillo with a field blend of 5% Mazuelo, Garnacha and Viura. The wine is aged in 80% American and 20% French oak, and they expect to make it six years in every ten. As a wine it has more colour, structure and tannin than its sister wines, partly from the new French oak, as well as American oak, in which it sits for 22–24 months.

There was uncertainty about such a highly rated bodega’s ability to do something different and good just down the road. Finca Martelo has proved itself. Then again, for these fine wines, the terroir isn’t just about the soil and *climat* – it’s also

With a wine like Finca Martelo, the task is to get the best expression of the vineyard. As a result, there will be more vintage variation



Above: Alejandro López is the winemaker for the site-specific Finca Martelo; La Rioja Alta’s 904 and 890 releases, meanwhile, are blended from a range of the group’s vineyards (left)



Tempranillo three ways: Gran Reserva 904



95

La Rioja Alta, Gran Reserva 904 2011

Drink 2021–31

This latest release is layered with glorious fine oak and alive with fruit. Citrus freshness and elegant notes of tobacco and cinnamon; full-bodied and full-flavoured to the very end. The 2010 was a very hard act to follow, but this is a classic 904 all the same. 14.5%

From £45.68 Armit Wines, Hedonism Wines, Lea & Sandeman, Oddbins, Petersham Cellars

95

La Rioja Alta, Gran Reserva 904 2001

Drink 2021–30

What a great year for Rioja; for La Rioja Alta, too, because important details were bringing change. More vineyards had been bought, and they were starting to import the staves from Missouri and Ohio to make their own barrels. Barrel age was sharply reducing – from 15 years, to four or five years. This is a wonderfully complex wine, with an intense aroma still, and a long, elegant finish. 12.7%

POA Armit Wines, BBX

92

La Rioja Alta, Gran Reserva 904 1997

Drink 2021–24

1997 was not a great year for Rioja. Chairman Guillermo de Aranzabal says, ‘This was the vintage that we set aside. We tasted it after bottling and were not impressed. We tried it three years later and were amazed. It could turn out to be one of the best 904s.’ It certainly typifies the image of 904 today: elegant, refined, fresh and gently spicy. Enjoy now. 13.2%

£66 (in bond) Lay & Wheeler; from £85 Armit Wines, Fine+Rare



the people. There are three key Tempranillo terroirists in the team at La Rioja Alta SA (the cumbersome group name that we'll shorten to RASA from here on). Sáenz joined in 1996, initially to oversee quality control; ten years later he took on the top winemaking job. Aranzabal, a member of one of the founding families, joined the business in 1987 and became chairman in 2005. Together, they have consistently evolved the wines.

The newest member of the trio is Alejandro López, who walked across the road from his post at Bodegas Bilbaínas to join La Rioja Alta in 2019. López is Sáenz's assistant director of winemaking, as well as the winemaker at Torre de Oña and the group's Ribera del Duero offshoot Áster. He's quick to point out that he's not an innocent when it comes to handling Tempranillo in Ribera del Duero. In his old job, he worked closely with Jorge Bombín, technical director at Legaris, which, like Bilbaínas, is owned by the conglomerate Codorníu. Bombín, like a growing number of others in the region, is focusing on specific vineyard expressions and lending a much more diverse image to the all-powerful Ribera del Duero.

I say 'all-powerful' to highlight the potential intensity of Ribera's 100% Tempranillo wines. In Rioja, by contrast, the Tempranillo is blended and seasoned with Graciano, Garnacha and Mazuelo. That's not the only difference. In terms of hectares of vineyards, Ribera is one third of the size of Rioja. It's younger, too, only having become a denomination in 1982, some six decades after Rioja. Ribera is higher, colder, hotter and generally more extreme than Rioja, and while Tempranillo still dominates, it has a different name here: Tinto Fino (aka Tinta Fina or Tinta del País). It's enough to confuse any student of the variety.

Right: the higher altitude in Ribera del Duero brings the benefit of cooler days during harvest than in Rioja, seen left, with this year's crop at Torre de Oña



It was in 1999 that RASA branched out into Ribera. It started by buying vineyards, hence the full name of its estate, Viñedos y Bodegas Áster. The move represented an ambitious change of direction for the group. For a Riojano, the Ribera climate will seem much more extreme: much colder winters and much hotter summers, with a risk of late frosts. There is one advantage, in that by October and the harvest, the days are getting cooler. The altitude helps: Áster is at 800–850m.

López points out that while the grapes at Áster and Torre de Oña are harvested at the same time, the vines at Áster bud three weeks later – but they catch up. 'There's so much heat here that the grapes mature faster,' he says. The thick-skinned berries – 'you don't need to demand extraction, it just happens' – make for far more structured wine, which needs different treatment in the winery. At Áster, they use only French oak, and they age

the wine for a much shorter time than in Rioja, just 16 months.

As at Torre de Oña, it's a work in progress: they are currently trialling bigger barriques for ageing and then managing all their parcels separately in smaller deposits. 'It's a continuous work of questioning everything we do,' says López, who points out another distinctive characteristic of the Áster wines: 'The evolution is so much slower than in Rioja.' These are not wines to buy today and drink tomorrow.

RASA has brought a little bit of Rioja with it to Ribera. It grafted 1ha of Garnacha from its excellent Tudelilla vineyard in Rioja Oriental. Will the variety, a key ingredient in La Rioja Alta's much-loved, more accessible Viña Ardanza, adapt? Or will it freeze in the hard winter? It could be just the thing to soften those Ribera tannins – and cause further confusion to anyone trying to pigeonhole the increasingly nuanced Tempranillo. ○

Tempranillo three ways: Finca Martelo



95
Torre de Oña, Finca Martelo 2015
Drink 2021–31

A lovely vintage in Rioja, and this third release of Finca Martelo reveals the continuing improvement in the wine, as well as the results of the questioning, probing approach to the viticulture and winemaking, with further developments coming on-stream in 2016. Martelo is certainly building on its promising start. Full-bodied and succulent, with ripe fruits and firm tannins. 14.5%

From £26.95 Armit Wines, DBM Wines, Divine Fine Wines

94
Torre de Oña, Finca Martelo 2014
Drink 2021–30

A promising step up from the inaugural 2012 Martelo (there was no 2013). All the elegance you would expect from the producer, while also proving it can achieve it in a different place. Aromatic, with strawberry preserves and morello cherries, finely balanced with notes of vanilla oak. This is a very clear expression of the fine old vines used here and the careful work of parcel selection. 14.5%

From £23.95 Direct Wine, Divine Fine Wines, Majestic Wine, Waitrose Cellar; £150.47 (case of six) Seckford Wines

92
Torre de Oña, Finca Martelo 2012
Drink 2021–28

A fine beginning. Torre de Oña was already established when Finca Martelo appeared, and the style at the winery had hitherto been a tad more traditional. The launch of this wine made a marked difference, a distinct step into a rounder, riper, more expressive style, with fine tannins. In retrospect, the Finca Martelo has developed more complexity. But if you are charmed by Finca Martelo 2015, then do seek out this 2012 – a great chance to follow a new wine from the beginning. 14%

£40 Harvey Nichols; £160 (case of six, in bond) City Wine Collection

Tempranillo three ways: Finca El Otero



93
Viñedos y Bodegas Áster, Finca El Otero 2016
Drink 2023–35

Proof of the compnay's own observation: these wines take a long time to evolve. But as the 2014 proves so well, once they do begin to evolve, they can be glorious. This 2016 is still a buttoned-up infant, bursting with dark, dense character – definitely a wine to cellar. As ever with Finca El Otero, the tannin is very well controlled. My score is provisional; it will undoubtedly go up in five years' time. 15%

£35.68 Armit Wines

94
Viñedos y Bodegas Áster, Finca El Otero 2014
Drink 2021–31

Spot on! This is coming into its own at last, with layers of blackcurrant fruit. Impressive elegance, freshness and purity, with a clean, long finish. The tannins are refined, and the power of the variety is well tamed. 14.5%

N/A UK

91
Viñedos y Bodegas Áster, Finca El Otero 2009
Drink 2021–26

A delightful chance to step back in time and discover how the La Rioja Alta team was starting to tackle the scant soils and extreme climate. This shows the definite promise of their chosen vineyards: aromas of roasted plums, a very smooth palate, and exceptionally dense in the mouth, with a light, refreshing lift on the finish. 14.5%

N/A UK

Turning Japanese

For three decades, Richard Geoffroy was the ebullient, eccentric force behind the world's most famous Champagne. So, what makes him think he can turn his hand to sake, asks Jim Clarke
Portraits by Charles Geoffroy

In June of 2019, Richard Geoffroy's life – his second life, as he calls it – ended in a high-profile ceremony at Hautvilliers Abbey. It was here that the monk Dom Pérignon lived, worked and was buried, and for 28 years, Geoffroy had been *chef de cave* of the Champagne that bears the monk's name. Now he was stepping down.

Then, in November of the same year, a Shinto ceremony in the foothills southeast of Japan's Toyama Bay marked the beginning of Geoffroy's third life. With that ceremony, he broke ground on a sake brewery.

From the outside, it was a move even more unlikely than Geoffroy's first life, as a doctor. In retrospect, his medical career turned out to be nothing more than youthful rebellion. Geoffroy had grown up in Champagne, and while his father Henri, a vigneron and president of the Champagne Growers' Union, was happy to see his son go into a more respected profession, it didn't last. 'I could see that being a doctor was not necessarily for me,' Geoffroy says. So he retrained, and as he entered his third decade, he finally found his vocation. 'I've done everything late in life,' he says. 'I married late, had kids late. I'm sad to say that I will probably retire late – or perhaps never – but I suspect that retirement is a sort of dead end.'

Geoffroy doesn't like dead ends. He made up for lost time as a young winemaker by working multiple harvests each year, bouncing between hemispheres to gain experience in California, Australia, New Zealand, Spain and Portugal. He estimates he did four vintages a year for six years or so before taking over at

Dom Pérignon in 1990. It was only then that his work began taking him to Japan.

He made around 100 visits to the country, and as it grabbed his interest, sake became part of that experience. Thanks to his role with Dom Pérignon, he found himself in the hands of the best guides. Shinya Tasaki, a former Best Sommelier in the World, plied him with flights of different styles, and he was struck by how much sake reminded him of Champagne. 'There are many shared elements,' Geoffroy says. 'The sheer ease and drinkability. There are not many beverages on earth you can drink so easily. To me, sake, Champagne and Fino Sherry all have similarities. Dishes that go with one go with the others. And with their salinity, the last sip always calls for the next one.'

But appreciation does not a business opportunity make. The sake industry is struggling. While exports were growing until the pandemic hit, they have never exceeded 5% of production, and the core domestic market continues to shrink with Japan's population decline. Today, there are fewer than 1,500 breweries, compared to 2,500 in 1984. Nonetheless, Geoffroy saw an opportunity and a challenge in sake that he didn't see in, say, Sherry. 'There's so much space, as long as you go for it and get things right. What first attracted me is the level of complexity in the making of sake. It's such an options game. I thought Champagne was it, but there are way more options in sake than in Champagne. Champagne is very complex, but sake beats it. There's so much microbiology involved, and you need a lot of experience to master it. So intellectually, it was very stimulating.'





Geoffroy says the landscape surrounding the brewery in Shiraiwa (top right) serves as an inspiration for the sake's identity, which is defined by two unusual elements: blending and ageing

Experience, of course, was what he didn't have, and one doesn't decide, aged 65, to become a master sake brewer. So Geoffroy went in search of partners. He visited more than a dozen breweries, big and small, without success. Then one night over drinks, a friend, the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, recommended Ryuichiro Masuda. The owner of Masuizumi, a highly regarded brewery in Toyama, Masuda was already making elevated, super-premium sakes and was open to new ideas. A wine lover and collector, he had successfully experimented with barrel aging and other tools from the wine world. 'We visited Masuda for the weekend,' recalls Geoffroy, 'and surprisingly, he was pretty easy to convince. I realised he had a really clear, analytical view of his own industry, which can come across as a little complacent.'

Geoffroy is careful not to criticise his now fellow sake producers, but he mentions how he finds some sakes overly sweet or bitter, or generally out of balance. The smart ones, he says, aim at a 'broader span of drinking moment'. (For the record, he also thinks too many *chefs de caves* in Champagne, particularly smaller producers, have forgotten about drinkability.) He notes, too, how high-end sakes tend to be more about the nose than the palate, and the finish can be 'abrupt' – a clean finish is seen as a virtue in sake circles, but Geoffroy is keen to enhance what he sees as a disjointed element by incorporating a more satisfying note. 'I want an equilibrium, a balance between nose and palate. Conventional sake is more about the nose; I want more fragrant, vibrant, luminous, radiant aromatics. The finish is crucial. I spend so much time [working] on the quality of the finish,' he says, 'integrating all the components of taste and sapidity and umami together.'

Masuda and Geoffroy began experimenting, developing the sake and looking for a brewery site. Meanwhile, Kuma drew up plans for the brewery, with Australian designer Marc Newson contributing on other design elements, including the bottle. The new company and the brewery took the name of the eventual site, Shiraiwa, which means 'White Rock'; the brand itself is Iwa, and the sake is called Iwa 5. The first three bottlings were completed at Masuda's brewery before the Shiraiwa brewery was finished in March of 2021. (Sake is traditionally brewed in the winter months, and for now, Geoffroy is keeping with that schedule, meaning the first brew at the Shiraiwa location won't commence until this winter.)

The pandemic didn't slow down construction unduly, but it did change Geoffroy's marketing plans. Exports remain key; he aims to export 80% of the production, a number much higher than other industry leaders have come close to. Originally the intention was to start off in Europe and the US, but Covid-related

issues confined Iwa 5 to Asia initially. So, Iwa 5 first saw the light of day in Japan in May of 2020, then spread out to Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. In September 2021, attention turned to Europe, starting with the United Kingdom, Italy and France. While the complicated distribution laws in the United States have slowed down plans there, the aim is to have Iwa 5 available for private clients by the end of the year, with distribution to restaurants opening up in 2022. For now, private clients and high-end restaurants are the target market, with bottles priced at approximately £130 retail. Initial production is around 1,000 cases, which Geoffroy hopes to increase, though he points out that yields are small and the cost of the raw materials 'insane'.

But Geoffroy's role at Shiraiwa is not simply that of the visionary or brand ambassador. While not a brewer himself, Geoffroy brings a skill set rarely practised in the world of sake, which is normally made in single batches. Much of the brewer's art traditionally lies in ensuring consistency in each brew, with the marketing focus on the percentage of rice polishing (too much so for Geoffroy, who says rice can be 'overpolished'). Iwa 5, however, is a blend. At its core, it combines sakes brewed with five different rice strains, providing 'five different typologies', though the components are much more diverse than that summation conveys.

Blending, of course, lies at the heart of Champagne production, so while Geoffroy is no brewer, he's well prepared. 'Brewing is a lifetime project, but blending could apply to sake, Port, Champagne – anything. Blending, to me, is very straightforward. I've been doing this long enough; I'm very clear about the objective.' And that objective is to start from a set of components that provide different characters and styles, 'as long as each individual base element is an optimum expression of that style. Then the blend can be stretched by working opposite or complementary components together.' When blends fail to add up, Geoffroy says, it's often because the elements were not dissimilar enough. 'The most difficult part of blending is to know exactly what you can expect from each individual element and then to realise that some elements are out before you even start. The frustrating thing is that sometimes these elements can be bloody good, and still they're out. If they cannot fit into the scheme, they don't belong.'

For Iwa 5, the components echo what Geoffroy achieved with Dom Pérignon – deliberately so. 'It's the overall sense of completeness, the complexity, to be substantial enough and yet include nothing overly weighty. That and a floating element of relatively weightless opulence; that has been my life, and that's something I will stick to forever.

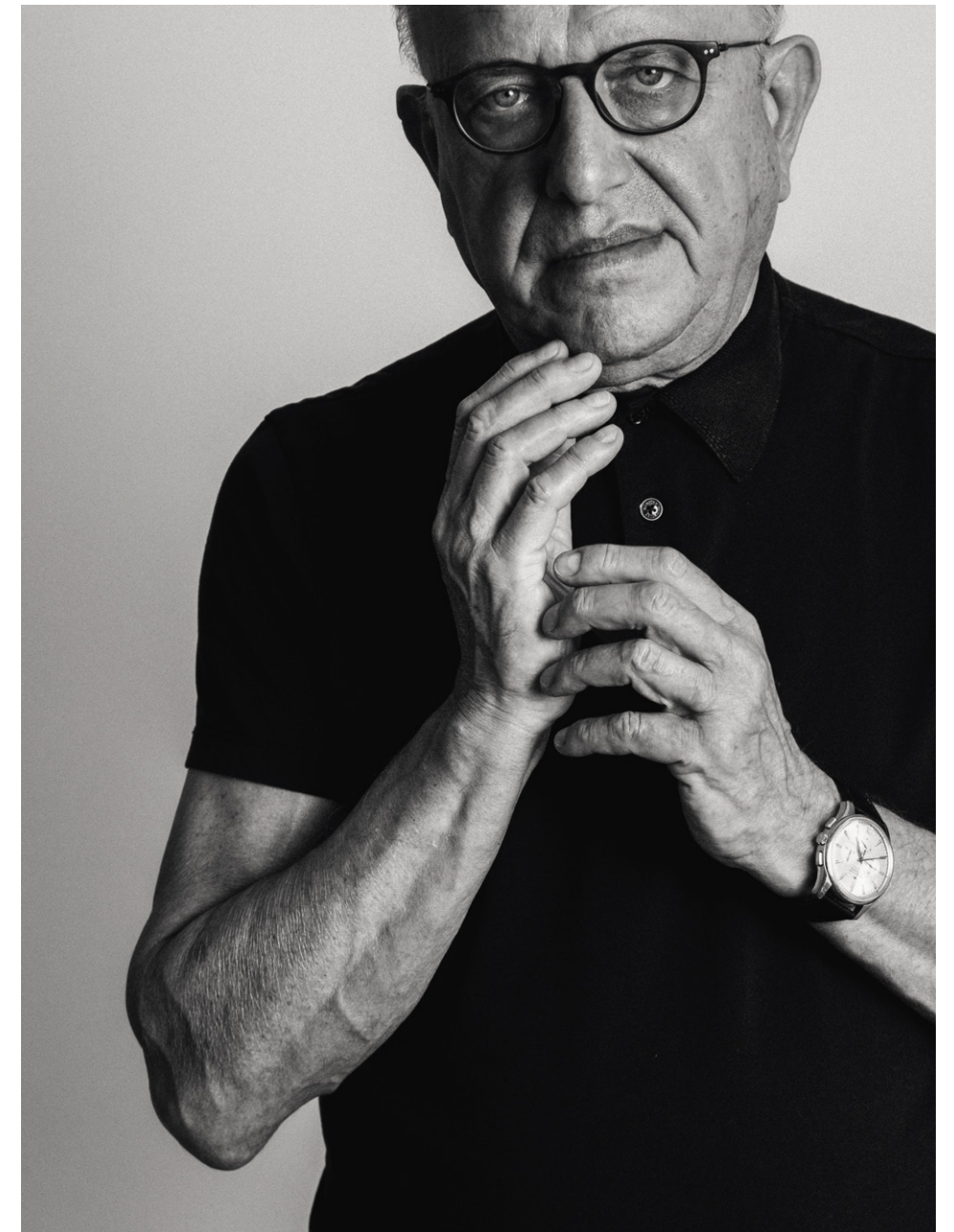
Just as Dom Pérignon is a vintage product, Iwa 5 has and

will continue to change and evolve – not because of different growing seasons, but because Geoffroy is continuing to explore the various tools that sake brewing offers. ‘I insist on the fact that this production – whatever volume, whatever size – will keep being experimental. I don’t want a steady state and to say, “Here we go, we’ve got the formula, and I don’t even need to come to Japan anymore, I just prescribe the thing by email.” No, no, no. This project will keep experimenting forever.’ That said, Geoffroy was forced to perfect the blend for the second bottling of Iwa 5 in his kitchen at home in France, because he couldn’t get to Japan during Covid.

While the pandemic changed the trajectory of the launch, it also gave Geoffroy a chance to realise a second, important point of difference, beyond blending. Sake is typically drunk fresh; ageing sake as a regular practice disappeared in the 19th century, when tax laws changed. But having had the chance to see how well Iwa 5 ages in bottle, Geoffroy decided to make bottle maturation part of the plan and to highlight the difference ageing makes. So, the second iteration, by way of example, had a different yeast selection in pursuit of a more substantial weight and brighter aromatics. The third *assemblage* was bottled in May 2021 and will only be released a year later. With it, Geoffroy also plans to present a triumvirate of the three blends completed to date, from 2019, 2020 and 2021. It’s a concept familiar from the world of wine, though these are not verticals of different vintages in the sense of highlighting the growing conditions of the year. Rather, they will show the evolution of the blend and the progressive effect of ageing in bottle – the two points that Geoffroy believes set Iwa 5 apart. ‘Blending and bottle maturation are not really traditional to sake-making, and yet in the end, the goal is to achieve something within the sake orthodoxy. I’m trying to push the parameters through what I would call rather unconventional means, yet to achieve a grand sake.’

While the sake world is generally a conservative one, the struggles facing the industry have made innovations like Geoffroy’s more welcome. ‘People who do something different aren’t always liked, and I suspect many guardians of the temple are not so comfortable with what I’m making, but they tend to be discreet,’ says Geoffroy. ‘However, some people have said, “At last, a *gaijin* is coming in and stirring the pot.” And several discerning palates have given me the best compliment, by saying that while Iwa 5 is very true to sake and cannot be mistaken for anything else, there is definitely a new sensation there, related to balance and complexity. So, you could say that the whole thing has been reconfigured but without breaking away or going too far.’

What’s indisputable is that, as Geoffroy says, ‘It’s definitely a new life for me. But it’s funny – it’s as if a little voice was telling me what to do. I never had any hesitation. It’s not very rational, but I’m tired of rational; rational is very limiting. Great things are not rational; there’s something beyond that. So I’m following my instinct, and people are following me.’ Part of this, as he’s well aware, is about building the brand – of which he is very much part. ‘It’s not very Japanese to be self-promoting,’ he says. You get the sense it comes more easily to Geoffroy. ‘When you have no conflict in what you make, it allows you to go further. I could have stayed at Dom Pérignon, but I felt I had to move on. At Dom Pérignon I was not building the brand; it was in existence long before me and will continue long after me. Whereas now I have the sense of starting off, of building something new.’



**‘I suspect many guardians
of the temple are
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what I’m making’**

How does it taste? A sake expert gives his verdict

It makes sense for Richard Geoffroy to choose to make a *junmai daiginjō*, and he has done so by respecting the established order of rice polishing, yet also drawing on his blending expertise. *Junmai*, pure rice sake with no alcohol added, is perceived by many as a purer style than alcohol-added sake, even if alcohol at premium level is limited by law and added to enhance fragrance and, counterintuitively, lightness. By law, *daiginjō* requires at least 50% of the rice grain to be milled. To remove 65%, as is the case with Iwa 5, is a greater sacrifice in the interests of quality. Brewers go lower than 35%, Dassai 23 being the obvious example, but Geoffroy has rejected the line that lower is better.

Where he does make a marketing statement is in his aim of creating an internationally recognized brand, not something that concerns most sake producers. The biggest difference in style,

meanwhile, is the application of his blending expertise. Blending rice varieties – not the norm – is at the heart of Geoffroy’s desire for balance and depth. The complexity of the *assemblage* is in the blending of four different rice varieties from three distinct regions, using five sake yeast strains.

The result is a sake that transcends the aromatic power expected of *daiginjō* without losing perfume but bringing added texture and delicacy and building on flavour with light, savoury umami notes. *Assemblage* one, bottled in July 2019 and released in April 2020, contains more in the savoury umami spectrum of flavour, largely from its extra ageing. The second *assemblage*, bottled in June 2020 and released in May 2021, more than makes up for it in freshness and finesse. ○

Anthony Rose, author of Sake and the Wines of Japan

Champagnes of the Year

With many houses reporting a run on fizz, Essi Avellan MW picks out the best new releases to snap up now – and enjoy later

The past two years have been a roller-coaster ride in the Champagne world. The major houses have rebounded from the slump generated by the onset of the pandemic only to find themselves in the midst of an altogether different issue: unprecedented supply shortages. With many new releases put on hold last year, as the Champenois opted to wait for the return of normal times, 2021 has seen a glut of them. And they are selling fast. Now is the time to stock up, as the very last cuvées of the hyped 2008 vintage are released, among them Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth and Charles Heidsieck Rosé.

For fans of cool-vintage Champagnes, there is also an exceptional array of prestige and vintage cuvées available. In addition to the lean and fresh 2008s, the 2012s offer outstanding Champagnes of intensity and purity. Some of the top cuvées from the radiant and energetic 2013, like Roederer's Cristal, also made their debut this year. Such wines promise longevity and a taste profile that we will likely wait a long time to see again, since the latter half of the decade has been an era of predominantly warm vintages. Here are my top releases from the past 12 months, both to lay down and, in some cases, to toast happier times in 2022.





97

Louis Roederer, Cristal Rosé 2013

Drink 2021–41

The palest peachy hue eases in the seductive, ripe and soft nose, which comes with all the Cristal charms. Delicate peach and vanilla tones, with cool rhubarb and floral notes speaking of supreme sophistication. On the palate, it is fleshy and creamy, its crisp, driven acidity perfectly in balance with the pure fruity deliciousness. Stunningly polished and complete. 12%

From £466 Corking Wines, Harrods, Hedonism Wines, VinQuinn



96

Dom Pérignon, Brut 2012

Drink 2021–41

In 2012, they really played the density card at Dom Pérignon, effortlessly compacting together delicious, crunchy, perfectly ripe fruit. The nose is welcoming, harmonious and deeply fruity, with DP's hallmark fragrant smoky layers. At first, the wine feels deceptively light, but then comes the fruity power and sheer volume. The wine's most unique feature is the tingling sensation that energises the rich, vibrant palate. It is almost electrically charged, bringing an exciting dynamism to the long, delicious palate. 12.5%

From £160 Cru World Wine, The Finest Bubble, Harrods

96

Rare Champagne, Brut 2008

Drink 2021–40

Beautifully detailed nose, with a fresh, fruity profile of pineapple, coconut, vanilla and coffee meeting liquorice and roasted almonds. The fruitiness is pure and ripe yet crunchy. On the palate, it is tightly knit and driven, with a crisp acidity perfectly bound to the radiant fruitiness. The lacy texture shows tension, the wine building to a palate-cleaning fresh, salty tang. A really refined vintage of Rare, with majestic longevity ahead. 12.5%

From £215 Harrods, The Finest Bubble, Hedonism Wines

96

Billecart-Salmon, Cuvée Elisabeth Rosé 2008

Drink 2021–38

Lots of delicious primary fruit here: red cherry, strawberry, baked peach, lemon and blood orange. Age-derived complexity comes through as spice, liquorice and even leather notes. Billecart has, for the first time, used some oak barrels in its crafting (17%), which has aided in creating an appetising fleshiness, silkiness and caressing creaminess. Crisp by nature, the 2008 vintage of this cuvée isn't too acidic, due to that richness filling the mid-palate. Tannins are beautifully low-key, yet the wine has a gorgeous structure to it. The carry is long and seamless, with a pure, fruity, palate-cleansing finish. An exquisite Cuvée Elisabeth. 12%

From £160 Champagne Direct, The Finest Bubble, Harrods, Hedonism Wines

96

Krug, Grande Cuvée, 169ème Edition NV

Drink 2021–40

Based on the 2013 vintage, the 169th Grande Cuvée really wears the year's signature in its radiant and racy fruit profile and amplified, saline length. The fine base year is supported by 40% of reserve wines from 10 different vintages all the way down to 2000. The expressive, stylishly oak-lined nose comes with a delicious fresh, fruity profile; complex and overt already. The palate is tighter, with real vibrancy to it. Pure fruitiness and firm structure of tension, this edition is a keeper. 12%

From £169 Champagne Direct, Davy's, Harrods, Hedonism Wines



96

Laurent-Perrier, Grand Siècle Iteration No.23 NV (magnum)

Drink 2021–41

This blend beautifully marries the generosity and voluptuousness of 2006 and 2002 with the racy finesse of 2004. This is truly a rich iteration, so creamy with age-mellowed power and with lots of complexity waiting to express itself in the glass. Notes of coffee with cream, white pepper, white flowers and gunpowder alongside the pear and apple fruitiness. Not the smokiest or tightest of the Grand Siècle magnums but a caressing one that sits at that perfect place between youth and maturity. 12%

£130 (75cl) The Finest Bubble

95

Veuve Clicquot, La Grande Dame 2012

Drink 2021–36

The 'new' La Grande Dame style, approaching a blanc de noirs, was first created in 2008. For the 2012, Veuve has managed to further fine-tune its precision and purity. This is fresh and elegant to the extent that it is hard to imagine it is made from 90% Pinot Noir. Soft yet coolly fruity and harmonious on the nose, with lemon confit, sweet apricot, vanilla, smoke and buttery pastry notes. On the palate, the balance is impeccable, much more driven, tightly packed and fine than we had come to expect from this cuvée. 13.5%

£160 Clos19, Harrods

96

Louis Roederer, Cristal 2013

Drink 2021–41

The 2013 vintage was sculpted by its late season, with grapes finally harvested in October. But ripe they became, with heaps of delicious cool and crunchy fruit. The Cristal Blanc is racy and pure, with huge, salty mineral tanginess to the fore. Look beyond that, and you'll be dazzled by its fruity power. Lemon, lime, white currant and Granny Smith apple, with chalky tones and gunpowder whiffs arising over time. Focused and saline on the mouthwateringly zingy palate. 12%

From £199 Champagne Direct, Harrods, Hedonism Wines, Petersham Cellar



95

Deutz, Cuvée William Deutz 2008 (magnum)

Drink 2021–35

Bottles of Cuvée William Deutz are exquisite enough, but the magnums come with the additional charm of an amazingly creamy texture and refreshing zinginess. Polished pristine fruitiness on the nose. Plentiful and driven at the same time, with fine smoky complexity framing the whole. The finish is dry and pure, ending on a cool, saline note. 12%

£114 (75cl) Millésima

94

Ruinart, Dom Ruinart 2009

Drink 2021–38

Despite having three years' ageing post-disgorgement (March 2018), upon release this is still elegantly reserved and smoky-mineral in aromatics. The year was dry and sunny, but the wine retained its crunchy fruit profile: lemon, yellow apple and ripe apricots. It takes some time to open in the glass. On the palate, it comes with ample, attractive fruitiness and fleshy mouthfeel. But by no means is it soft in the way many wines of the vintage are – instead, it is surprisingly crisp. The slow ageing curve promises great longevity. 12.5%

From £150 Champagne Direct, The Finest Bubble, Harrods, Hedonism Wines

94

Bollinger RD 2007

Drink 2021–36

2007 is a rather scarcely declared vintage and not one celebrated for its Pinot Noir, yet Bollinger has managed to create something so fresh and delicious. The secret lies in rigorous selection and an unusually high proportion of crunchy Verzenay fruit (29%). The cool, fruity nose comes with golden raisins, yellow apple, orange zest, juniper wood and ginger. The palate has rare energy and tension for an RD, extremely driven and pure. All in all, this seems like a really slowly ageing RD worth cellaring. 12.5%

From £139 Corking Wines, Harrods, The Wine Society; £968.58 (three magnums) Bordeaux Index

94

Charles Heidsieck, Vintage Rosé 2008

Drink 2021–35

Charles's typical, heavenly ground coffee note is there, but this rosé remains coolly reserved with a crunchy fruit profile that still holds back a lot. A *rosé d'assemblage* with 9% red wine (half from Les Riceys, half from Montagne de Reims), it is elegant, focused and even tight for the time being. Peach, blood orange and lemon peel, with a spicy twist on the nose. The palate finishes very dry, with the lowest-ever *dosage* for Charles, 7g/l, bringing a gastronomic, phenolic bite to the fore. In its breezy lightness and vivacious style it promises to be a slowly ageing keeper. 12%

From £114 The Finest Bubble, Hedonism Wines

94

Moët & Chandon, Grand Vintage Collection 2004

Drink 2021–35

After benefiting from 15 years on lees, the nose is quintessentially Moët, with gunpowder and liquorice meeting dough-like yeasty aromas and elegant, cool, crunchy fruitiness. The 2004 is delicate for a Grand Vintage, with fragrant floral tones, tangerine and lemon confit notes. Softly spicy cardamom and refreshing ginger notes support. Feather-light on the fresh yet vivacious palate. 12.5%

From £55 The Champagne Company, Champagne Direct, Farr Vintners

93

Perrier-Jouët, Belle Epoque 2013

Drink 2021–35

Bright lemon colour. Appealing soft nose, with attractive white fruit profile. There are floral touches to the nuanced yet delicate aromatics: orange blossom, apricot pie and fruit drops. Intense, restrained yet bright fruit on the zingy palate of energising nervosity. Long, appetisingly juicy finish, with lemony notes. The wine is remaining highly youthful still with the promise of great longevity. 12.5%

£140 Harrods



93

Pol Roger, Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill 2012

Drink 2021–35

A soft and overt nose of spicy, yeasty complexity meeting a whiff of lovely charred gunpowder. Crisp pristine fruitiness of ripe yellow apple, baked pear, candied lemon and vanilla, developing tropical nuances. The palate echoes the 2012 vintage's hallmark vivacity but is mellow, round and textured, as Winston ought to be. There is instant charm and drinkability to this well-built wine that finishes with a refreshing chalky-mineral bite. A fine Sir Winston vintage. 12.5%

From £185 Harrods, Jeroboams, Laithwaites, Lea & Sandeman

93

Bollinger, B13 2013

Drink 2021–31

For this vintage, with its prolonged growing season, Bollinger played the cool card, choosing to go with a high proportion of Verzenay fruit (51%). The combination of a cool vintage and cool terroir is truly attractive for a blanc de noirs. Already the nose has a lovely zingy fruitiness to it: lemon custard, perfectly ripe peaches and elegant spicy and chalky tones. The ensemble comes across as elegant, super-juicy and purely fruity. The best of the Bollinger limited editions so far. 12%

From £95 The Champagne Company, The Finest Bubble, Harrods, Hedonism Wines; £494.58 (six bottles) Bordeaux Index

92

Pol Roger, Blanc de Blancs 2013

Drink 2021–31

Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs is a consistent classic, but the cool 2013 vintage produced a particularly fine expression of the cuvée. Beautifully clean, brightly fruity and toast-lined nose, with sumptuous burned-sugar deliciousness. The intense and vivacious palate is at the same time invigoratingly fresh and soothingly gentle. It all leads to a richly fruity and persistent finish. 12.5%

£80.50 Berry Bros & Rudd, The Champagne Company, Hedonism Wines, The Wine Society

92

Perrier-Jouët, Belle Epoque Rosé 2013

Drink 2021–41

The year produced a Belle Epoque Rosé of elegance yet also one that craves time. The colour is paler than usual, with salmon hues. It comes with blanc de noirs rather than rosé vibes, with smoke, vanilla, cherry, bergamot and fudge intermingling. Still restrained on a structured palate of exquisite freshness, this deserves additional time to show all its charms. 12.5%

£250 Ocado



92

Philipponnat, Cuvée 1522 Rosé 2012

Drink 2021–29

Coming largely from the house's historical Léon vineyard in Ay, Cuvée 1522 Rosé has heaps of lush Pinot fruit. Red and black cherries, strawberry jam, juniper wood, wet chalk and soft spiciness grace the nose. On the palate, it is impressively structured and muscular, with a gentle bite of phenolics on the dry, firm back palate. This one is a keeper, with lots and lots of deliciousness still to give. 12%

£86.42 Farr Vintners, Justerini & Brooks

92

Delamotte, Blanc de Blancs 2014

Drink 2021–33

Such a consistent wine from one vintage to another, Delamotte Blanc de Blancs brings together the six grands crus of the Côte des Blancs. Pristinely crafted, the wine is squeaky clean and radiant, with cool, crunchy lemony fruit taking centre stage. Beautiful reductive, smoky tones line the intense fruitiness, while the racy palate is pleasantly creamy and silky, with a lingering long finish. 12%

£58 Crump Richmond & Shaw, Cru World Wine, Farr Vintners



93

Salon, Brut 2012

Drink 2021–40

Pinot Noir was the king of this climatically challenging vintage, so Salon wasn't promising us a release early on. The house changed its mind and has come up with something instantly rewarding and generous. Bright, sweetly fruity nose on the tropical side, with lemon, jasmine and orange blossom. The palate has volume yet also a firm backbone of brisk acidity. The chalky mineral notions come forward on the long, intense and dry finish. 12%

POA Corney & Barrow

91

Louis Roederer, Collection 242 NV

Drink 2021–26

The new climate and era have seen Louis Roederer replace its Brut Premier with Collection. The new cuvée's resilience derives from the *réserve perpétuelle* of previous vintages. In the challenging 2017 vintage, Chardonnay was made to play an important role. The resulting cuvée is rich with fine depth, and comes with nicely toasted, ripe fruity aromas of vanilla, lemon and hazelnut. The taste is softly lush but fresh and elegantly layered. 12%

From £45 Bordeaux Index, The Finest Bubble, Fine Wine Direct, Harrods, Hedonism Wines



Rolling out the red carpet

Recent months have seen several previously dusty whisky distilleries open premium offerings, from high-end restaurants to VIP accommodation. Becky Paskin checks in



Previous spread: distillery manager Stewart Bowman at the newly reopened Brora, where visitors can enjoy tastings of its £30,000 triptych (left). Above: Glenmorangie House, now open for private stays

Glenturret, now owned by French *cristallerie* Lalique, has opened a suitably lavish bar and restaurant, with intricate tasting menu and Michelin ambitions



Fancy dining in a Michelin-starred distillery maltings, sleeping in a whisky-themed bedroom or kicking back with a rare single malt while taking in the Edinburgh skyline? Welcome to the next generation of premium Scotch whisky experiences.

With more than two million people visiting Scotland's distilleries in 2019, whisky tourism was, pre-pandemic, at an all-time high. But while the numbers were buoyant, the experiences themselves had become somewhat standardised. A tour of the distillery, a dram or two from the basic range, and perhaps a coffee or a sandwich at the on-site café – after exiting through the gift shop, of course, with the attendant offerings of branded baseball caps, golf accessories and picnic blankets.

The reopening of distilleries to the public, however, has coincided with a raft of new ventures offering a more tailored, immersive and all-round premium experience. And with several of these having been delayed to a greater or lesser degree by the restrictions of the past 18 months, Scotch lovers are suddenly spoiled for choice when it comes to luxury whisky tourism.

For starters comes the opportunity to witness the rebirth of a historic 'lost' distillery. This summer saw the reopening of the iconic Brora in Sutherland, whose rare and extremely limited releases have become collectors' items since its closure in 1983. As an admirer of Brora's legacy, and having been fortunate enough to have tasted several expressions over the years, I couldn't pass up an opportunity to experience the distillery's regeneration first hand. And just as tasting Brora is a luxury in itself, so is an exclusive tour of the distillery. There are just two options available: Brora Awakened (£300) and The Eras of Brora (£600). I opt for the latter – and since I'm the only visitor

today, I have their full, undivided attention. I'm welcomed by the warm smiles of brand home manager Andrew Flatt and distillery manager Stewart Bowman. This is not special treatment, I hasten to add. With tours here by appointment only and conducted in small groups, all visitors to Brora are greeted personally.

From the moment you open Brora's imposing black wildcat gates, you know you're somewhere special. The stone walls enclosing the distillery's cobbled courtyard create a feeling of serenity that's interrupted only by the occasional hiss or whirr of a nearby pump. The extensive renovation is sympathetically done, and without the constant murmur of the crowds usually encountered at Scotland's most popular distilleries, it's easy to imagine the early days at this historic site – not least because we begin our tour by picking through the abundance of archive material used in the restoration. This includes the old workers' time and pay book and the original distillery renovation plans drawn up by architect Charles Doig in 1896.

We move into a nosing of the three spirit styles that the new Brora will eventually come to produce, before our tour takes us into the original 19th-century warehouses. Like most dunnage warehouses of the era, it's dank, dark and musty, the walls strewn with cobwebs, the space filled with maturing casks of whisky and spirit. Flatt opens a bottle of a new 1982 distillery exclusive and pours the golden liquid into my glass. It's rich and waxy, full of tropical fruits like mangoes and pineapple. To be tasting Brora in the place it was made, while breathing in the heady scent of the angel's share, is special indeed, and it whets the appetite for a taste of the Brora Triptych collection – a £30,000 trio of 1972, 1977 and 1982 vintages released earlier

this year. An indulgent three-course lunch and a further chat with Flatt and Bowman about the future plans for the distillery complete a memorable day.

Brora isn't the only Scotch distillery to have received an extravagant makeover. Almost 180 miles south in Crieff, another historic name has revealed its own new look. Never much more than the home of a blended Scotch (despite its claims to being Scotland's oldest working distillery), Glenturret was most recently best known as the home of the Famous Grouse Experience, a destination for coach parties of tourists making their way through the Highlands. But in 2019, the distillery was bought by French crystal house Lalique, which has relaunched the brand as a luxury single malt with its own annually evolving range of whiskies. To reflect the quality of the liquid, the new owner has transformed the small distillery into an opulent attraction where spirit and glass combine to form a journey into craftsmanship and provenance. The new identity is mirrored in every gleaming surface, expertly lit mahogany display case and glass sculpture, though nothing about the 'by hand' whisky-making process has changed, and visits can be as basic (£11 for a tour and one whisky) or as in-depth (£100 for a tour and five whiskies) as you like.

What is new – and nothing is more reflective of the new owner's ambition than this – is the fine dining venue, a first for a Scottish distillery. The Glenturret Lalique Restaurant is a polished space housed in one of the distillery's former maltings, its sloped white ceiling dripping with history and Lalique Champs-Élysées chandeliers. Its Michelin ambitions are clear in the star-studded team recruited to run the operation. The kitchen is led by head chef Mark Donald, formerly of Michelin-

starred Number One at The Balmoral, as well as Noma, Hibiscus and Restaurant Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles. Meanwhile, front of house is led by Emilio Muñoz Algarra (L'Enclume, The Fat Duck, Marcus Wareing) and executive sommelier Julien Beltzung (Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong, as well as Villa René Lalique and Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey – Lalique's two French properties, in Alsace and Bordeaux respectively).

From the start it was important to both Lalique and Glenturret managing director John Laurie to create a fine dining experience that reinvented the concept of a distillery restaurant. 'We didn't want to be as crass as to just add whisky sauce to the dishes,' says Laurie, 'so Mark spent time understanding whisky production and what parts of the process could be transferred into the food.'

Never before has a distillery put so much effort into its restaurant offering. The result is a 12-course tasting menu that is a grand yet authentic reflection of Glenturret's terroir. Take the refreshing fermented and pickled melon sorbet that's served in a dish crafted from clay sourced from the River Turret; or the soft, perfectly runny hen's egg served with Perthshire girolles and sweetcorn. An unexpected highlight for me was the sourdough bread course, which is baked using the distillery's intake of malted barley and served with cultured butter and local honey from Donald's neighbour. But the crowning moment came in a magical mahogany box, chocolate petits fours in each of its individual compartments.

By the end of the meal, diners will have a true sense of Glenturret's locality, ethos and ambitions. 'You're surrounded by the terroir, you consume it, you absorb it,' explains Laurie. 'The story of Glenturret should get inside you through osmosis.'

While the wine list here stretches to more than 400 bins,



Glenmorangie House (left) can be hired in its entirety, while the new Johnnie Walker attraction in Edinburgh (below) offers private rooftop dining and a 500-dram whisky vault



the six-metre-long whisky bar is the bigger attraction. With a selection of some 250 drams from right across Scotland, including Glenturret's newly relaunched range plus an impressive number of rare distillery bottlings, this is the perfect spot for a post-tour dram or curated flight. We finish the evening with a Glenturret 15-year-old, its bramble fruits and gingerbread spice setting the seal on a truly immersive experience.

For something equally out of the ordinary, how about a stay at Glenmorangie House? The Tain distillery's brand home is now an upscale boutique hotel situated on a remote Highland estate overlooking the rugged shoreline around Cadboll Point. Previously only accessible to the trade and invited guests, it has undergone a modern transformation with a disruptively bright and maximalist interior design by the renowned Russell Sage Studio. Here Glenmorangie's story is brought to life through bold prints and bright colours, each room reflecting the personality of the brand and the flavours found in its whisky – so expect to find a tropical paradise filled with monkeys, bananas and a hidden tiger, as well as a French patisserie complete with hand-knitted cakes. It's a chocolate box of a house: each door reveals a surprise, though the quirky designs may not be to everyone's taste.

And it's not just rural Scotland where brands are expanding their tourism offering. In the centre of Edinburgh is the eagerly anticipated Johnnie Walker Princes Street, an eight-storey whisky dreamland that's already proving a must-visit. The venue offers a range of tours aimed at all levels of knowledge, but for a truly special experience, guests can book a tasting of rare whiskies in the Explorer's Bothy Bar, an examination of some exclusive single casks in the Whisky Makers' Cellar, or a bespoke whisky-paired dinner in the semi-private rooftop Blue Label Room, with views out across the city. For private clients, there's the opportunity to taste from more than 500 single-malt and grain samples in the exclusive Whisky Vault beneath Princes Street.

Recent years have seen distilleries' premium bottlings scale ever more vertiginous heights of rarity and exclusivity. Now, it seems, their tourism offerings are finally catching up.

Doing Scotch in style

Brora

Two bookable tour options are available – Brora Awakened (£300) and The Eras of Brora (£600) – but contact the distillery team for any additional requirements.
malts.com/en-gb/distilleries/brora

Glenmorangie House

Stay at Glenmorangie House from £290 on a bed-and-breakfast basis, or from £330 for dinner, bed and breakfast. The house can also be hired exclusively from £3,060 per night.
theglenmorangiehouse.com

Glenturret Lalique Restaurant

The restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and afternoon tea five days a week. The 12-course tasting menu is available for dinner at £110 per person.
theglenturretrestaurant.com

Johnnie Walker Princes Street

Costs for prestige tours and experiences vary but start at £95 for the Whisky Makers' Cellar Experience.
johnniewalker.com/en-gb/visit-us-princes-street 