



Producer profile

# Laurent-Perrier

As this family-run Champagne house, renowned for its rosé, celebrates its bicentenary, Susie Barrie MW looks back on its rich history and the strong personalities who have forged its identity

BEING FAMOUS FOR rosé is something very few globally ambitious grandes marques – be they from Champagne or elsewhere – either aspire to or achieve. But such is the lot of Laurent-Perrier. Mention the house to most Champagne drinkers and the first response is almost invariably related to that stout, green bottle with its unusually crafted contents, bronze foil and distinctive pink label.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with such an association. But it does impede a more profound understanding and appreciation of what is, after all, one of the largest Champagne houses, still family-controlled, with plenty of intriguing wines. And that's not even to mention its celebrated subsidiaries Salon, Delamotte and De Castellane, which are all part of the Laurent-Perrier Group.

To understand Laurent-Perrier, it's important to get to grips with its history and key figures. Although the house traces its roots back to 1812 and celebrates its bicentenary this year, it was in the hands of two feisty females that it gained its reputation – and through one man that it forged its identity.

Following the death of her husband Eugène in 1887, Mathilde Emilie Perrier increased production to 50,000 cases and introduced Laurent-Perrier to the British market. Later, when young mother Marie-Louise Lanson de Nonancourt risked all she had to buy the war-torn and near bankrupt house in 1939, she hoped to secure a future for her eldest sons, Maurice and Bernard. It was a gamble that

**Left: in 1939, Bernard de Nonancourt's mother risked everything to buy the war-torn and bankrupt house of Laurent-Perrier. It was a gamble that paid off, with the house celebrating its bicentenary this year**

## Laurent-Perrier at a glance

**House established** 1812  
**Location** Tours-sur-Marne  
**Vineyards** 150ha  
**Annual production** 8 million bottles  
**Size** third largest Champagne house by value, fourth by volume  
**De Nonancourt family shareholding** 57% (March 2011), making it the largest independent, family-controlled Champagne brand  
**Other labels** the Laurent-Perrier Group also includes Salon, Delamotte and De Castellane

paid off. Although Marie’s older son, Maurice, was killed in a concentration camp during WWII, Bernard returned to run the house and became its driving force for half a century.

Pioneering spirit

Bernard de Nonancourt, or ‘BN’ as he was known by his staff and family, was an enormously influential man. He had time for everyone and, as his daughter Alexandra says, ‘my father was somebody who would never leave you indifferent’. As a child he escaped death twice; once when he swallowed the open staple from his nappy, and again as a teenager when he contracted pleurisy. On the latter occasion, his grandfather famously gave him half a bottle of Lanson and some horseradish to aid his recovery.

After distinguishing himself in the war and taking over the reins at Laurent-Perrier, de Nonancourt was renowned for his willingness to innovate. It was he who introduced a high percentage of Chardonnay into Laurent-Perrier’s wines at a time when Chardonnay tended to be a sweeter wine, served from a coupe at the end of a meal. He wanted the house style to be light and refreshing and, above all, to reflect the land. Alexandra describes her father’s vision for the wine as ‘like standing in a vineyard in autumn in the early morning’. With this purity of style in mind, he was also one of the first in the region to introduce stainless steel tanks (in 1963). Laurent-Perrier’s close involvement with the Chelsea Flower Show – now in its 15th year – and other high-profile garden events around the world stems from de Nonancourt’s love of nature and the land.

In 1959, at a time when a prestige cuvée was resolutely vintage, he created the first multi-vintage prestige cuvée, Grand Siècle. His rationale was that, if non-vintage wines were the Champenois’ greatest achievement, then why not make a blended prestige cuvée? He then launched Cuvée Rosé in 1968, when the idea of premium rosé Champagne was anathema to the French. De Nonancourt insisted his rosé would be ‘serious’, made by the saignée method and with its own unique bottle. Though one could argue that Laurent-Perrier Cuvée Rosé is ambitiously priced, it is impossible to deny its success and the cult following it has gained.

‘A family company means nothing; you have to fall in love with the brand’

Alexandra Pereyre de Nonancourt (right)

In a final trend-setting move, De Nonancourt re-introduced the idea of *brut nature* to the house in 1981 with Laurent-Perrier Ultra Brut, a bone-dry style that Emilie Mathilde Perrier had famously produced as Grand Vin Sans Sucre in 1889.

Today, Laurent-Perrier is one of the largest grandes marques and, following its listing on the French stock exchange in 1999, shareholders now control 43% of the firm, the remainder being in family hands. The Laurent-Perrier Group now includes De Castellane, Delamotte and Salon, as well as Château Malakoff, maker of Oudinot, among other brands. Yet in spite of its size and status, it’s hard to think of the company without its long-term head, Bernard de Nonancourt.

Indeed, the past few years have been difficult. This culminated in 2010, an annus horribilis both in a business and personal sense for Laurent-Perrier. The decision to adopt a new pricing strategy from April 2008, effectively doubling the price of Grand Siècle, came only months before the global financial crisis hit. Annual turnover fell by almost a third over the next two years and in June 2010 group chairman Stéphane Tsassis resigned for ‘personal reasons’. That November, Bernard, the house’s inspirational leader for so many years, died aged 90.

Next generation

Nonetheless, Laurent-Perrier’s overall turnover increased by more than 25% between 2009 and 2011, and the house now seems to be on a more even keel under Bernard’s daughters Alexandra and Stéphanie, both of whom are members of the management board. Alexandra had trained as an interior designer and worked for fashion designer Paco Rabanne before returning to Laurent-Perrier in 1987. She has been in charge of the company’s



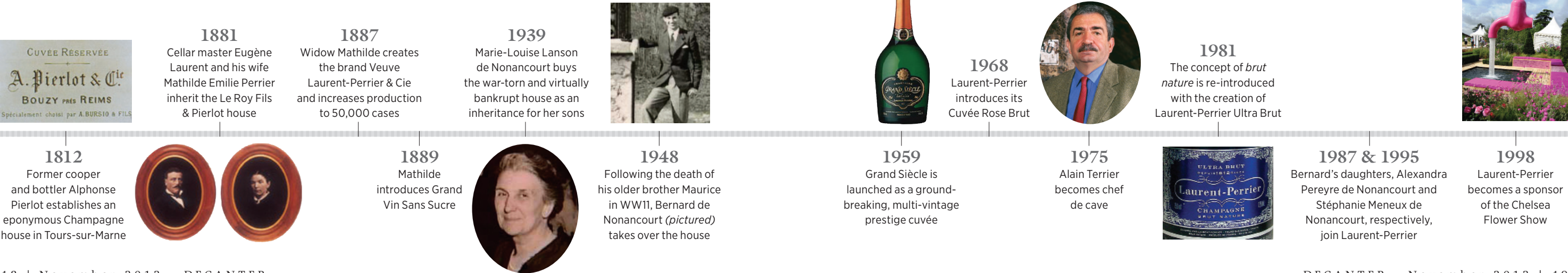
Above: Laurent-Perrier was awarded the Royal Warrant of HRH The Prince of Wales in 1998; almost 20 years earlier, in 1979, Prince Charles visited the house in Tours-sur-Marne with his uncle Lord Louis Mountbatten

brand image since 1997. With a background in public relations and marketing, Stéphanie worked for Sotheby’s before joining her sister in 1995 to set up a PR department for the house. They concede, though, that their father is a tough act to follow. One of the criteria Alexandra set herself before she returned to Laurent-Perrier was to be convinced the brand was as strong as her father: ‘A family company means nothing; you have to fall in love with the brand.’

When I visited the house in early summer, preparations were in full swing for the bicentenary celebrations for 3,000 guests. There were few signs of financial constraints or doom and gloom.

A new wine, Les Réserves Grand Siècle, was created specifically for the celebrations. Appropriately, it was conceived by Bernard de Nonancourt with the current chef de cave Michel Fauconnet. Fauconnet arrived at Laurent-Perrier in 1973 and subsequently took over from Alain Terrier, becoming the house’s third ever cellar master. He’s also a member of the management board. Fauconnet is a strong advocate for the house ➤

Laurent-Perrier: a timeline







Above: Alexandre Pereyre de Nonancourt (left) and her sister Stéphanie Meneux de Nonancourt

philosophy of making vintage wines merely to provide ingredients for the various cuvées, rather than making them a speciality. As such, Les Réserve is a fabulously impressive multi-vintage blend of 1990, '93 and '95, which no doubt delighted guests as they partied the night away.

In many ways, Laurent-Perrier has come full circle. It finds itself again in the hands of women – Alexandra and Stéphanie may not be as obviously feisty as Mathilde or Marie-Louise, but they, along with their management board, have weathered a substantial storm over the past few years and the company remains strong. While the house may still be best known for its rosé, there are still more stories, wines and history to be made here. **D**

Photograph: Olivier Roux

Susie Barrie MW is a wine broadcaster, author and writer and runs Susie & Peter's Wine School with her husband Peter Richards MW

## Barrie's top five Champagnes to try

**Laurent-Perrier, Les Réserve Grand Siècle (magnum)** 18.75pts/20 (95+pts/100)

£2,400 (jeroboam) **Selfridges**  
A magnificent way to celebrate L-P's bicentenary. Based on the 1990, '93 and '95 vintages, this wine was set aside by Bernard de Nonancourt and Michel Fauconnet specifically for the occasion and bottled only in magnums and jeroboams. It is exotic and intense, full of honeyed lime, brioche and caramelised nut flavours. With a hint of mushroomy age and a long, creamy finish, it's a wonderfully engaging wine with exuberance and finesse in equal measure. **Drink** 2012–2016 **Alc** 12%



**Laurent-Perrier, Grand Siècle** 18.5 (95)  
£100–£138; **Harrods, Fortnum & Mason, Majestic, Selfridges, Wine Rack**

Always based on three vintages, the forthcoming release of this prestige cuvée is a blend of 1997, '99 and '02 and currently tastes almost ethereal in its delicacy. It is still incredibly young but with a complex array of flavours: white flowers, honey, bread, lemon rind and red pear. There's also minerality, precision and freshness to let it age gracefully. **Drink** 2014–2025 **Alc** 12%

**Laurent-Perrier, Alexandra Rosé 1998** 18.5 (95)  
£260–£300; **Fine & Rare, Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Fortnum & Mason**  
Created by Bernard de Nonancourt for



his daughter Alexandra's wedding in 1987, the first vintage of this rosé was 1982 and there have only been six since. The 1998 has creamy scents of dried figs and autumn leaves. A rosé made for drinking with food, it is dry, intense, earthy and compelling. **Drink** 2012–2025 **Alc** 12%



**Laurent-Perrier 2002** 18 (93)  
£33–£50 **Fine & Rare, Goedhuis, Harrods, Laithwaites, Majestic, Sainsburys, Wine Rack**

From the superb 2002 vintage, this equal blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is beautifully refined and structured. Delicate bubbles reveal crisp lemon and yeast aromas, backed by clean lines through the mid-palate and a delicious, spicy finish. Drinking well but worth keeping for a few more years. **Drink** 2012–2020 **Alc** 12%

**Laurent-Perrier, Brut NV** 16 (86)  
£25–£40 **widely available via**

**Laurent-Perrier UK**  
Encapsulating the house style, this Chardonnay-dominated blend is restrained and elegant. Based on the 2006 harvest with a splash of 2005 and a little more '04, it shows fresh apricot fruit with floral overtones and a light, bready note. The finish is tangy and lifted. **Drink** 2012–2013 **Alc** 12%

For full details of UK stockists, see p112

## Laurent-Perrier: a timeline (cont...)

**1999**  
Laurent-Perrier is listed on the French Stock Exchange



**2004**  
Acquisition of Champagne house Chateau Malakoff with 60ha of grand cru land

**2004**  
Michel Fauconnet is appointed as Champagne Laurent-Perrier's third cellar master



**2005**  
Bernard de Nonancourt retires and becomes honorary chairman and member of the supervisory board

**2010**  
Bernard de Nonancourt dies aged 90



**2012**  
The house of Laurent-Perrier celebrates its bicentenary with the launch of a limited-edition Grand Siècle Reserve