

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes Magazine

Q&A: Frédéric Panaïotis, Ruinart's Cellar Master, On The Champagne House's Collaborations With Artists

Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle

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I sit down with Frédéric Panaïotis to discuss Ruinart's longstanding artist collaborations.

Every year, Ruinart collaborates with artists. How does meeting an artist like David Shrigley, for instance, inspire you? It's always a great pleasure to work with artists because in a way, we share the same sensitivity. We share a lot of curiosity as well. We have to have those qualities for our jobs, but we have differences. I think what I like to see in David Shrigley is his eyes and his hands. This always mesmerizes me how he can capture things and reproduce that, but we have different skills. The difference is that artists have carte blanche. With my team, we have to reproduce the Ruinart style every year with ingredients that can be very different from one vintage to another, so the Chardonnay might not taste the same, yet you want to drink pretty much the same Blanc de Blancs year in, year out.

How did you relate to David Shrigley's artworks?

I was extremely surprised by how much he grasped about the making of champagne, including climate change which is obviously in many of the drawings. Even micro-organisms are in there; I was quite surprised to see this, so it's really extremely relevant and it's also inspirational for us. It pushes us to do even better for us and for the planet, so it's good.

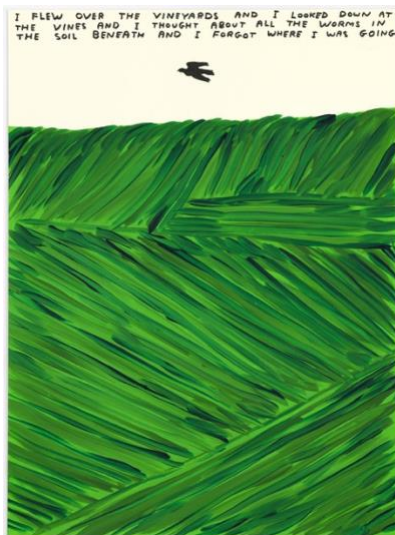


Image: Drawing by David Shrigley for Ruinart/ Photo courtesy of Todd-White Art Photography

Can you talk about sustainability at Ruinart?

Obviously, we work with nature and so it's not new to us. We've seen changes since even the '90s. I'll give you a few examples. Before 2003, we harvested once in August and this was in 1893, but since 2003, it has happened five times, so that's a sign and it's not only in Champagne. If you go to Bordeaux or Alsace, they have the same issues. We've been working a lot in Champagne to have minimum impact on the environment, and this needs to be a global approach. It can be done in the vineyard, which obviously we have the highest certification in terms of sustainability in our vineyards. But on the production site where we bottle, where we age the wine, where we disgorge and label them, we recycle 99.8% of all waste, and I think this is quite remarkable. I think there are very few companies in the world that can have that number, and we are expecting to reach 100. And more recently because packaging is also a very big issue, you may have seen that we have this sort of very disruptive packaging called "second skin", which wraps and protects our beautiful Blanc de Blancs bottles, and not only the Blanc de Blancs bottles, by the way. Ultimately, they will replace the gift boxes and this means 60% less in terms of carbon footprint. With the packaging, there is fully the possibility to recycle and that way it's nine times less than a gift box. Everything we develop and everything we do from the vineyards to the wine to the packaging, we have this sustainable element in all that.

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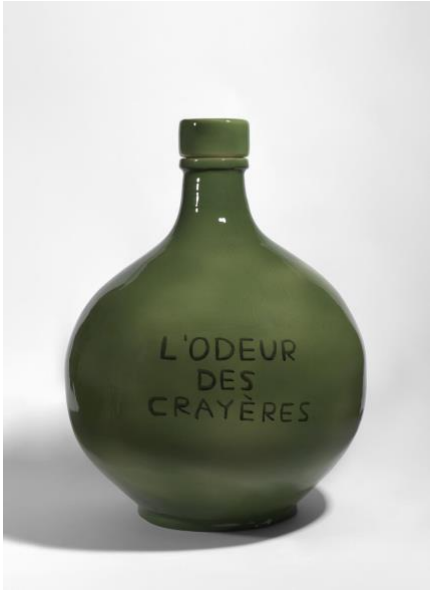


Image: A David Shrigley ceramic sculpture for Ruinart/ Photo courtesy of Todd-White Art Photography

You welcomed David Shrigley for several tastings in Reims. How was it to interact with an artist and what kind of message did you try to share?

I always like to share the behind the scenes of how we create champagne, how we create Ruinart today. It is quite elegant, pure, refined, in a way easy to approach, a bit like David's art in a way, but behind the simplicity, there's quite a lot of complexity.

What's unconventional about making wine at Ruinart?

I guess that most people think that Ruinart is only about Chardonnay and only about Blanc de Blancs, but rosé is in a way our first baby because we were making the first rosé in 1764. I like to give this information because I'm pretty sure even if we don't have the archives to prove it, I'm pretty sure it was a mistake, like something broke down, the cellar master of the time was drunk or tired or both, and the juice connected with the skin and they ended up with

a pink juice and a pink wine. At the time, the wine that was sought after was white, not rosé, so they had to find something to do with it and Ruinart is one of the most important producers of rosé champagne today. I would say that's pretty unconventional, but maybe the most unconventional wine is not yet released.