

MARIEHAMN JOURNAL

Buried Treasure in Baltic Brings Back Vintage Taste

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

MARIEHAMN, Finland — When Christian Ekstrom, a local diver, finally got to explore a sunken two-masted schooner he had known about for years, he found bottles, lots of bottles, so he brought one to the surface.

"I said, 'Let's taste some sea water,'" he said with a laugh, over coffee recently. "So I tasted it straight from the bottle. It was then that I noticed, 'This is not sea water.'"

Mr. Ekstrom, 31, a compact man with a shock of blond hair, brought the bottle to experts in this town of 11,000 on Aland Island, which lies midway between Finland and Sweden, then to others in Sweden and finally in France.

Though the bottle had no label, burned into the cork were markings that made clear it was a bottle of Juglar, a premium French Champagne that ceased to be sold under that name after 1830, when it was renamed Jacquesson, for another of the winery's owners. It remains one of the

smaller but finer producers of French Champagnes.

"You could still see the bubbles, and see how clear it was," Mr. Ekstrom said.

The 75-foot wreck, in 160 feet of water, contained other cargo as well: crates filled with grapes, long withered; carpets; coffee beans; spices including white and black pepper and coriander, and four bottles of beer.

Not including the bottle Mr. Ekstrom swigged from, the divers soon discovered a cargo that numbered 172 bottles of Champagne.

Four were broken, but 168 others were intact, and in early August they were hoisted to dry land and stored in Mariehamn. The Baltic Sea floor proved an ideal wine cellar, with 40 degree temperatures, total darkness and enough pressure to keep the corks in.

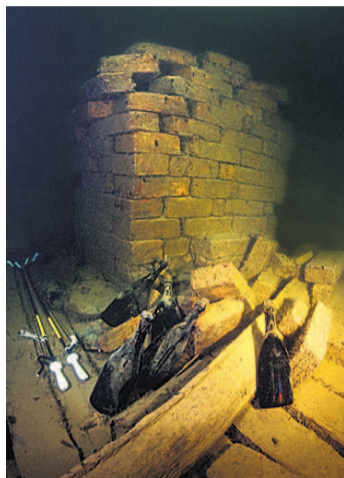
Getting help in recognizing the find was not easy. "It was quite tricky to get someone to listen," Mr. Ekstrom said. When he contacted Veuve Clicquot, one of the largest French Champagne houses, in search of expertise, a voice on the phone said, "It's a fantastic story, but I have to ask you, 'Where is Aland?'"

Gradually, word got out to the Champagne world, and this November experts from abroad, including from Jacquesson and Veuve Clicquot, were invited to Aland (pronounced AH-lahnd) to replace the crumbling corks in 10 bottles and for a tasting. In the meantime, the Champagne had become the property of the local government, which lays legal claim to anything found in undersea wrecks that is more than 100 years old.

The first three bottles recorked were Juglar, but on the bottom of the fourth cork were the star and anchor of Veuve Clicquot. The star represents a comet that crossed the skies of Champagne



ABOVE, AUGUSTO MENDES/GOVERNMENT OF THE ALAND ISLANDS; BELOW, ALEX DAWSON/GOVERNMENT OF THE ALAND ISLANDS
In Mariehamn, François Hautekeur, a Veuve Clicquot winemaker, recently uncorked a bottle found in a shipwreck, below, at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, which proved an ideal wine cellar.



in 1811 and supposedly caused fabulous vintages. "I thought, 'Madame Clicquot is watching us,'" Mr. Ekstrom said.

At another recorking, further bottles of Veuve Clicquot appeared. François Hautekeur, a Veuve Clicquot winemaker who attended, pointed to the name Werle branded into the bottom of the cork, referring to Édouard Werle, the man who in 1830 as-

sumed much of the business from the Widow Clicquot, actually Barbe Nicole Clicquot, née Ponsardin, who inherited the company from her husband in 1805 and ran it until her death. "So it is later than 1831," Mr. Hautekeur said.

Jean-Hervé Chiquet, whose family now owns and operates Jacquesson, the winery that absorbed Juglar, said that the shape of the bottles and the use of the name Juglar indicated the Champagne was from the late 1820s, and may have been stored for some time before it was shipped.

He was "overcome with emotion," he said, when he first tasted the Champagne at the recorking in November.

"There was a powerful but agreeable aroma, notes of dried fruit and tobacco, and a striking acidity," Mr. Chiquet said by telephone. The oldest Champagne in Jacquesson's inventory is from 1915, he said.

The Champagne was probably en route to the court of Czar Alexander II in St. Petersburg when the wooden cargo vessel sank. Though the exact age of the

Champagne is not yet known, it goes up against tough competition in the oldest Champagne category.

The Champagne house Perrier-Jouët claims that its vintage of 1825 is the oldest recorded Champagne in existence. Mr. Hautekeur said Veuve Clicquot's oldest drinkable bottle was from 1904.

Richard Juhlin, a Swedish author of numerous books about Champagne, said he noted "great variations" in the first 10 bottles tasted, "from seawater to great stuff." After overseeing the recorking, he said both Juglar and Veuve Clicquot "had in common a mature aroma, almost of cow cheese, Brie or Vacherin, almost too strong," combined with a "liqueur-like sweetness." Of the two Champagnes, he found the Juglar, "a little more intense, bigger, the French would say, 'rustique,'" but said they both compared favorably to some of the best Champagnes today.

Not much goes on this collection of islands that belongs to Finland but whose inhabitants speak Swedish, so the residents

are understandably hoping the Champagne will put Mariehamn on the map. The government wants to auction the bottles over time; there are also, somewhat inexplicably, plans to blend some of it with modern Champagne and sell it in local restaurants and liquor stores.

"We see events and different possibilities with Champagne for small companies and restaurants," said Britt Lundberg, responsible for culture, and hence for Champagne, in the local government. Asked whether Veuve Clicquot and Jacquesson would get some of the antique bubbly, Ms. Lundberg replied, "Not get, but they'll have the possibility to buy."

Some experts, like Mr. Juhlin, have suggested that the bottles could fetch as much as \$70,000 each at auction. The previous record price was \$21,200 paid for a 1928 Krug auctioned last year in Hong Kong.

"There is obviously a market and collectors," said Bjorn Haggblom, the government spokesman. "You have London, New York, Hong Kong — why not Mariehamn?"

Some islanders, like Mr. Ekstrom, wish less were auctioned and more kept on the island. "There's too much business in it, you're losing the history," he said. "You could create a food event, serve it with a meal and tell the story of the Baltic Sea. Even if you got 3 million euros," about \$4 million, from an auction, "that's nothing." As part-owner of the island's only beer brewery, he would like to brew a special beer if the yeast in the beer bottles proves to be alive, as experts expect.

Others approve of an auction. "I think it's a waste to keep it on the island, people drink it maybe at New Year's," said Patrik Helander, 34, a salesman in a hunting and fishing store. Beer, he added, was "more my cup."

Some said the auction proceeds should go to clean up the notoriously polluted Baltic. "The Baltic Sea preserved the Champagne," said Henri Pettersson, 18, a high school student. "That would say thank you."



The find was hoisted to land and stored in Mariehamn.

Fire Breaks Out in Top Floors of Bangladesh Garment Factory, Killing at Least 20

By JULFIKAR ALI MANIK and VIKAS BAJAJ

DHAKA, Bangladesh — A fire at a garment factory north of Dhaka, the capital, killed at least 20 people and injured dozens on Tuesday, in the latest blow to the country's largest industry.

The fire at a 10-story factory in the Ashulia industrial area, about 16 miles from the capital, started on the ninth floor around lunchtime, when most of the workers were outside. Local reporters who had canvassed hospitals said at least 24 people had been killed. Factory officials said they knew of about 20 deaths.

About 5,000 people worked in the building, producing pants for customers in the United States and Europe, said Delwar Hussain, a deputy managing director at the Ha-Meem Group, which owns the factory. Fire officials were still fighting the fire, which

spread to the top floor, into the evening as people gathered at the compound to look for relatives.

It was not immediately clear which Western retailers were supplied by the factory. Garment factories employ about three million Bangladeshis, most of them women, to make clothes for stores like Wal-Mart and H & M.

Just days ago, three people were killed in labor protests. Workers have said they were protesting because some factories had not carried out a government-mandated 80 percent increase in the minimum wage, to 3,000 taka a month or about \$43.

It was unclear what had caused the fire at the Ha-Meem factory and whether it was related to the labor unrest. Mr. Hussain said that the company suspected an electrical short circuit, but that investigators from the government and the garment industry association were still working to establish the cause.

Piles of clothes in garment factories are easily combustible.

Fires can be very deadly because some factory owners lock exits to prevent workers from leaving their machines. Mr. Hussain said the doors at the company's factory had not been locked.

International labor groups have criticized the safety of Bangladesh's garment factories. A factory fire outside Dhaka in February killed more than 20 people.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said it would pay the families of workers killed in the Ha-Meem fire 100,000 taka (about \$1,400), and the company has promised to pay another 100,000 taka.

Mr. Hussain said the company hoped to reopen the first eight floors of the factory as early as Tuesday because they did not appear to be damaged. He said the company expected to meet all pending orders. The ninth floor was used as a finishing area where workers prepared shipments, and the 10th floor housed a dining hall, he said.



Workers pointed to a man at a window of a burning factory in Ashulia, Bangladesh, on Tuesday.

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