



# THE SPARKLE IN LUXEMBOURG'S CROWN

TEXT: Rajiv Singhal PHOTOS: Bernard Massard & Embassy of Luxembourg in New Delhi

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is a constitutional monarchy and is the only sovereign territory in the world that remains a Grand Duchy. The origins of the House of Luxembourg can be traced back to the *Lucilinburhuc* Castle from the 10th Century. In Luxembourg's Golden Ages in the 14th Century, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV was crowned in Rome and reigned in Prague.





Château de Schengen



The Romans brought grapes to Luxembourg 20 centuries ago, because it was easier than bringing wine all the way north. This history is exemplified in the 1342 hectares of vineyards along the steep banks of the Moselle river – the geographical divide between Luxembourg and Germany – that are currently notified in the modern day financial nerve-centre of the world.

Ambassador of Luxembourg to India, H.E. Jean-Claude Kugener, announced that “Luxembourg has the brighter side of Mosel with ample sunshine” as he welcomed Caves Bernard-Massard, the century old sparkling wine producer and official wine supplier to the Grand Ducal Court of Luxembourg since 1931. Antoine Clasen, the fifth generation to lead this family wine business, was on his maiden visit to India – “it surely won’t be my last” – and introduced me to his award-winning wines.

### AN ENTREPRENEUR'S DREAM

A century ago, the fabled Luxembourgish entrepreneurial spirit made Jean Bernard, a reputed oenologist and cellar master at prestigious houses in Champagne, itch to return to his homeland to realise his dream to produce quality sparkling wines

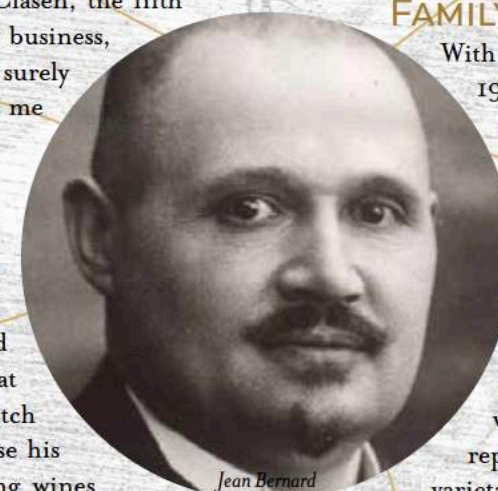
with the knowledge he had acquired. The first world war over, Jean Bernard returned to Luxembourg. In 1921, he had success in founding “Caves Bernard-Massard” – Massard being his wife’s name – with help from his friends. Bernard Clasen, a lawyer and wine enthusiast, and Max Lambert, a stalwart of the Luxembourg financial world, became key shareholders of the company.

On offer, were sparkling wines – “Vin Champenoise” which changed to “Méthode Champenoise” and in 1991, under protection of Geographical Indications, was forced by authorities to change again to “Méthode Traditionelle, Crémant de Luxembourg”.

### FAMILY DRIVEN

With the sudden death of Jean Bernard in 1923, the Clasen family had to look after the business.

The decree to supply to the Royal Court came at a time of deep economic crisis. In 1933, an important decision was taken so that the company could continue to produce these luxurious wines sustainably. The classic champagne varietals in the blends were partly replaced with the extensively homegrown varietals – Riesling and Pinot Blanc.



Jean Bernard





## MODERN PRODUCTION

It all starts in the vineyards. Bernard-Massard's owned vineyards are across a variety of terroirs in Schengen and between Grevenmacher (where the company is headquartered) and Wormeldange. In Luxembourg, Bernard-Massard own 38 hectares of vineyards — 22 hectares in Clos des Rochers and 15.5 hectares in Chateau de Schengen.

These vineyards along the Moselle are south and south-east facing with calcareous soils in the north and clay in the south. Considering how far up north they are, the south facing vineyards are just adequately sun-exposed. The appellation allows nine grape varieties — Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Auxerrois, Gewürztraminer, Rivaner (Müller-Thurgau), and Elbling. Antoine exuded

confidence that, "this exceptional terroir is ideal for the production of outstanding fresh, fruity sparkling and still wines." Under the leadership of Joseph Clasen, the blends with indigenous varieties saw a high but unfortunately, not for long. The winery was destroyed in the second world war and had to be rebuilt from scratch — Joseph's sons, Andre and Carlos, took the restructuring forward and took charge to complete the state-of-the-art winery and re-capture the main markets in Luxembourg and Belgium.

Hubert, Carlos' son, joined in 1979, and worked to reposition Bernard-Massard as a drink for all occasions. In 1988, Hubert envisioned the concept of Charta wines which set rules and standards to better wines under the Domaine de Tradition label. In 2000, Caves Bernard-Massard became an ISO 9001 certified company.

It was in 2011 that Antoine, Hubert's son, took the decision to join the family business. Antoine was very mindful of the family stakeholders. "The company's heritage is my inheritance. I have an obligation to grow the family business and secure it for the next generations. I keep the 20 members of my family who have a stake in the company abreast of our performance."

Even if a typical Bernard-Massard customer doesn't care about the provenance of the grapes, the company







has leveraged their small domains, and take a vigneron approach to focus only on the terroir. Antoine was proud, "it's our chance of living two lives."

There are currently 62 wine producers in Luxembourg, and with 3.9 million bottles annually, Caves Bernard-Massard is the largest private producer of wines – mainly sparkling, with some small quantities of still wines.

Even in this day of modernization, their 100 year old heritage has been protected – everything is done by hand. Antoine elaborated that, "so that our quality levels stayed superior to other vintners in Luxembourg, considerable amount of investments were made over the years as Bernard-Massard expanded."

### NEW MAN IN CHARGE

Antoine Clasen studied Finance and Economics and discovered that a career in consulting was not for him. "I needed the real stuff. I have to touch the grapes and the earth... just be in the vineyard," Antoine told us. Looking back, he doesn't regret his decision. "I was able to use my finance background to raise our prices!"

Antoine summarised his feelings. "Bernard-Massard is more than a company for us, it's a part of family. I don't know of anyone from the family who didn't work there – we played there, we grew up there. Even if our name isn't on the company, the company is in our DNA."

Inspired by Shakespeare, I asked Antoine what's in a



name? Did the Clasen's ever think of rebranding Bernard-Massard? "No. You can't put ego before business. After a 100 years, the brand is too well-known. It could've been done, at best, some few years after my ancestors took over. But, at the end of World War II everything French-sounding was warmly embraced in Luxembourg. Bernard-Massard sounded so much better than our name!"

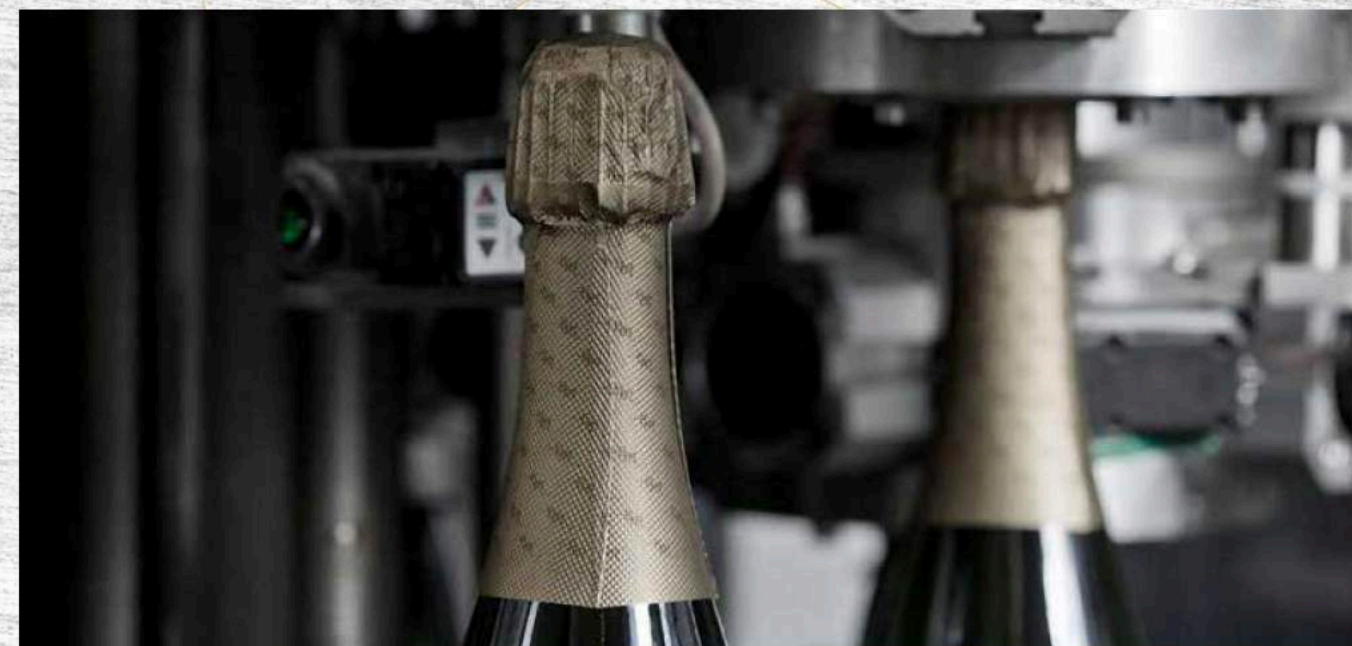
Antoine spelt out what made Bernard-Massard the brand that it is. "Most important, without any doubt, the excellent product. The appealing look. And the great team, especially in foreign markets."

"I didn't want to revolutionise everything, when I took over." Antoine found the founder's philosophy to

to promote the Grand Duchy in other countries – you could call it nation branding."

"However, I wanted to bring marketing up with the times. Adopting trendier digital campaigns on social media platforms, the focus was more on reaching out to our customers directly. In the present global dot com boom, people expect accessibility and transparency and digital is almost the only way to stay ahead of the curve."

The look went through a makeover – the traditional, gold and arabesque labels yielded to something that was minimalist, visually appealing, elegant and sleeker. The team was surprised that except in a few markets, customers hardly noticed.



expand in unexplored markets and to deploy traditional viticultural and vinification methods whilst keeping quality at the heart of their mission very relevant.

Pushing the frontiers in new export markets, Antoine was challenged by the lack of awareness of wines of Luxembourg and the poor reputation that they have acquired in key neighbouring markets. In some markets, he's dealing with complacency, "Bernard Massard has been there forever, we know them." He is also focussed on the home market, where lower-priced sparklers like Prosecco and Cava were beginning to gain popularity, and where many people were not really aware about his wines!

Always looking out to push his company (and himself), Antoine succeeded in getting Bernard-Massard wines noticed by sparkling wine and champagne giants in export markets. "It is my obligation towards my motherland to flaunt the diversity and quality of Luxembourg wines and

### WEDDED TO WORK

I asked Antoine what a typical day was like? He laughed, "luckily, I don't have one. I rise early and head to the winery to say hello to all the people who work at the company – for me, knowing what and how everyone is doing is very important. I do vineyard visits twice a week, depending on activities there. When I get to the office, I am swamped by at least 10,000 emails every day! It's a plague, but I like to respond promptly."

Meeting clients for lunch or dinner or even both becomes challenging at times. "I get very little time with my girlfriend", Antoine lamented. He is on the board of the appellation AOP and, with the help of the Luxembourg government, is involved in promoting Wines of Luxembourg around the world. "It really helps when you have Ambassador's like H.E. Kugener in new target markets – they are just so invaluable." He was extremely grateful.





L-R: H.E. Jean-Claude Kugener, Antoine Clasen, Mme Pascale Kugener-Barbier Saint Hilaire



## THE NEXT DECADE

Bernard-Massard will need to increase production to meet growing demand. Acquiring more vineyards remains on the agenda, but Antoine will have to be clever with the ever-growing prices of prized ones and the emotional connect that many build with their ancestral lands. "I am lucky that I can continue to draw on my father's advice."

Antoine would like organic wine to be a possible addition to Bernard-Massard's portfolio. "Nature is our main tool and we have to respect it in order to be able to live." Even if no chemical fertilizers (except some specific fungicides) have been used by Bernard-Massard, the landscape of organic is fast changing and there is still a lot to do.

Antoine Clasen is tackling a number of challenges – he thinks the biggest is not to become old fashioned. In its centenary, Antoine would like to portray Bernard-Massard as a forward-looking company with a wealth of heritage. "Accepting and adapting to the changes that come along with the swift passing of time is always a boon."

## BETTING ON INDIA

The key focus for Bernard-Massard will be on tapping the potential in new markets, like India, Antoine announced. "It's not an easy walk in the park in India, as nobody knows who we are, what we are, why we are here and where we are from! Indians don't drink a lot of Champagne like the rest of the world does. If the market explodes (very unlikely),

Champagne alone will not be able to meet the demand."

Antoine was optimistic that high quality sparkling wines, like his, can fit in. "My Crémant is a first alternative to champagne – as is my experience in some markets – and I'd like to be there early and ready." He was struck by the scale and realised that while India is different – very different – it is a high potential market, even if a very slow mover. "You can't fall asleep; you have to always have your eyes and ears open."

## A MEMORABLE REPAST

H.E. Kugener and his lovely wife Mme Pascale Kugener-Barbier Saint Hilaire hosted the wine dinner to welcome Antoine Clasen of Bernard-Massard and his wines at the Residence of Luxembourg in New Delhi.

It is a picture-perfect setting with stunning twilight views of illuminated Safdarjung Tomb on one side and a towering rare Amar Nath Sehgal tapestry on the other and the warmth and most generous hospitality of the first couple of Luxembourg in India in between. The hosts' attention to even the minutest details had a hugely pampering effect on me.

Fine tableware crested with the Luxembourg coat of arms is laid out on the table, along with Christofle silverware, and individually hand-calligraphed menus by the host couple. The Luxembourg crest had been hand-embroidered on the napkins by Indian artisans. The right shade of blue

that represents the Luxembourg flag decorated the collars and cuffs of the staff uniforms – even His Excellency's tie matches. A range of porcelainware from Villeroy & Boch (revived fond memories of how I had launched the brand in India) including tureens from the old classic Vieux Luxembourg collection accentuated every nook.

Antoine presented a range of Bernard-Massard wines from Luxembourg that are now available in India through Amit Aggarwal of Hema Connoisseur.

The guests were welcomed with the Selection Brut Methode Traditionelle. Antoine shared excellent insights into the wines – Château de Schengen Riesling 2017, Millésimé Brut Crémant de Luxembourg 2015 and the Cuvée de L'Ecusson Pinot Noir Rosé – which had been paired with a very well curated delectable meal. H.E. Kugener shared nuggets of information about the Grand Duchy. It was an evening that one hoped wouldn't end. ✨

*A big thank you from FINE India to H.E. Kugener for entrusting the first-ever presentation of the wines from Luxembourg in India to us – we have built the market for wine in India since 1997 and can safely say that we comprehend it the best.*



### CUVÉE SÉLECTION BRUT

Made by the Méthode Traditionelle with a minimum of one-year ageing. The cuvée is the same blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc from 1921. Light yellow hue. Floral and slightly buttery nose. Subdued acidity. Packed with citrus flavours and green apples. Fresh, light and elegant.

### CRÉMANT DE LUXEMBOURG MILLÉSIMÉ BRUT 2015

This blend of Pinot Blanc and Riesling is only produced in exceptional vintages. Sustainable viticulture is complemented with a minimum of three years ageing. Golden appearance with fine effervescence. Creamy and biscuity, the full-bodied concentration and overloaded flavour profile has an engaging minerally finish. Vinous and well rounded.

### CHÂTEAU DE SCHENGEN RIESLING 2017

A delicate balance has been struck between the opulent fruit and well-integrated acidity in this storied Riesling – Victor Hugo sketch of the castle is on the label. Pale yellow-green appearance. Floral and spicy nose with a whiff of mint. Abounds in citrusy flavours with hints of salinity. Very smooth and satisfying.

### CUVÉE DE L'ECUSSON ROSÉ

A traditional blanc de noirs elaborated from Pinot Noir by maceration and ageing over two years. Brilliant, light salmon pink colour. Seductive nose of berries. Lively, yet balanced, palate with a lingering fleshy finish. Cuvée de l'Ecusson is the flagship that was created for the 50th Anniversary of Bernard-Massard. The Rosé variant came later.