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World's oldest bubbly sells for \$73k

By Richard Vines
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Two bottles of the world's oldest champagne, which spent about 170 years at the bottom of the ocean, sold for 54,000 euros (\$73,700) at an auction in Finland on Friday.

The second lot, containing vintage Veuve, fetched 30,000 euros, which the auction house - New York-based wine specialist Acker Merrall & Condit - said was the most paid for a bottle.

"The important thing for this event is that this was a world record for an auction," Richard Juhlin, an authority on champagne, said in an interview after the event. "I'm a little surprised the bidding didn't go higher. If you had speculators bidding against each other, it could have sky rocketed."

Collectors have been paying higher prices for champagne, especially for prized vintages, said Juhlin, who had forecast that the bottles might fetch 100,000 euros, 10 times the minimum price of 10,000 euros. Bidders applauded at the Veuve price, given by the same Singapore-based internet bidder who minutes before gave 24,000 euros for a bottle of Juglar.

The bottles were sold in Mariehamn, capital of Aaland, a Finnish-controlled archipelago of 6,500 islands in the Baltic Sea, where divers discovered the precious cargo in a previously unknown shipwreck.

Madame Clicquot

"This is truly a historic event," Stephane Baschiera, president of Veuve Clicquot, said in a statement before the sale. "We have worked closely with the government of Aaland since the discovery of the shipwreck to help salvage and protect the precious wines, which we know now were tasted by Madame Clicquot herself."

The auctioneer didn't charge a premium, Truly Hardy, Acker Merrall's director of auction operations, said at the event in the Culture and Congress House Alandica.

About 145 bottles were found intact, including Veuve Clicquot, Heidsieck - today made by Vranken-Pommery Monopole - and Juglar, which became part of Jacquesson. Veuve also offered 15 rare bottles from its own cellars and was a partner in the sale.

Acker Merrall said the top price, equivalent to \$40,500, beat the \$39,850 paid for a bottle of 1959 Dom Perignon Rose in April 2008.

Fresh fizz

Two bottles were cracked open in November and I got to taste the Juglar, which was remarkably fresh. The fizz had almost

gone and it was too sweet for today's palate, yet it retained a distinctive smell of orange and raisins, like a Christmas cake. It might still be served as a dessert wine. The Veuve was lighter and more floral, with layers of complexity.

The original destination of the champagne isn't known. Anders Naasman, one of the divers, said it may have been headed for the tsar's court in St. Petersburg. It was well preserved because it lay horizontally, under pressure, at a low temperature in the dark, 50 meters (55 yards) below the surface.

The authorities in Aaland, an Swedish-speaking region, say the proceeds of the sale will go to a good cause, such as environmental measures to improve the quality of the water in the seas around Aaland, whose main industries are shipping, trade, banking, farming and food. About 65 of the islands are inhabited, with 11,000 people living in Mariehamn, the archipelago's only town, founded in 1861.

The oldest Veuve Clicquot previously held by the champagne house dates back to 1893, said Francois Hautekeur, a winemaker with Veuve, who is assisting with preserving the champagne.

World's oldest beer

While the exact age isn't yet known, marine archaeologists estimate the twin-masted schooner on which the bottles were found is from the second quarter of the 19th century. Plates on board were manufactured by Rorstrand porcelain factory between 1780 and 1830.

When one of the champagne bottles was brought to the surface, the pressure change caused the cork to pop. One diver took a swig from the bottle expecting it to taste of seawater and realised that it was good. The team drank some from plastic beakers, resealed it and took it to a local sommelier, Ella Grussner Cromwell-Morgan, to taste the next day.

Veuve Clicquot is made by Paris-based LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton SA, the world's largest maker of luxury goods.

The divers also discovered bottles of the world's oldest beer. That is being analysed by the VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, with a view to recreating the original recipe for modern industrial production. VTT is studying what microbes - for example, yeast or lactic acid bacteria - remain in the beer. It will use chemical analyses to determine what kind of raw materials were used in the brewing of the beer.