

ROBERSON WINE FINE WINE TASTINGS

INTRODUCTION TO SERIOUS CHAMPAGNE

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CHAMPAGNE THE HISTORY

Champagne. The world's benchmark sparkling wine brings with it connotations of celebration, exclusivity and luxury, reinforced by a long history of royal patronage, foreign imitators and legions of connoisseurs that will be seen drinking little else.

The history of wine making in the region stretches right back to biblical times, although it was in 496 that Reims (and thus the Champagne region) played host to an event that would shape its future for millennia to come. The Frankish warlord Clovis had declared himself King of the land around Reims and was facing invasion by the Gothic army from the north. On the eve of the battle Clovis (who was a Pagan) was persuaded to pray to the Christian God for protection in the battle and he promised to convert to Christianity if his forces were victorious. They won a historic battle, so on Christmas day of that year Clovis was baptized by the Bishop of Reims. This became a tradition for Frankish Kings and 37 of his successors came to Reims for their coronations (the last was in 1825), in the process making Champagne a wine of royal celebration.

So that is where the tradition of celebration comes from, but what about the bubbles? There are some respected commentators that claim it was the English that made Champagne sparkle, by applying a technique they had been using for cider production to the barrels of Champagne wine that were regularly shipped to England. There are others that claim it was Pierre (or 'Dom') Perignon, the Benedictine monk that was cellar master at the Abbey of Hautvillers and one of the most important figures in the development of wine in the region. More likely is the assertion that due to the cold climate and late picking of grapes in Champagne, fermentations would seldom be finished before the cold weather put the wine to sleep for the winter. When the wines awoke in the spring they would restart the fermentation process, triggering the release of CO₂ and thus giving the wines a natural prickle that became part of its personality. Once technological development had enabled the Champenois to control and promote this process, they were able to make it the defining feature of their wine. Regardless of whether Dom Perignon was responsible for making Champagne sparkle, he certainly introduced other advances that remain to this day. He introduced glass bottles that were made from stronger, English glass and were able to withstand the pressure that built up during the secondary fermentation. He invented the 'Coquard Press' and used it to make white wine from red grapes. He mastered the art of making clean, bright and clear wines and pioneered the idea of blending together parcels from across the region in order to make the finished wine more than the sum of its parts.

Although many producers were making Champagne in a sparkling style by the early 1700s (Dom P died in 1715), there were many of the old guard in the region that continued to make the wine in a still fashion, calling the bubbly incarnation 'the Devil's wine'. This sort of talk was all the encouragement that Louis XV's decadent Regency court needed and they embraced sparkling Champagne wholeheartedly, removing many of the restrictions that had previously made it difficult to trade (such as a ban on selling wine in bottle). This change in attitude, allied to the marketing that came from royal patronage, led to a thriving trade in the region's wines and in 1729 the house of Ruinart was established - Champagne's original commercial Champagne producer. The industry quickly established itself as an international force, with the Napoleonic forces followed wherever they went by ambitious export managers from one of the numerous Champagne houses that were founded in the 18th and 19th centuries. When the French were beaten at the battle of Waterloo, Moët & Chandon were keen to hand over the French army's supply of his wine in the hope that the Russian's may develop a taste for it. They did, and Champagne became the wine of choice for the Russian court. Years later Louis Roederer would develop a super sweet cuvée called Cristal especially for the Tsar and his family.

It was the British market that would become the most important from an export sales perspective, but the English would also come to dictate a development in the style of the wines. Until the mid 1800s, the majority of Champagne was sweet, either in its still or sparkling form. The production process continued to be perfected, with advances like Remuage (thanks to the cellar master at Veuve Clicquot) which enabled removal of the yeast from bottles so that they didn't re-ferment and explode. The liqueur expedition also began to be toned down in sweetness, as the English promoted the idea of a wine that wasn't solely for drinking with dessert. The drier, Brut style of Champagne really caught on when Madame Pommery insisted on making her 1874 in the style. It captured the imagination of Victorian Britain and Pommery became the label of choice for London's Champagne cogniscenti. While some houses continued to make sweet Champagnes, the majority moved to follow Pommery's lead and before long the drier style that we are familiar with today had become the default method of Champagne production.

THE PLACE CHAMPAGNE

As with the other classic wine regions that have such a rich history, the basis for all of it is the intrinsic quality of the product. With Champagne, like Bordeaux and Burgundy (not to mention the Mosel, Piedmont, Tokaji etc), that quality comes from the land on which the vines are planted and the identification of which grape varieties respond best to the different terroir to be found around the region. There is a wide variety of soil types in Champagne, but nearly all of the best share a chalky subsoil that drains very well and infuses the grapes with an intense minerality and freshness. There are differences between the numerous types of chalk, with some (like Belemnite) that are excellent for Chardonnay and others (with higher sandstone content) that work equally well for Pinot Noir. There are also places that are rich in the Kimmeridge clay found in Sancerre and Chablis, where both varieties make exuberant, fruity wines that maintain a core of minerality. It is the presence of this chalk rich sub soil in the south of England that has prompted a number of Champagne houses to purchase land there.

The Champagne region can be divided into four sub regions, each renowned for the production of certain styles of wine. The Montagne de Reims (famous for excellent Pinot Noir), Cote des Blancs (home of Champagne's best Chardonnay) the Vallée de Marne (excellent for both red varietals Pinots Noir and Meunier) and the Cotes de Bar (considered, perhaps unfairly, the 'workhorse' region). Within the various sub-regions there is a classification (known as the *Echelle des Crus* - ladder of growths) that grades the various villages and their wines. At the top of this pile are 17 Grand Crus, followed by 43 villages at 1er Cru and then the lesser villages (many of which are in the Aube) come in below this on the scale. The villages deemed worthy of Grand Cru status are: Ambonnay, Beaumont-sur-Vesle, Bouzy, Louvois, Mailly, Puisieulx, Sillery, Verzenay and Verzy in the Montagne de Reims. Ay and Tours-sur-Marne in the Vallée de Marne and Avize, Chouilly, Cramant, Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger and Oiry on the Cote de Blancs.

CHAMPAGNE THE METHOD

PRESSING

On arrival into the winery, the grapes are pressed in a variety of different styles of press, depending on the nature of the producer. Smaller, artisanal houses may use traditional wooden vertical presses, while more modern houses that produce large volumes are more likely to use stainless steel pneumatic presses. The fruit is loaded in whole bunches and gently pressed, giving a first batch of juice (about 80% of the 2550 litre total) referred to as the *cuvée*. Subsequent pressings are lower in quality, with more bitter tannins extracted as the fruit has to be worked harder.

DEBOURBAGE & FIRST FERMENTATION

The pressed juice, or must as it is known, is run off into stainless steel vats (or in some cases, into barrel) where it settles and clarifies before undergoing the first fermentation, where the sugars are turned into alcohol. Nowadays, this normally takes several weeks and is fully temperature controlled, but in days gone by it could often take much longer when temperatures were very low during cold vintages. Following the alcoholic fermentation the wine will undergo its malolactic fermentation, although certain houses (and in certain vintages) may block some or all of the malo in order to maintain more crispness and acidity in the wine.

BLENDING

The previous stage creates the base wines known as *Vins Clairs* or base wines, most of which will then be bottled and put into storage for maturation in the network of cellars under the surface of the entire region. Some of these base wines are used to assemble the non-vintage blend (from a number of vintages) and the best ones will go into a single vintage *cuvée* or prestige bottling depending on the range offered by the house. At some point, a number of these will be pulled out by the Chef de Cave and assembled into that year's production of the various wines. The art of this blending cannot be underestimated, as there can be over 300 base wines to select from in order to find the right balance and blend to continue the style of the house and keep consistency of taste from the years before. In addition to blending from the different plots of vines and various vintages stocked in the cellar, it is vital to use the different grape varieties to create a wine with the correct balance. Although the big three (Meunier, Noir and Chardonnay) are 99.08% of plantings today, the appellation laws allow for the use of 9 grapes.

- * Pinot Noir
- * Pinot Meunier
- * Chardonnay
- * Pinot Blanc
- * Arbanne
- * Petit Meslier
- * Pinot Gris (Fromenteau)
- * Pinot de Juillet
- * Pinot Rosé

BOTTLING, SECOND FERMENTATION & AGEING IN BOTTLE

Once the final blend for each wine has been decided and the different base wines have been combined in tank, the wine is drawn off into bottles and the *liqueur de tirage* is added. This is a blend of grape must, sugar and yeast that is added before the bottles are sealed with cork or crown caps. The bottles are then taken to the cellars for maturation and are stored for a minimum of 16 months (if NV) or 3 years (if single vintage) as the appellation law stipulates. During this time the yeasts and sugar will activate a second fermentation and much of the *liqueur* will dissolve into the wine creating the atmospheric pressure that gives the wine its fizz. The yeast cells will continue to interact with the wine (through the process of autolysis) and infuse it with the biscuity, bready richness that is a key part of Champagne's flavour profile.

REMUAGE (RIDDLING)

During the ageing process, the bottles are stored on their sides (*sur lattes*), which leads the yeasts to pass down through the wine and settle on the bottom of the side of the bottle. This deposit needs to be encouraged to slide down into the neck of the bottle so that it can be removed, although it took the cellar master of Veuve Clicquot (Antoine Müller) to develop a technique that made this possible.

First of all, the bottles that have been resting *sur lattes* are moved onto a *pupitre*. Then the process of Remuage (or riddling) begins (see image left), whereby the remueur turns the bottles by a small amount (1/8 of a turn) each day until the previously flat bottles have been positioned almost vertically. This process moves the sediment into the neck of the bottle ready for removal.

DISGORGEMENT

Once the sediment has collected in the neck of the bottle, it is a relatively simple (although important) process to remove it as the pressure build up in the bottle pushes out the offending sludge as soon as the cap is removed. The way that most disgorgement is done nowadays is by freezing the top of the bottle (and therefore the sediment) so that on opening the bottle there is less wine lost during the process. This is known as *dégorgement à la glace* rather than the original *dégorgement à la volée*.

- * Extra Brut: 0-6 g/l
- * Brut: 0-15 g/l
- * Extra Sec: 12-20 g/l
- * Sec: 17-35 g/l
- * Demi-Sec: 35-50 g/l
- * Doux: 50-150 g/l

LIQUEUR D'EXPEDITION (DOSAGE) ADDED

The final stage before the wine is corked and caged ready for distribution, is to refill the bottle to replace what disgorgement has just removed. This is the *liqueur d'expédition* or *dosage*, a solution that consists of wine, sulphur and differing amounts of sugar. The dosage determines the final style of wine, ranging in sweetness from extra-brut through to doux (sweet).

THE STYLES CHAMPAGNE

EXTRA OR ULTRA BRUT / LOW OR ZERO DOSAGE

Following the success of Pommery's Brut release in 1874, Laurent Perrier released an Extra-Brut cuvée 1889 with no added sugar. The style has been available ever since, although with the exception of a period during the 1980s when it became fashionable for a time, Extra-Brut, Zero-Brut or Ultra-Brut (as the style is variously known) has rarely been in too much demand.

Laurent-Perrier's remains the benchmark of this style today, but there are many excellent producers (Gosset and Pierre Gimmonnet amongst them) who practice low-dosage as a matter of course for all of their cuvées.

1: NV 'Ultra Brut'; Laurent Perrier

£48.95

LE GOUT FRANCAIS - AN APERETIF STYLE

Although not an official category, the French preference for bright, fresh and elegant Champagne is often referred to as an 'Aperitif style'. Producers like Taittinger, Ruinart and Laurent Perrier feature a higher proportion of Chardonnay in their blend than most producers (40-45%) and look for a fresh style that is invigorating on the palate.

2: NV 'Brut Réserve'; Taittinger

£32.95

LE GOUT ANGLAIS - A FULL BODIED STYLE

In contrast to the French penchant for brightness, the British have long preferred a fuller bodied style of Champagne, which is typically achieved by using a higher proportion of Pinot Noir in the blend. This style is produced by the likes of Louis Roederer, Pol Roger and Bollinger and these names (particularly Pol & Boll) have long been the favourites of the UK Champagne buyer. At Bollinger, a proportion of the base wine is fermented in barrel and all of the wine is put through the malolactic fermentation. These techniques, along with a high proportion of Pinot Noir & Meunier in the blend (60% & 15%) give the wine a richness and fullness of body that the British market has embraced to a far greater extent than the French.

3: NV 'Special Cuvée'; Bollinger

£42.95

BLANC DES BLANCS

Blanc des Blancs must be made only from the white grape varieties permitted in Champagne production, which renders the majority of cuvées made under this name as 100% Chardonnay. While some Blanc des Blancs will accentuate the freshness and elegance of Chardonnay, there are many that take advantage of the variety's love for wood by fermenting and ageing the wine in oak barrels (often new). This gives the wine a rich, buttery character and creamy texture that when allied to the freshness and minerality of one of the better Chardonnay growing villages, can result in a wonderfully complex wine.

Some of the region's most sought after wines are Blanc des Blancs, including Salon, Taittinger's Comtes de Champagne and Krug's Clos de Mesnil.

4: NV 'Blanc des Blancs'; Ruinart

£54.95

CHAMPAGNE THE STYLES

BLANC DES NOIRS

Blanc des Noirs must be made only from the red grapes permitted in Champagne production, which nowadays means Pinot Noir and/or Pinot Meunier. Typically a Blanc de Noirs will be a fuller style of Champagne, with marked characters of red berries. During the élevage, it responds well to being aged in oak, further enhancing the fuller body of the wine. It is a style that is not seen all that often and when it does appear it will usually be from a smaller house or artisanal grower.

5: NV 'Recolte Noirs'; Dosnon & Lepage

£32.95

ROSÉ

Rosé Champagne has the distinction of being the only European quality rosé wine (that is, with an appellation) where the winemaker is permitted to blend together red and white wines. This is done at the blending stage before the wine is bottled for its second fermentation.

The other process for making rosé Champagne mirrors that of general rosé wine production where following pressing the juice is left to macerate on the skins for a limited time, taking on the colour before the tank is bled. This method is called 'saignée' (bleeding) and is considered by some to make a superior rosé Champagne, although by no means all the commentators and producers agree with that statement.

6: NV Rosé; Laurent Perrier

£65.95

VINTAGE

In particularly good years, most Champagne houses and producers will produce a single vintage champagne. A maximum of 80% of a given years crop can be used for single vintage bottlings (ensuring that there is base wine to add into the NV wines) but in reality there is a much smaller proportion of the crop given over to this sort of wine. Why? Well, because vintage bottlings are required to be matured for double the time that NV wines are, and because the massive global demand for Champagne is focused on the house NV product.

As vintage bottlings tend only to be made in the better years (or at least, that's the idea) and are aged longer on the lees, they are marked by a more 'autolytic' character - that is, they are more biscuity and creamy on the nose and palate.

7: 1998 'Cuvée Nicolas Francois'; Billecart-Salmon

£79.95

PRESTIGE NON-VINTAGE

There is non-vintage Champagne and then there is non-vintage Champagne. The likes of Nicolas Feuillate and Mercier make solid NV wines, but few would argue that they outshine the likes of Bollinger or Billecart-Salmon. Likewise there are some NV cuvées, like Laurent Perrier's Grand Siecle and most famously Krug Grand Cuvée, that are compared to the finest wines of Champagne rather than their NV brethren.

Krug ferment and mature their Grand Cuvée in oak barrels and, while they make a number of more expensive vintage wines, much of their best fruit is always destined for the wine on which this great house's reputation was forged. In actual fact, Krug refuse to consider Grand Cuvée as a non-vintage wine, insisting that it is in fact multi-vintage!

8: NV 'Grand Cuvée'; Krug

£130.00

THE ORIGINAL PRESTIGE CUVÉE

The top houses will often make a stable of different wines, headed by their 'prestige cuvée'. This will often be the producer's most famous wine and they will often build their reputation around it - think Cristal from Louis Roederer or Comtes de Champagne from Taittinger.

At Moët & Chandon their best Grand Cru vineyards are used, when the vintage allows, to produce what was the first prestige cuvée made for commercial release - Dom Pérignon. Named after the main man himself and first released in 1937, it is often criticised for the volumes produced (too large) and the vintages it is made in (that is, almost every vintage), but over recent years Dom Pérignon has re established itself as one of the region's finest wines.

9: 2002 'Dom Pérignon'; Moët & Chandon

£120.00

THE ORIGINAL, ORIGINAL PRESTIGE CUVÉE

First produced for the Russian royal family (rather than for commercial release), Cristal was originally made as a super sweet cuvée as per the Tsar's taste for that style of Champagne. The bottle is clear and without a punt so that the Tsar's housekeeping staff could see through it to check that there was no poison or other offending materials in the wine.

Nowadays Cristal is made in a Brut style and despite marketing issues associated with the 'bling' generation, the quality has not suffered and sales of this superb wine remain buoyant.

10: 2004 'Cristal'; Louis Roederer

£185.00