

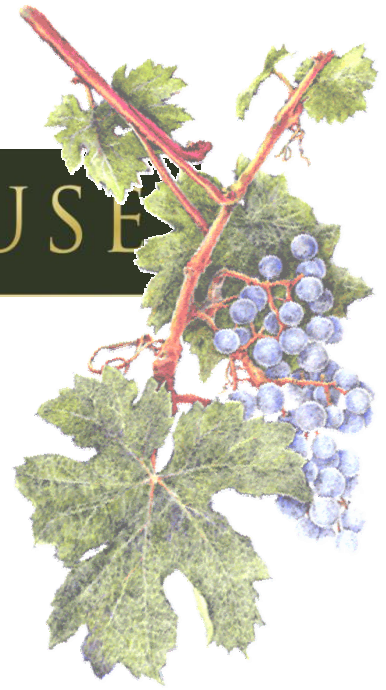
THE GLASSHOUSE

WINE APPRECIATION SOCIETY

MODULE 4

CHAMPAGNE

AND SOME OTHER NOTABLE FIZZ



Champagne is one of life's luxuries. An old boss of mine always kept a bottle of champagne in the fridge to pop when any opportunity arose to celebrate a success or his whim of the day. And I guess we are all a bit like that. Champagne is recognised as being something special. And quite rightly too! There is one distinct reason why champagne should be expensive – and that is because it is very expensive to take the rather unremarkable grapes that are grown in the northernmost and chilliest wine growing area of France that is Champagne and then to nurture the carbon dioxide in the liquid in each bottle and to keep it long enough for the CO₂ to take effect, whilst taking the trouble to capture and disgorge the solid CO₂ waste before finally producing the classic sparkling liquid. This process of fermentation in the bottle takes at least 18 months but usually is allowed to take 3 years.

There are other ways of putting fizz into a bottle - all of them are less time consuming and all of them produce less good sparkle.

THE HISTORY OF CHAMPAGNE

The champagne area is located at one of those great crossroads of both geography and history. For centuries it occupied an important crossroads on two trade routes – east west from Paris to the Rhine and north south from Flanders to Switzerland. So not surprisingly it became prosperous and was fought over for centuries too – most recently being the scene of an important battle in WW1 – The Battle of The Marne in 1914. Grapes have been grown in the area since at least the 5th century. But the wines did not sparkle until much much later – they were pinkish light wines grown from the pinot noir grape. When wine making techniques improved in the late 17th century, under the clerics, a certain Dom Perignon became the leading wine maker, making his abbey - just north of Epernay – a centre of wine growing excellence. Dom Perignon did not invent champagne but he did invent the method of holding the cork

in place with the little cage of wire. Because the area was so cold in winter the fresh wine would stop fermenting in the winter and then would start to re-ferment in the spring. At the time this was thought of as a nuisance – as the resulting carbon dioxide was often strong enough to break the then flimsy wine bottles. Don't worry though - the English came to the rescue!!

English glassmakers learnt how to make stronger glass bottles meaning that the sparkle could be left in the bottle. This sparkling wine was taken up by English café society – what has changed – and was championed by an English aristocrat St Evremont. Louis XIV and his court also made the new wine popular – but it was still the case that at that time 'serious' winemakers thought this fizz was inferior to still wines.



The Champagne industry that we know of today was born in the early 19th century. It was now under the auspices of Veuve Cliquot that techniques were further improved – one of her wine makers improved the techniques of remuage (riddling) and dosage and there were advances in how to cork champagne. Elsewhere in Champagne scientists were beginning to understand how the fermentation process was happening and how to measure it more accurately – and also to understand how much sugar produced the secondary fermentation. Champagne then attracted entrepreneurs from the Rhineland area – Messrs Krug, Bollinger and Roederer, who were more savvy than the local merchants. Many of the local merchants perished in the face of this competition with only a few – such as Cliquot and Moët – surviving.

The champagne industry was held back until the early 1950s. The collapse of Russia, the two world wars and the wine disease, phylloxera, in the 1890s together with local fraud and competition of other sparkling wines – namely cheaper German wine – all contrived to make the business weak and rather 'cottage industry like'.

From the 1950s, however, the business has grown enormously with the US and now the Far East being the great new markets. Despite all this growth though the UK remains the largest export market for Champagne in the world! About 100m bottles of wine are exported each year with about a third coming to the UK – the US and Germany come 2nd and 3rd.

THE INDUSTRY AND THE BIG BRANDS – 'GRAND MARQUES'

Most people, certainly outside France, associate champagne with big names – Bollinger, Moët & Chandon, Dom Perignon, Veuve Cliquot, Krug. What sets Champagne apart from some of the great wine houses in Bordeaux or Burgundy is that champagne is a blend of wines from different producers. Even the great houses, in the main, buy their grapes from some of the more than 15,000 smallholders in the 300 or so Champagne villages. Interestingly in France champagne made from single estate and not 'grand marque' houses is very popular.



The ageing quality of champagne has been recently put to the test when a bottle of 1825 Perrier Jouet was opened and tasted. It had retained its sparkle and was said to have tasted rather good!

But despite the cost and difficulty of producing champagne it has grown relatively cheap!. Prior to WW1 a bottle of Bollinger would have cost the same as a 1st Growth from chateau Lafite. Today such a bottle would be a fraction of the Bordeaux.

GEOGRAPHY AND THE GRAPES

As in most things the French turn their minds to – they have emerged completely victorious in asserting their claim that champagne refers to an area, not to a liquid. So nowhere else in the world can anyone produce a sparkling wine and claim that it is champagne. Once again the issue of terroir rather than grape has differentiated France from the rest of the world.

Champagne comes mainly from three grape varieties; chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier. Two of these grapes are clearly red variety grapes – with black skins - and this adds another aspect to cost as the crushing process of the black skinned grapes must be done very gently to avoid coloration or too much tannin taint. The area in which champagne is grown Reims (pronounced Rrance), Epernay and the Aube further south is very like the south downs of England – they were once connected – is cold and often the summers are pretty miserable. Nevertheless they produce enough juice to produce, in some years, 300 million bottles of champagne.



The grapes that make champagne are the most expensive grapes in the world and their yields and production are completely controlled and classified – as you would expect from the French. Each harvest is ranked on a vineyard by vineyard basis on a point system ranging from 80 to 100 – and this score determines the price at which the vineyard can sell the grapes. As can be imagined there is usually a tension between the wine growers and the big houses that buy the grapes. Such tension almost led to civil war in 1911.



The juice ferments inside each bottle and is left to settle and mature. Each bottle is 'riddled' – in many instance still by hand. This is the process whereby the bottle is gently turned so as to gather the solid waste from the fermentation in the neck of each bottle. In recent years and in the biggest houses this remouage has been mechanised.

A further aspect of production in Champagne is the skill that has been developed over many many centuries in determining which blend of grapes in each year blend best with each other. Whilst the big money goes toward named vintages there are

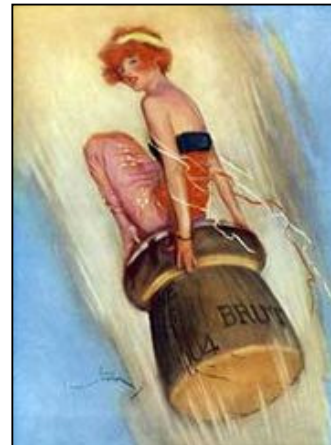
some in Champagne who believe that vintage champagne is 'bad form' - in that selecting the best grapes from a single year takes away the potential for better non vintage blends. Of course this was a marketing ploy closely copied after Moët & Chandon introduced vintage Dom Perignon as recently as 1937 – and found it was a huge commercial success.



Underneath the champagne houses are stored millions of bottles waiting for the moment when they can be released. The cost of storing these stocks is simply enormous – and adds yet further to the cost of a bottle of champagne. A visit to these cellars will convince you that champagne is actually rather cheap – given the cost of just keeping the stuff.

SOME TERMS USED IN CHAMPAGNE

- Non-vintage: based substantially on a single vintage and representing about 80% of all production, usually about 3 years old
- Vintage: a more expensive blend made exclusively from grapes grown in a particular year. Usually released after 6 years, but can age much longer
- Prestige: the top of the range and includes such names as Bollinger Tradition, Dom Perignon, Krug, Roederer Cristal
- Blanc de Blancs: made only from chardonnay grapes
- Rose: made by blending still red and still white wines before fermentation



1915 English magazine illustration

FLAVOUR DESIGNATIONS

- Brut: bone-dry to almost-dry (less than 1.5 percent sugar). The most common Champagne
- Extra-Dry or Extra-Sec: this is "slightly sweeter" than brut (1.2 to 2 percent sugar)
- Sec: medium sweet (1.7 to 3.5 percent sugar)
- Demi-Sec: sweet, considered a dessert wine (3.3 to 5 percent sugar)
- Doux: very sweet, considered a dessert wine (over 5 percent sugar)



Edwardian Advert for Champagne

OTHER FORMS OF FIZZ

The most common way that other sparkling wines are produced is to produce the fermentation in a big/giant tanks rather than in the bottle and then to bottle the liquid under pressure. This process takes months and not years and is substantially less labour intensive. We will taste this evening prosecco, which comes from north eastern Italy and is growing in popularity. Cava and spumante are made in this manner and explains why they are all much cheaper to buy than champagne.



TASTING

We have been privileged to taste a number of these wines over the years with the wine grower right where they have been grown and made. There are some glorious examples of Champagne here tonight and we will be visiting champagne in early June 2010.

Moutard: Champagne from a family firm located in the south of Champagne. They have been making champagne for hundreds of years and produce wines mainly from their own grapes. François Moutard is involved in every aspect of his business. When asked which aspect of his business he likes the best – the growing, the making, marketing or selling – he became silent for a moment and then said 'le tous' - all of them

Moutard Grand Cuvee (Pinot Noir)

Marc Hebrart: From only 11 hectares this is really a 'boutique' champagne house. Every bottle is hand crafted and 'riddled'. The vineyard is one of the most highly rated villages

Marc Hebrart 1er Cru Cuvee de Reserve

Lanson: A grand marque founded in 1760 – noted for its very light crisp wines – said to be a favourite of The Queen. Celebrating its 250th birthday this year.

Veuve Cliquot: Fabulous marketing makes this brand stand out. The widow was clearly a talented lady! Her husband was killed in the Napoleonic Wars when she was 27.


Ruinart: Ruinart is the oldest Champagne house founded in 1729 by Nicholas Ruinart and is considered to be one of the most prestigious, exclusive and elegant champagnes of all. A fabulous presentation makes this an ideal celebratory drink – as does the price. We are tasting two styles this evening;

Ruinart is made from 40% Chardonnay and 60% Pinot Noir

Ruinart Rosé is made from 45% premier Cru Chardonnay and 55% Premier Cru Pinot Noir

Prosecco:

Carpene Malvolti di Conegliano: one of the oldest prosecco makers in the Veneto. The Venetians can be heard to say at all times of the day 'Proseccino'? – meaning 'time for a swift prosecco and a chat'?

	BOTTLE NAME	VOLUME (ML)	EQUIVALENT IN STANDARD BOTTLES	DERIVATION OF BOTTLE NAME
	1. Quarter or Piccolo	187ml	¼	
	2. Half Bottle	375ml	½	
	3. Standard Bottle	750ml	1	
	4. Magnum	1.5 litres	2	
	5. Jeroboam	3 litres	4	
	6. Rehoboam	4.5 litres	6	
	7. Methuselah	6 litres	8	Founder and first king of Israel, 931-910 BC
	8. Salmanazar	9 litres	12	Son of Solomon, King of Judah, 922-908 BC
	9. Balthazar	12 litres	16	Biblical patriarch who lived to the age of 969 King of Assyria, 859-824 BC
	10. Nebuchadnezzar	15 litres	20	Regent of Babylon, son of Nabonide, 539BC King of Babylon, 605-562 BC

Quiz:

Other trivia relating to Champagne

How many bubbles are there in a bottle of Champagne?

At what speed does a Champagne cork escape from its bottle?

What is the pressure under which Champagne rests in the bottle?

What is the most expensive bottle of Champagne ever sold ?

How many calories are there in a glass of Champagne?

What is the term for opening a bottle of Champagne with a sword?

Which is the largest bottle in which champagne is made?

What is the largest size bottle of Champagne you can buy?
(Its not on the list above)

Can you pronounce Reims – the heart of Champagne?

Why was Reims important between 898 and 1825?

'I only drink Champagne when I am happy.....and also when I am sad. Sometimes I drink it when I am alone. When I am with company , it is obligatory. I trifle with it if I am not hungry and drink it when I am. Otherwise I never touch it – unless I am thirsty'.

Lily Bollinger