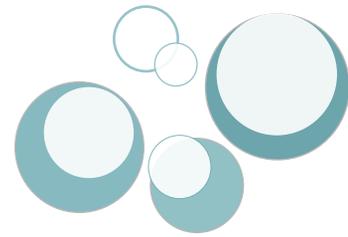


Champagne



To Taste the Stars

Pop the Cork and Celebrate the New Year with Everyone's Favorite Bubbly

[WRITTEN BY KATIE KELLY BELL]

With a history spanning well over 300 years, Champagne has good reason for its stature as the drink of kings in the beverage world. The French, having invented and mastered the process, are rightly territorial about the whole business. Indeed the actual process for making Champagne is referred to as *méthode champenoise*. Anyone can make sparkling wine in the *méthode champenoise* style, but unless the grapes hail from the precisely outlined Champagne region of France, the wine must be simply called sparkling wine. Some vintners even note on their bottles “made in the *méthode champenoise* style” but only the French can call such a thing Champagne.

As is often the case with France, there are a few more rules regarding the production of true Champagne. The wines must be crafted only from the Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier or Chardonnay grapes grown in the region. The fermentation process must occur twice: once in barrels and again in bottles. Really a fair bit of fuss over bubbles, but many will agree there is something enigmatic about bubbles produced in Champagne. Possibly its history might even be just in the name, but the birthplace of effervescence deserves a second look this holiday season — if only for the story you can tell before popping the cork.

“Come quickly, I am tasting the stars.”

— Dom Perignon

Champagne has a mood for every time of day, every event and every place. Dame Lily Bollinger summed it best: “I drink it when I’m happy and when I’m sad. Sometimes I drink it when I’m alone. When I have company I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I’m not hungry and I drink it when I am. Otherwise I never touch it, unless I’m thirsty.”

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF AMY MIRONOV JANISH
UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED



From Stepchild to Star

Champagne began life as the irritating stepchild of the white still wine the local Benedictine monks were responsible for producing for royalty. In 987 AD, the stunning cathedral at Reims was chosen as the coronation site for the French king Hugh Capet. This inaugurated the Champagne region as a religious and royal center. All of the French kings were to be coroneted in Reims and local monasteries in Champagne were charged with producing a white still wine for the kings and their court.

The cool climate required a long growing season and often grapes were picked just before winter set in, crushed and quickly bottled. The cold winter temperatures put a temporary stop to the fermentation process before the yeast finished its work on the remaining sugar in the wine. Once warmer weather arrived, the yeast, quieted by the cool winter months, would become active again in the sealed bottle creating carbon dioxide as a by-product ... hence the bubbles.

Upon tasting the bubbles, the monks were dismayed. They considered it a fault in the wine. They also had the added problem of bottles exploding all over the cellars. However, there is disagreement among historians and wine geeks about whether or not Dom Perignon saw potential in the new sparkling wine. What is agreed upon is his implementation of thicker bottles (to control explosions) and a thicker, new style of cork (still used today). He also perfected the practice of blending wines from different vineyards to achieve taste balance — a practice still used today by the world's finest cellar masters. Thierry Gasco, the highly respected cellar master for Pommery Champagne, noted that, "this blending gives us a tremendous selection of tastes to achieve perfect balance in our final product."

For the monks, the bubbles in the wine remained and they began tweaking the process to cultivate finer versions of what

would become Champagne. Enter Nicole Clicquot, also known as The Widow Clicquot. Clicquot took the process to a higher level with the introduction of riddling and disgorgement. When the second fermentation occurs, the yeast leave thick sediment behind, something that no one wants to see floating in a glass of Blanc de Blanc. Clicquot stored her bottles at an angle. Each day a riddler would turn each bottle about a quarter inch, nudging the yeast over time down into the neck. At the end of the second fermentation, you have disgorgement: the freezing of the yeast plug in the neck of the bottle, which is then popped out, the contents are topped off with a dosage of sugar and wine. The result? A pristine, gleaming glass of silken bubbles.

So, Why Champagne?

At the end of the day the question everyone wants answered is "Why is Champagne so special?" Why not buy some sparkling wine from another region? Gasco shakes his head with conviction when asked this question, then takes a deep breath and explains. "Champagne is special because of chalk and tradition. We have



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Champagne

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to make the absolute best Champagne,” he said. Managing Director for Pommery, Paul Bamberger is more direct. “Comparing Champagne to cava or any other *méthode champenoise* is like comparing a Porsche to a Volkswagen. They are just not in the same league.” **PN**

BEST BUBBLES FOR YOUR HOLIDAY

New Year's Day: Pommery Pop, \$11

These festive single serving “bottles” of Champagne are best consumed with a straw. Kick back, watch some football and sip in the New Year with a relaxed, approachable sparkler.

Everyday, All Year Long: Piper Heidsieck Brut, \$12 – \$15

A great value Champagne for the bubble experience on a budget.

Christmas Dinner: Pommery Brut Apanage, NV, \$55

This Champagne was crafted by Pommery Cellar Master Thierry Gasco specifically to be enjoyed throughout a meal. The floral aromas and racy bubbles make it perfect for before dinner, too.

Christmas Eve: Diamant Rose, 1998, \$120

This elegant sparkler might be the most beautiful item on the table with its etched crystal base and the rosy blush. Aromas of raspberries, strawberries and a supple mousse make this a knockout glass of bubbly.

New Year's Eve: Cuvee Louise, (1998), \$180

With its notes of mousse, crisp apple, and bright, fresh, mineral acidity, this is a grand special occasion Champagne. The vivacious bubbles dance on the tongue in anticipation of a grand new year. It was also a Gold Medal winner at the World Wine Championships.

And for a Really Special Occasion: Armand de Brignac Brut Gold, \$300

Served in an unmistakable gold bottle fit for a king, this luxurious sip of old-world style is nothing but heavenly. The Champagne is full-bodied and marvelously complex, with light floral notes and a silky finish. Once you have savored your last drop, save the beautiful bottle and turn it into a candleholder for romantic dinners.

Armand de Brignac
Brut Gold



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARMAND DE BRIGNAC



WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

It's all about sugar and skin. The more sugar left in your Champagne, the sweeter it will be. A bit of extra time on the red grape skins stains the juice and the result is pink Champagne. Normally red grapes are crushed immediately after picking and the resulting white juice is used (red grapes do not have red juice). Cellar masters allow the juice to stay in contact briefly with the skins for a rose (aka pink) hue.

Blanc de Blanc: Made only from Chardonnay grapes, typically crisp with a hint of apple.

Blanc de Noir: Made only from Pinot Meunier or Pinot Noir grapes, means white wine from red grapes. These are not rose (pink).

Rose: Pink Champagne, made so by brief contact with skins. Does not denote sweetness.

Brut: The driest, least sweet version of Champagne.

Demi-Sec: (French for "medium-sweet") or Extra Dry; oddly enough this means a bit sweeter than Brut.

Sec: This means "dry" in French, but on sparkling wine labels this means the wine is sweet.

Doux: Very sweet, more than 5 percent sugar; the sweetest version you can buy.

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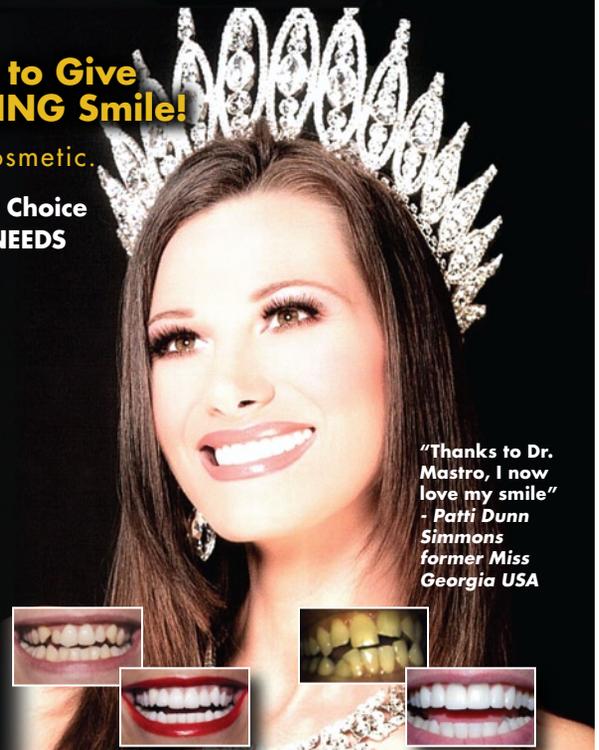
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