

Tasting the stars

After he invented champagne, Dom Perignon called out to his fellow monks with the now immortal words, “Come quickly, I am tasting the stars.”

Suneeta Sodhi Kanga shares The Champagne Experience



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 drink it if I am; Otherwise I never touch it— unless I'm thirsty.”

—Madame Bollinger

History of Champagne

Until the mid-1600s, Champagne as we know it had yet to be discovered. The region produced still wines which were very popular with European nobility. Dom Perignon, the Benedictine monk who is often called the inventor of Champagne, was upset with the bubbles and explosions of the wine bottles, considered a fault in wine making. He spent a good deal of time trying to prevent the bubbles and though he wasn't successful, he developed the basic principles used in Champagne making that continue to this day.

When Dom Perignon died in 1715, Champagne accounted for only about 10 percent of the region's wine. But it was fast becoming the preferred drink of English and French royalty. By the 1800s the Champagne industry was in full swing.

Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC)

Though bubbling wines under various appellations abound throughout the world, true Champagne comes only from the Champagne region in northeast France. The official recognition of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), Champagne was the culmination of a long process dedicated to the demarcation and regulation of the Champagne production area. Since then for producers and consumers alike, the Champagne appellation has come to stand as a benchmark of authenticity and an almost visionary quality.

Champagne houses

Unlike other French wines that are named after growing regions,

Champagnes are named for the houses that produce them. The houses, in turn, produce various brands of Champagne called marques. The largest and most famous of the houses are known as Grandes Marques. Some of the more recognisable members that are available in India are Agrapart & Fils, Dom Perignon, Billecart-Salmon, Bollinger, Canard Duchene, Cattier, Drappier, G.H. Mumm, Jacquesson, Jacquinet & Fils, Joseph Perrier, Krug, Laherte Freres, Lanson, Laurent-Perrier, Lombard & Cie, Louis Roederer, Moët Et Chandon, Philippe Gonet, Piper-Heidsieck, Pol Roger, Pommery, Ruinart, Taittinger and Veuve Clicquot-Ponsardin.

The diversity of Champagne

Cru, grape varieties, vintages, dosage ... these elements may be combined in seemingly endless permutations that make for a truly astonishing range of Champagne wines.

Cru: The French term for 'growth', refers to a certain wine-growing location with a particular growing environment, especially soil and climate, which favours a particular grape variety. Champagne is represented by 320 crus and 275,000 individual vineyard parcels, each with its own specific profile.

Grape varieties: The grapes that are traditionally used to make champagne are Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier. Each Champagne grape variety has its own unique personality which expresses itself differently depending on the terroir.

Varietal expression is at its purest in single varietal Champagne wines:

- *Blanc de blancs* blended exclusively from white Chardonnay grapes.
- *Blanc de noirs* assemble uniquement les raisins noirs du pinot noir et/ou du meunier.

Vintages: Champagne is produced every year. But “vintage” Champagne is only produced in the best years. In the years in between, the house blends wines from multiple years. It's termed non vintage (NV). Blending across years is one reason you can expect uniform quality.

Dosage: Sweetness levels of Champagne are important parts of their styles.

Progressing from dry to sweet, these are:

- Extra Brut (also called Brut Sauvage/Ultra Brut/Brut Integral/Brut Zero): driest of all but not a common style
- Brut: the most popular style considered to be a good balance of sweetness to dryness
- Extra Dry (or Extra Sec): dry to medium-dry
- Sec: medium-dry to medium-sweet
- Demi-Sec: sweet
- Doux: very sweet

Choice of colours

Champagne wines have different colours. Some are pale gold verging on green-gold; others are old-gold verging on grey-gold; while still others are straw-yellow tending to bright-yellow. The colour depends on the blend and the style of wine in question. The more powerful the wine, the deeper the colour.

Rosé or Pink Champagne is the accompaniment to romance! Rosé Champagne gets its pink colour in one of two ways. The wine maker can leave the skins of the grapes in brief contact with the grape juice during the first fermentation ... or add a little Pinot Noir to the wine blend.

Ideal serving temperature

For as long as Champagne wines have existed, it has been the custom to bring them to the table in ice buckets or coolers to make sure they are served at the right temperature. Half ice and half water in an ice bucket is the way to go.

Experience shows that the ideal serving temperature is 8-10°C (47-50°F). Below that temperature the wine is too cold making aromas harder to detect. Above that the wines appear heavier and less bright.

You may store the bottle on its side in the bottom of your refrigerator for four hours. Under no circumstances chill a bottle of Champagne in the freezer; and never serve it in pre-chilled glasses (or you will lose some of the sparkle).

Do not try to chill two bottles in a bucket; it is better to leave the second bottle in the refrigerator in an insulated container. Never return an empty champagne bottle to the ice bucket upside-down! It shows an utter lack of respect for the prestigious beverage you have just consumed, and worse yet, a tactless disregard for the companions you have just shared it with.

The best glass

Choosing the right wine glass is essential for the development of the bouquet and the effervescence—so too is the cleanliness of the glass. Many of us have been given Champagne in flutes or sometime in the old fashion coupes (the flat glass) which are not the most appropriate. The first one is too narrow and will retain most of the aromas in a one-dimension-effect. The second is so wide that most of the bubbles will start to fade before you have your first sip and all of the aromas will gradually evaporate.

So the solution really is the tulip glass. In its classic style, it resembles a white wine glass: stem, medium size body and slightly narrower rim. Perfect when it comes to expanding the aromas and concentration as they reach your mouth.

Always rinse Champagne glasses with hot water before use, and leave to drain. This will remove any detergent residue that can cause the bubbles to go flat.

Many times, a disappointing show of effervescence is the fault of the glass and not the Champagne. This also explains why a champagne glass must never be chilled in a freezer or a fridge. Water will simply coat the glass and hinder the natural creation of the bubbles. When you pour the Champagne, pour a little first to wet the glass, then pour some more.

Because of its rougher surface, crystal produces more bubbles than ordinary glass. If you want the effect of crystal without the expense, do



Rajiv Singhal, Ambassador of Champagne in India for the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne



what restaurants do. Lightly scratch an X in the bottom of the inside of the glass with the tip of a knife. This gives the bubbles something to cling to, just like the crystal.

Storing Champagne

Champagne is ready for drinking upon release, matured to perfection in the producer's cellars. It will however keep well for several years if stored on its side in a cool, dark, draft-free place, following

the three golden rules of Champagne storage:

- Constant, low ambient temperature (around 10°C/50°F)
- Generous humidity
- No direct exposure to sunlight, noise or excessive vibration.

If you don't have a good wine cellar, which most people don't, it's asking for trouble if you keep your champagne (or any other wine) too long. One thing is for sure: Champagne will go past its best one day and the longer you keep it, the greater the chances are of you being disappointed when you finally do open it.

That's why you should never just hang on to Champagne waiting for a special occasion – make any occasion special by opening a bottle of Champagne!

Opening a bottle of Champagne

First words of advice: Popping the cork wastes bubbles. The cork should be removed so the sound you hear is a soft "sigh." Removing the cork in this slow manner also reduces the risks of hurting someone in the room!

- Step One: stand the bottle on a counter for support and remove the foil covering.
- Step Two: tilt the bottle slightly, always pointing the bottle safely away from yourself or any other person; then untwist the metal loop to loosen the wire cage. According to experts, if you can remove the wire in five and a half twists, you are about to open a top quality bottle, "the real thing."
- Step Three: remove the wire cage and foil wrapping, meanwhile keeping a firm grip on the cork.

- Step Four: still holding the cork firmly, gently rotate the bottle (not the cork) with your other hand so the cork comes sliding—not popping—smoothly out.

Sabrage

Opening a bottle “like a Napoleonic cavalry officer” is now used for ceremonial occasions. Napoleon’s spectacular victories across all Europe gave them plenty of reason to celebrate. During these parties the cavalry would open the Champagne with their sabers.

Napoleon, known to have said, “Champagne! In victory one deserves it; in defeat one needs it,” may have encouraged this. The saber is slid along the body of the bottle to break the entire neck away from the bottle, leaving only the base of the bottle open and ready to pour. The force of the blunt side of the blade hitting the lip breaks the glass to separate the collar from the neck of the bottle. Note that one does not use the ‘sharp’ side of the blade. The cork and collar remain together after separating from the neck.

Pouring for the best show of bubbles

There is an art to pouring a glass of Champagne. Hold the bottle by its base (not by the neck). Keep the flow slow and steady to encourage the bubbles to collect around the sides and settle there before you finish pouring.

Do not fill the glass more than half, so as to be able to inhale the aromas. Filling a Champagne glass to the top rim is considered improper etiquette, and it also increases your chances of drinking a warm Champagne which is undesirable.

Always use a fresh glass for serving more. Do not top up warm flat Champagne with a fresh bubbly one.

Drinking Champagne

Don’t swirl the champagne in the glass. The French call this “champagne battering”, because swirling the bubbly in the glass will only succeed in compromising in thirty seconds the bubbles that took at least three years to produce.

Don’t be afraid to bury your nose in the glass before your first sip, as so much of taste comes from smell. Have a taste and note the flavour. Don’t drink Champagne quickly or the bubbles will cause the alcohol to enter your bloodstream too fast often causing a headache.

Take small sips and allow it to remain in your mouth longer. And finally—don’t over-think it. Champagne is meant for celebrations. So relax and have a blast! And, of course, don’t forget to make a toast—to anything or anyone—before you take your first sip! ☺



Champagne Cocktails

Prince of Wales (invented by Prince of Wales, Edward VII)

- 1 spoon sugar
- 1 dash of Angostura
- 4.5 cl Rye (whisky)
- 1 dash Marasquin (cherry liqueur)
- Top with Champagne. Add pineapple cube and lemon peel.

Parkflower (Yann Daniel, barman, Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme)

- 0.5 cl rose syrup
- 2 cl aloe vera juice
- 2 cl mashed litchis
- 2 cl Vodka
- 1 cl Chambord
- Top with Champagne. Add rose petals and fresh raspberries

Serendipity (Colin Field, barman, Hotel Ritz, Paris)

- 2 cl Calvados
- 2 cl apple juice
- A pinch of sugar and fresh mint leaves
- Top with Champagne

Baccarat (Gilles Le Lann, barman, Hotel Crillon, Paris)

- 2 cl lime juice
- 3 cl cranberry juice
- 3 cl Grand Marnier
- 10 cl pink Champagne
- 2 lime peels

Bellini (Harry’s Bar, Venice)

- 6 cl fresh pressed peach
- Champagne

Pick me up (created by Harry Mac Elhone, Harry’s New York Bar, Paris)

- 1 dash Grenadine
- 2 cl orange juice
- 3 cl Cognac
- Top with Champagne

Champagne Trivia

- It is rumoured that Marilyn Monroe once took a bath in 350 bottles of Champagne.
- There are 49 million bubbles in a bottle of Champagne, according to scientist Bill Lembeck.
- Fine Champagne has the tiniest of bubbles. In fact, the French consider big bubbles so ugly that they call them the *oeil de crapaud* (toad’s eyes).
- Illustrious Champagne Lovers: From great historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson, the Tsars of Russia and Winston Churchill, to esteemed artistes such as Marcel Proust, Marlene Dietrich and Colette, the list is as long as it is impressive.
- The largest bottle size for Champagne is called a Melchizedek and is equal to 40 standard bottles or 30 liters.
- The longest recorded flight of a Champagne cork is over 177 feet (54 meters).
- There is about 90 pounds per square inch of pressure in a bottle of Champagne. That’s more than triple the pressure in an automobile tire.
- Some believe that the shallow, bowl shaped champagne coupe was modeled in the shape of Marie Antoinette’s breast. Others believe that it was created to commemorate the breast of Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of the preceding king, Louis the Fifteenth. No matter whose breast was the inspiration for the shallow drinking vessel, all experts agree that it should never be used to serve champagne or sparkling wine. Save it for ice cream or sorbet.
- Heidsieck & Co’s Monopole Blue Top Champagne Brut, the champagne that was served on the Titanic, was rumored to wash ashore several years later. It is said that it tasted great even after all that time!
- A raisin kept in a glass of champagne will rise to the top and sink to the bottom over and over.