

# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

# Champagne!

## HISTORY



**30 million years ago** - earthquakes brought the ideal soils to the surface of the Champagne region

**1584** - Gosset became the oldest still wine producer

**17th Century** - Dom Perignon struggled with re-fermentation - EXPLODING BOTTLES!

**18th Century** - the region was trying to produce wines that resembled Burgundy - winemakers wanted a wine without bubbles, but had trouble producing it. Fermentation stopped when it got too cold for yeast activity. Yeast activity ceased at 50 degrees F and bubble production stopped. Wines were bottled and aged in the spring. Due to the warm temps, the yeast would begin re-fermenting the remaining sugar. The pressure would build inside the bottles and the corks would pop off (winemakers wore helmets). At the time these wines were considered flawed, but would eventually become the wines of Champagne!

**1724** - the word MOUSSEUX was created, meaning "effervescence" or amount of bubblyness in the wine

**1729** - Ruinart was established as the oldest sparkling Champagne House

**19th Century** - The widow Clicquot discovered the process of remuage or riddling and disgorgement, also advances in science caused Champagne production to increase significantly - ALSO when a truly DRY style was created (previously used to sweeter wines)

**1890's** - Phylloxera

**1908** - Fraudulent bottles were a big deal at this time

**1914-1918** - WWI destroyed many Marne vineyards

**1936** - Champagne region became part of the AOC system (is the only region that does not need to include AOC on the label)

**1941** - Moët et Chandon organized a new, broader consortium of growers, producers, and shippers to represent the Champagne industry and protect its interests in the face of Nazi occupation. (That organization, the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC), remains a powerful force in the complex mediation between the large Champagne houses and the numerous smaller growers from whom they source grapes)

**2009** - The INAO broadened the appellation area to increase sales (1/12 bottles of sparkling wine produced is from Champagne)

## VARIETIES



Three authorized Principal Grapes

- **Pinot Noir** (38% of plantings) (dominant in Montagne de Reims + Côte des Bars) - supports the wines structure, weight, and power
- **Pinot Meunier** (31% of plantings) (dominant in Vallée de la Marne) - provides a youthful fruitiness and approachability, reliable, cheaper to grow, high yields
- **Chardonnay** (31% of plantings) (dominant in Côte des Blancs + Côte de Sézanne) - provides elegance and longevity (unlike Chardonnay in any other area, because it never fully ripens!)

OTHER WHITES (usually less than 1%): (In select areas, **Pinot Blanc Vrai** ("true" Pinot Blanc, a white form of Pinot Noir), **Arbane**, **Pinot Gris**, and **Petit Meslier** are authorized for Champagne AOP production, and showcased by only a few producers)

# THE MÉTHODE CHAMPENOISE



## The Traditional Method

There are two fermentations in this process, one in bulk, and one in bottle, + sugar, and yeast are added at two different stages of the Champagne process

- Black grapes are pressed quickly after harvest so the skins don't color the must
- The extracted juice is then divided into the and the *vin de taille* (the following 500 liters)
- After **1. pressing**, the juice is allowed to settle (*débourbage*) at a cool temperature for eight to fifteen hours
- The must, which is often chaptalized, will then undergo **2. primary fermentation**, resulting in high-acid base wines (*vins clairs*) with an approximate alcohol content of 11%
- Primary fermentation may occur in either stainless steel or oak—typically used barrels, although some producers do use a percentage of new wood. The base wines often undergo **3. malolactic fermentation**, although this is not a universal practice.

After both the primary and malolactic fermentations have concluded, the base wines will generally be **4. clarified**, through fining, filtering, or centrifuge

-The clarified base wines **5. age**/remain in either stainless steel or barrel (or, in rare cases, bottles) until late February or March of the year following the harvest. The blender will then taste the lots of base wine, and determine a house's hallmark **6. blend**, drawing on reserve stocks from previous years to provide complexity and richness

-After the *assemblage* and cold stabilization, the blend will be **7. racked** and bottled with the addition of *liqueur de tirage*, a mixture of still wine, yeasts, sugar, and fining agents that will serve to ignite the **8. second fermentation**.

-The secondary fermentation lasts up to eight weeks, as the yeast slowly converts the additional sugar to alcohol and carbon dioxide. The alcohol content of the wine rises approximately 1.2-1.3%, and the carbon dioxide creates pressure inside the bottle. The bottles are usually stored horizontally ("*sur latte*"). Autolysis, the breakdown of dead yeast cells, forms sediment, or lees, in the bottle as second fermentation occurs. The wine will be **9. aged on the lees** for an appropriate period—a minimum of 15 months is required for non-vintage wines/3 years for vintage wines—prior to their removal from the bottle through *dégorgement*.

-Once the sediment is successfully collected in the neck of the bottle, the bottles remain in the upside-down vertical position ("*sur pointe*") for a short period of time prior to **10. dégorgement**

-The modern method of *dégorgement à la glace* involves dipping the neck of the bottle in a freezing brine solution. The bottle can then be turned upright. The force of internal pressure will expel the semi-frozen sediment (and a small portion of wine) as the crown cap is removed. (the disgorgement date is on the bottle) As the wines are fully fermented to total dryness, the bottles are then topped off with **11. dosage**, or *liqueur d'expédition*, a liquid mixture of sugar syrup and wine. Rarely, bone-dry non-dosage styles are produced. The amount of sugar in the dosage is determined by the desired style of the wine.

-Non-vintage styles must **12. age**/remain in the cellar for a total minimum of 15 months (including the period of lees aging), whereas vintage wines require 36 months in the cellar.

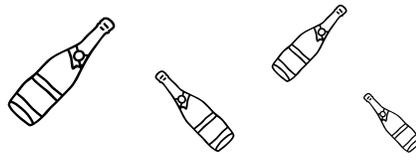
## SWEETNESS LEVELS



Determined by dosage or *liqueur d'expédition*, a liquid mixture of sugar syrup that is added to the wine before corking. The amount of sugar in the dosage is determined by the desired style of the wine.

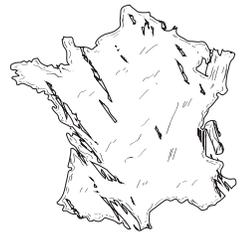
- **Brut Nature** (or Zero Dosage) (bone dry) (0-3g/l Residual Sugar and no sugar added)
- **Extra Brut** (very dry) (0-6g/l RS)
- **Brut** (dry) (0-12g/l RS) (most popular style)
- **Extra Dry/Extra Sec** (off-dry) (12-17g/l RS)
- **Sec** (off-dry/semi-sweet) (17-32g/l RS) (sweeter although the word translates to "dry")
- **Demi-Sec** (semi-sweet) (32-50g/l RS) (suitable for dessert courses)
- **Doux** (sweet) (50+ g/l RS) (extremely sweet and heavily concentrated)(rarely produced)

## STYLES OF CHAMPAGNE



- **Non-Vintage (NV):** Generally brut in style, the NV cuvée represents a house's signature style, and the blender's job is to ensure its consistency from year to year/producers replicate a "house style" that is consistent. Blend of several wines from several vintages, but generally, 75-90% of the wine is from that vintage, the rest is reserve wine from other vintages. Non-vintage Champagne makes up at least three-quarters of the market (generally 80% of Champagne).
- **Vintage:** 100% of the blend must come from the stated vintage, but a maximum of 80% of a year's harvest may be sold as vintage Champagne. (usually, 20% is saved for an NV year) The better houses declare a vintage only in exceptional years. These are usually brut in style, and good examples can age for a decade or more. Must be aged 36 months! Generally made 2-3 times every three years.
- **Blanc de Blancs:** 100% Chardonnay is required, but it is not always sourced from the Côte des Blancs. They may be vintage-dated or NV. The Blanc de Blancs category represents some of Champagne's most age-worthy bottlings, although they are steely in youth, better examples develop an intense bouquet with age.
- **Blanc de Noirs:** White wine produced solely from black grapes. The wine usually displays richness, intensity, and weight, but lacks the supreme elegance and finesse of Blanc de Blancs.
- **Prestige Cuvée (Tête de Cuvée):** Usually the finest and most expensive bottling that a house offers, Typically (but not always) vintage-dated and aged for a number of years prior to release. Only released in superior vintages, and may undergo more traditional vinification procedures, such as barrel fermentation, riddling by hand, and cork-finishing during the second fermentation. Many of the large houses produce prestige cuvées from their own vineyards (can be a single vineyard). Prestige cuvées may be Blanc de Blancs, Blanc de Noirs or rosé in style. Not all houses produce a prestige cuvée, and some produce several. Classic examples include Moët et Chandon "Dom Pérignon," Louis Roederer "Cristal," Perrier-Jouët "Belle Époque" and Veuve Clicquot "La Grande Dame."
- **Single Vineyard Champagne:** Single Vineyard Champagne bottlings may be produced by a large house or a smaller grower-producer. Also could be a Prestige Cuvée. Single Vineyard wines are not required to carry a vintage date, although they often do. Philipponnat's "Clos de Goisses," is a benchmark.
- **Special Club Prestige Cuvée:** The "Special Club" concept originated in 1971, with a bunch of grower-producers. Since they didn't have the marketing budgets of larger houses, they banded together to promote their Prestige Cuvées through identical packaging. Now there are over two-dozen RM producers as members. The Special Club bottlings are estate-bottled, vintage-dated, and represent the heart of each grower's style. Special Club bottles and labels share identical designs and are very small production. Current members include Pierre Gimmonet and Gaston Chiquet.
- **Rosé Champagne:** Vintage, NV, and prestige cuvées may also be produced as rosé. The Blending method is most common (blending in small amounts of red wine to still white wine). Champagne is the only AOP in France that allows a rosé to be produced by blending red and white wine! Rarely is the traditional saignée method used (leaving skins in contact with juice which extracts color). A rosé Prestige Cuvée is usually the most expensive and rare product a house offers.

## AREAS



- There are 357 villages authorized to grow grapes for Champagne
- The cities of Reims and Epernay are areas where major commercial houses of Champagne are located
- There are 5 districts that make up the Champagne region:

### THE MARNE

-produces more than  $\frac{2}{3}$  of all Champagne (9% is produced in the Aisne, its neighbor to the northwest)

- **MONTAGNE DE REIMS** "wooded mountain"

-Pinot Noir is the primary grape, although a fair amount of Pinot Meunier

-wines are heady and firm with good acidity

- **VALLÉE DE LA MARNE** "the valley of the Marne"

-Pinot Meunier is the primary grape (predominantly black grapes-little Chardonnay)

-south-facing slopes

-wines are fullest, roundest, and ripest with plenty of aromas

- **CÔTE DES BLANCS** "hillside of the whites"

-Chardonnay is the primary grape

-wines are fresh and finessed

- **CÔTE DE SEZANNE**

-Chardonnay is the primary grape

-Less distinguished extension of Cote des Blancs

### THE AUBE

-produces 22% of Champagne

- **COTE DES BAR**

-Pinot Noir is the primary grape

\*\*\*No one area is better than the other, they just bring different expressions to a blend!

## CHAMPAGNE HOUSES



### THE MATRICULATION NUMBER

Every bottle of Champagne bears a series of digits/a code assigned to each producer by the CIVC. A set of initials precedes the number, denoting the type of producer who made the wine (these are found somewhere on the label). None of these indicate quality!

**NM (Négociant Manipulant):** The Big Houses! A house that purchases grapes and or base wines from growers and other smaller houses. Can also purchase a finished wine and label it. Some NM houses own a significant portion of their own vineyards; others own none at all. Large Champagne houses with the most international presence are invariably in this category: Moët et Chandon, Louis Roederer, Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin, Billecart-Salmon, Lanson, Taittinger, Pol Roger, Perrier-Jouët, Mumm, and Laurent-Perrier. Quality varies widely, although prices are uniformly high. Many houses often fall under the same corporate parentage; for example, Moët et Chandon, Krug, Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin, and Mercier fall under the umbrella of the luxury conglomerate LVMH.

**RM (Récoltant Manipulant):** A Grower-Producer who makes Champagne from estate-grown fruit. 95% of the grapes must originate in the producer's own vineyards.

**CM (Coopérative Manipulant):** A Growers' Co-Operative that produces the wine under a single brand/growers who blend the product of their collective vineyards to sell under one or more brands. In this situation the individual grower may have some involvement in the winemaking process.

**RC (Récoltant Coopérateur):** A grower whose grapes are vinified at a co-operative, but sells the wine under his own label.

**SR (Société de Récoltants):** A firm, not a co-operative, set up by a union of often related growers, who share resources to make their wines and collectively market several brands.

**ND (Négociant Distributeur):** A middleman company that distributes Champagne it did not make.

**MA (Marque d'Acheteur):** A buyer's own brand, often a large supermarket chain or restaurant, that purchases Champagne and sells it under its own label.

# Producers by Style

**HOUSE STYLE:** Each year, Champagne houses release a flagship (usually Non-Vintage - NV) house style! The houses take pride in their 'style' and it generally helps consumers find a Champagne they can depend on (as they retain consistency year after year).

Methods that determine a signature style include:

- ~The percentage of grapes used in the blend (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier)
- ~Malolactic fermentation (to soften the acidity of the wine)
- ~Sur Lie aging (how long the wine rests on its lees - more time = more notes)
- ~Terroir (climate/land) can affect the house style as well
- ~Use of oxygen (oxidized styles usually see some oak and reductive styles are usually done in stainless steel)

For starters, we can focus on light and bright styles vs. full and rich styles from the more well-known Big Houses. Doing this helped me gain an understanding of what I liked (a baseline) so I could more easily explore, research, and ask about smaller houses.

## Reductive

- Generally aged in stainless steel
- Typically more floral and fruit-driven
- Generally Chardonnay dominant

1. Laurent-Perrier
2. Perrier-Jouët
3. Moët et Chandon (largest - owned by LVMH)
4. Ruinart (owned by LVMH)
5. Taittinger
6. Pol Roger
7. Billecart-Salmon
8. Mumm
9. Pommery
10. Deutz (owned by Roederer)
11. Salon
12. Ayala (owned by Bollinger)

## Middle Ground

- Tends to blur the lines between oxidized/reductive and be a nice mix of both flowers and toast

1. Henriot
2. Heidsieck
3. Gosset
4. Lanson
5. Piper Heidsieck
6. Philipponnat
7. Louis Roederer

## Oxidative

- Generally oak aged
- Typically more bread/yeasty/biscuity
- Often Pinot Noir and Meunier dominant

1. Krug (owned by LVMH)
2. Bollinger
3. Drappier
4. Veuve Clicquot (2nd largest) (owned by LVMH)
5. Henri Giraud

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