

CHAMPAGNE



Around the world, champagne is a byword for celebration. But it wasn't always so. There was a time when bubbles indicated wine of low quality. Let's raise a glass to progress

By the numbers

>> There are about **2 million** bubbles in an average glass of champagne.

>> Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot was just **27** in 1805, when she took over the family champagne house.

>> **168** bottles of champagne from the early 1800s were recovered from a shipwreck in the Baltic Sea last July. Their worth? About **US\$70,000** each.

>> A champagne cork can reach speeds of up to **60 km/h** as it leaves the bottle.

The science of sparkling wine

Crushing grapes brings the yeast compounds that occur naturally on grape skins and in the atmosphere into contact with the sugars inside the fruit. This is fermentation, which converts sugar into alcohol and carbonic acid gas (dissolved carbon dioxide). If the gas is set free, the wine is still; if not, it is sparkling.

After ageing for at least 15 months, the final step in preparing a bottle of champagne is *dégorgement*, to remove the dead yeast residue. The necks of bottles are plunged upside down into a -20°C brine bath. This creates a small ice plug in the neck that traps the sediment.

The bottles are then righted, which leaves a small air gap between the unfrozen wine and ice plug. The bottle cap is removed, and the ice-yeast plug shoots out. A little wine is lost in this process, so the bottles are topped up with *liqueur d'expédition*, a mix of cane sugar in solution and old wine.



PHOTOS: THINKSTOCK

The real thing

Sparkling wine can come from anywhere, but true champagne can only come from the Champagne region of north-eastern France.

The area has chalky soil, which means the vines have to work doubly hard to bury their roots.

As well, its cooler climate means the fruit takes longer to ripen. The combination of these factors gives the grapes higher acid levels, and finesse to the resulting wine.

Sparkling wine goes back at least as far as 1662, and until 1700 bubbles were generally considered a flaw in wine. The monk Dom Pérignon became the cellarmaster at Hautvillers Abbey in 1668 and discovered how to consistently improve champagne wines by processing the grapes from different villages separately and then blending the final wine from many different components. In doing so, he created champagne

as we know it. At first Dom Pérignon tried in vain to eradicate the bubbles. By the end of the 19th century champagne had become synonymous with sparkle and its bubbles signified celebrations of all sorts, including births, marriages and the launching of ships.

“There comes a time in every woman’s life when the only thing that helps is a glass of champagne”

Bette Davis in the 1943 film Old Acquaintance



The region, some 160km east of Paris, includes more than 300 villages





Fine wine connoisseurs:
James Bond (above);
Patsy and Eddy
(below)



Absolutely Fabulous, Mr Bond

For all his fastidiousness about martinis, James Bond is one of pop culture's great champagne devotees. In *Dr No* (1962), Bond is captive in the title character's lair.

Casting about for a weapon, he picks up the first thing to hand: a bottle. "That's a Dom Pérignon '55," exclaims Dr No. "It would be a pity to break it."

"I prefer the Dom '53 myself," retorts Bond, who puts the bottle back unharmed.

Less classy, but as memorable, Eddy and Patsy of the British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* were inveterate champagne guzzlers. Although the brands switch between Bollinger, Moët and Veuve Clicquot, champagne is swilled in every episode. By the final series, Eddy boasts a dedicated champagne fridge in the kitchen.

"Champagne is the only wine that leaves a woman beautiful after drinking it"
Madame de Pompadour

CHAMPAGNE TERMS DECODED

Non-vintage About 80-90% of champagne sold is non-vintage – a blend of various wines from the current harvest plus reserve wines from several different years.

Vintage Made from grapes harvested in the specific year shown on the bottle. No vintage will be produced in a particular year if the grape quality is not considered high enough.

Blanc de Blancs Made from 100% chardonnay grapes, rather than pinot grapes. **Brut** Less sugar is added after *dégorgement*. Extra brut and brut zéro are driest of all.

Raising the (right) glass

To open a champagne bottle without taking someone's eye out, unwrap the foil and, holding your fingers or a cloth over the cork, untwist the muselet (wire hood). Then, with a firm grip on the cork, gently turn the bottle, not the cork. This way, you should ease out the cork without losing any of the precious liquid.

While the flat style of champagne glass features in many Hollywood movies, a tall, narrow flute is better for appreciating the bubbles and aromas.



"I drink my champagne 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 when I am. Otherwise, I never touch it unless I'm thirsty"

Madame Lily Bollinger

PHOTOS: (NADAL) GETTY IMAGES; THINKSTOCK; SNAPPER MEDIA

The timeline

In AD 79, after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius ruins Roman vineyards, Emperor Domitian orders that land in Gaul be converted from cereal crops to vineyards.

In AD 496, Champagne (a thin red wine) is first mentioned in the history books (baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks, at Reims Cathedral on Christmas Day).

In 1662, six years before Dom Pérignon even sets foot in the region of Champagne, the English document sparkling wine (on December 17 Christopher Merrett presents a paper describing the production method to the newly formed Royal Society).

In 1743, Moët & Chandon, one of the world's top-selling champagne brands, is founded.

In 1805, Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot takes over the running of the champagne house after the death of her husband. The 27-year-old *Veuve* (widow) Clicquot proves herself an astute businesswoman.

In 1863, Moët & Chandon releases the world's first champagne "brand", named "Brut Imperial" as a tribute to Napoleon Bonaparte.

In 1867, English music hall

performer George Leybourne writes a song called "Champagne Charlie", which becomes hugely popular – mostly among audiences who'd never tasted it. The song is originally dedicated to Moët, but is quickly adopted by merchant "Champagne Charles" Heidsieck to great effect to promote his brand.

In 1936, Moët launches Dom Pérignon, the world's

first *cuvée de prestige* champagne (meaning it is made from the best grapes).

By 2007, the Champagne region is selling 329 million bottles a year around the world.

But in 2009, post-GFC, sales flatten to about 293 million bottles a year. Nevertheless, it is still predicted that demand, especially in Asia, will soon outstrip supply. ■



Spraying champagne is a winning tradition