

Last updated: May 19, 2012 12:18 am

Expatriate lives: Here comes the fizz

By Emma Mahony

Champagne socialist Jayne Powell has gone from Wales to France to Australia in her campaign to make the drink more accessible



'Champagne' Jayne Powell in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens

If ever the label “champagne socialist” could be applied to someone in the wine trade, it would be Jayne Powell. The 42-year-old has made it her mission in life to bring champagne to the people. In February the independent consultant and author of *Champagnes: Behind the Bubbles*, won an award for Champagne Educator of the Year at the Harpers Champagne Summit in London.

“Champagne Jayne”, as she calls herself, has lived and worked in Sydney, Australia, for the past decade. “I’m a Welsh Australian who grew up wanting to be French,” she says, admitting that her reasons for moving to Sydney had more to do with “true love” than anything else. “I fell in love with a Kiwi in 2000, while backpacking through Australia. None of my friends could believe I was turning my back on London and the corporate lifestyle to settle here,” she says.

Born in Cardiff to a mother who was deputy-headmistress of a local primary school and a serial entrepreneur father, Powell had an early experience of the high life. “Dad was always launching new projects, so there were periods when he was very well off and took us all out for fine dining.” She first became aware of champagne through the James Bond movies of her childhood, although it wasn’t until a French exchange visit aged 15 that she had her first taste.

“The host family had a little hotel in La Rochelle, and the father decided to educate me in French tastes, introducing me to Heidsieck Monopole from the supermarket, Vouvray and Blanquette de Limoux, which we used to make Kir Royale – crème de cassis mixed with sparkling wine,” says Powell. “Everything was so much more exciting than in Wales, and my French family seemed so sophisticated.” By the time she returned home, she was a fully-fledged Francophile. She vowed to read French and business studies at university and, at 17, presented a speech on fine wines to a large audience.

After several periods of working and studying in France, Powell took a job in 1995 with Emap publishers, in London, as a business development manager. She also set up her first champagne club. “I used to organise tasting evenings at the champagne bar at the Carlton Towers in London, or the Hamilton Princess Hotel in Bermuda, with around a dozen clients wherever I was travelling,” she says. “It was called the Pooh Club, after champagne’s nickname ‘shampoo’ – and our motto was ‘uncorking business and pleasure’.”

In 1999 Powell decided to take time off to travel. Despite having a flat in Marylebone, central London, and a well-paid job, she had tired of the corporate life. “I arrived on the last flight to Sydney on New Year’s Eve, and took off my Tag Heuer watch to show that I had left that world behind.” She settled down with her Kiwi partner in Surry Hills, a suburb of Sydney, and applied for residency in 2000.

Setting up her consultancy in Australia proved difficult, especially since Powell’s European contacts’ book was no longer useful. But using the money from the sale of her two-bedroom flat in Marylebone, she found the required 30 per cent deposit to buy in Surry Hills. “It’s a wonderful area,” she says, “a bit like the Notting Hill of Sydney – known for its restaurants and short walk to Centennial Park.” The house is a three-bedroom, two-bathroom terrace. “I’ve ended up with a house version of my flat in London,” says Powell. “It’s perfect, because I shipped over all my furniture, and everything fitted in well.”

With £20,000 left over from the sale, Powell decided to sign up for a mini MBA course at the Australian Institute of Management. Alongside these studies, she took courses at the New South Wales Academy of Wine, as well as The Wine, Spirit and Education Trust.

“I was making annual pilgrimages to Champagne,” says Powell, “and after five years of visits, I finally found a course in champagne – all the other globally recognised courses were in wine.” She lived in France for the duration of the six-month course.

“I had worked for a number of French organisations including Club Med, The Commission of the European Communities and the French Chamber of Commerce in London,” says Powell. “And yet, after all that, I still decided to travel overseas on a regular basis, rather than work for a French organisation based in France. In the end, I couldn’t stand all that bourgeois bureaucracy.”

Her efforts to make champagne more accessible has led to occasional tensions with the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC), based in Epernay. “Contrary to the glossy big-brand marketing campaigns,” Powell says, “champagne isn’t about being snobby, posh or saving up to celebrate weddings or job promotions. Most of us can enjoy the small indulgence of a decent glass of fizz on Friday night to celebrate the weekend. What’s more, it is a natural antidepressant and mild diuretic – so it’s good for you.”

Such disagreements must seem very far away when she is enjoying the outdoor life in Australia. “I love ‘glamping’, and I love to go off the beaten track to the coast – there are over a dozen different beaches just 30 minutes from where I live. My partner and I love to cook on an open fire with fresh food – and, of course, the best wine.”

Plans for the future include exploring Japan and China, where there are “huge markets for champagne”. Powell also plans to spread the word through social media and annual champagne days, which she has run for the past two years.

Is there anything she misses about life back home? “I don’t miss Wales at all, except for my mother,” she admits. “But I do miss the culture and theatres in London – London is definitely my spiritual home.”

.....

Buying guide

Pros

- Proximity to Asia
- Healthy outdoor lifestyle
- Natural beauty, from snowcapped mountains to desert

Cons

- Workplace culture of competition rather than collaboration
- Too far from Europe
- High cost of living

What you can buy for ...

A\$255,000 (£162,585) A 28 sq m studio in Oxford Towers, Surry Hills

A\$1.95m (£1.24m) A three-bedroom penthouse with city views

Contacts

- **Laing + Simmons**, www.lspp.com.au
- **CBRE**, www.cbreresidentialprojects.com.au

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/55329f34-9b58-11e1-8b36-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2012** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.