

*In victory, you deserve Champagne,
in defeat, you need it.*
Napoleon Bonaparte

*Too much of anything is bad,
but too much Champagne is just right.*
Mark Twain

*Burgundy makes you think of silly things; Bordeaux makes
you talk about them, and Champagne makes you do them.*
Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Come quickly, I'm tasting the stars.
Dom Pérignon



Meeting Notes

Few symbols are as so widely recognized in modern civilization as sparkling wine. It is the icon of christening, celebration, festivity and romance. Champagne, the most revered expression of 'bubbly', has its fabled story set in 17th century France when Dom Perignon persisted in creating a great tasting wine out of what was perceived as a fault to have bubbles. Although contentiously debated, his story is the one that lives on as the first expression of what we now know as champagne. The story takes a more recognized turn almost two centuries later as Nicole 'Veuve' Cliquot-Ponsardin (the first 'Grand Dame' of Champagne), together with her cellar master, pioneered the process of *remuage* which is still used today to achieve brilliant clarity.

The grapes used in sparkling wines and the names of the wine come in a wide variety:

- **Champagne (France, with an AC of the same name):** Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Meunier
- **Crémant (many ACs from France):** Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Franc (Loire); Alsace (Pinot Blanc, Riesling, Chardonnay); Bourgogne (Pinot Noir, Chardonnay)
- **Cap Classique (South Africa):** Pinot Noir, Chardonnay
- **Cava DO (primarily from Penedès):** Macabeo, Parellada, Xarel-lo
- **Asti DOCG (Piedmont, Italy):** Muscat Blanc à Petit Grains
- **Deutcher Sekt (various from Germany):** Müller-Thurgau, Riesling
- Other sparkling wines from around the world do not have special dedicated names *per se*, but will often have the words *méthode traditionnelle*, *cuve close* or a variation on the label. They use the best grapes normally used to make still wines, as do their counterparts above.

The styles range from white to red, bone dry to lusciously sweet

- Brut Zero/Brut Nature/Ultra Brut – 0 to 2 g/L (bone dry)
- Extra Brut – 0 to 6 g/L (extra dry)
- Brut – 0 to 15 g/L (dry)
- Extra sec/Extra dry – 12 to 20 g/L (off-dry)
- Sec/Dry/Secco/Trocken – 17 to 35 g/L (medium-dry)
- Demi-Sec/Riche/Halbtrocken/Semi-Dulce/Abocato – 33-50 g/L (sweet)
- Doux/Sweet/Dolce/Doce/Dulce – 50+ g/L (luscious)

Even the size of bottles vary including the 'split' (1/4 or 1/2 bottles), 'Magnum' (2 bottle), 'Jeroboam' (4 bottle), 'Salmanazar' (12 bottles) and 'Nebuchadnezzar' (20 bottles)

Champagne

- An AC in the Northeast of France, centered on the town of Épernay. Key regions include the Vallée de la Marne, Montagne de Reims and the Côte des Blancs.
- Soil: Predominantly chalk; Kimmeridgian soil in the Côte des Blancs
- Grapes used are a blend of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay. Blanc de Noirs made of only black grapes and Blanc de Blancs made of only white grapes can be found.
- Vintage vs Non-vintage: Blends come from a single or multiple harvest years

Méthode Champenoise

1. Harvest: Due to the cold climate grapes reach a potential alcohol of 8.5% (9.5% for vintage)
 - a. By law, at pressing, only the first 80L of 100L of the free run can be used for champagne, the rest is sold for distillation
 - b. The Champagne ('Coquard') press holds ~4 tonnes of grapes and is short and wide to minimize the weight on the grapes themselves
2. Vinification: Creation of 'still' wine. Some wine can be kept in reserve to be used in future to create the house style
3. *Assemblage*: The still, base wines are blended together to create the house style. The aim for every non-vintage is to create a trademark style for which the house is known.
4. Bottling: The *liqueur de tirage* is added to charge the wine with fresh yeast, nutrients, clarifying agent and sugar so that the yeast can re-ferment to create bubbles. This wine is bottled and sealed with a crown cap.
5. The wine is laid, *sur latte*, on it's side for a minimum 15 months (NV) and 3 years (V). The yeast will ferment and then autolyse during this period of dormancy.
6. *Remuage*: The bottles are placed in an 'A'-frame rack (*pupitre*). They are twisted a quarter turn each day as the bottle is gently tilted upwards. By the end of a month, the bottle is *sur pointe* and the yeast sediment (plug) is confined to the top of the bottleneck.
7. *Dégorgement*: A freezing brine solution is often used to set the plug and the cap is lifted off to expel the plug.
8. *Dosage*: The bottle is topped up with the *liqueur d'expédition* which is made of a proprietary mixture of the house's wine.
9. Dressing: Corkage, caging and foiling...voilà!

Pressure's on! The typical pressure attained in Champagne is minimum 5.5 bar (80 psi)

Don't want to pay the \$60? There are many examples that use the *Méthode Champenoise* → Crémant and Cava

Transfer method

- This method uses the Champenoise technique until the point of disgorging, which is done into a bulk tank for subsequent filtration and bottling under pressure.
- Used predominantly for new world wines
- Results in more coarse bubbles and lessened pressure

Tank method (aka *cuvée close* or Charmat method)

- Re-fermentation process is done in a sealed tank
- Used for New World wines, Sekt and Asti

References

1. Fielden C. *Exploring the World of Wines and Spirits*. Wine & Spirit Education Trust. 2010, London (UK)
2. The Oxford Companion to Wine, 3rd edition, Jancis Robinson (ed).