



"NAPOLEON BONAPARTE FAMOUSLY SAID HE DRANK CHAMPAGNE WHEN HE WON, TO CELEBRATE AND WHEN HE LOST, TO CONSOLE HIMSELF"

No occasion is complete without France's finest fizz on offer whether launching a ship, unveiling a new business, wetting a baby's head, celebrating anniversaries, birthdays and sporting events.

Champagne screams out the importance of the occasion and the people present, it has a nose of quality, the musical notes of refinement, finesse and character both by reputation and tradition.

It simply must be champagne – the likes of Lanson, Moët et Chandon or Dom Pérignon on the label says everything about the individual and their aspirations.

To be called champagne, it must have come from the Champagne regions of La Montagne de Reims, La Vallée de la Marne, La Côte des Blancs and La Côte des Bars and Montgueux in Northeastern France and made in one of two ways, using malolactic fermentation or the original fermentation technique.

It has a cachet rarely lost on courting Romeos. Indeed, it was with champagne in arm that 17 years ago, I sought to woo my very own Juliet, turning up at her door with a bottle of Moët in the hope she would see me as *un homme débonair* and melt into my arms.

It seemed to work because she agreed to a second date to which I brought another bottle and then a third, and a fourth on each subsequent tryst. I never gave it a moment's thought that I drank most of it myself and she only took a small token sip...until by date 10, it suddenly dawned on me.

"You don't like champagne very much darling do you?" I said.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings," she replied.

We got married the following year and every anniversary, I buy a bottle of champagne – just for me. ➤





It is perception and image that has made champagne so special. Ever since Benedictine monks, Frere Jean Oudart and Pierry and Dom Pierre Perignon of Epernay reputedly established the principles in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, some of which are still important in the production of champagne today, according to *The Little Black Book of Champagne*, from Champagne Lanson.

Word quickly spread, attracting a firm following from French monarchs, to the tsars of Russia, Napoleon and Churchill.

However, until the mid 19th century, there was little technical progress, and creating the bubbles during the second fermentation of champagne was often haphazard and unreliable. Lanson's book notes it was only when a French pharmacist discovered a method to determine the level of carbon dioxide produced in the wine by measuring the residual sugar, that consistency improved and champagne experienced a meteoric rise in production and sales.

Today, the total value of champagne sales in the UK is about £897m, according to market researcher Mintel, a figure it forecasts to grow to £937m by the end of 2012. There are a multitude of champagne houses but a select group of 24 are also known as Grandes Marques which account for two-thirds of production and 90% of exports. The first of these was opened by Nicolas Ruinart in 1729 followed by Claude Moët in 1743.

There are about 15,000 growers in champagne who own about 90% of the entire champagne vineyard.

Monk Dom Perignon, on tasting his first sip, beckoned his colleagues, "Come quickly, I am drinking the stars!"

It is the stars no less that have been especially noted for drinking champagne ever since, served in a variety of vessels, including the coupe, the flute and the tulip and in the case of victorious F1 racing drivers – the bottle!

Napoleon Bonaparte famously said he drank champagne when he won, to celebrate and when he lost, to console himself; Charles Dickens, the author, said: "Champagne is one of the elegant extras in life". Another writer, Oscar Wilde, as he sipped champagne on his deathbed, was reputed to have said: "Alas, I am dying beyond my means."

The great beauties were frequently photographed with glass of champagne in hand: Marilyn Munroe, Brigitte Bardot, Marlene Dietrich and Jackie Kennedy, to name just a few.

There are no rules when it comes to the right time to drink champagne. While it has historically been linked to celebrations, there is nothing that says you cannot order a bottle of champagne at any time because you simply enjoy it. Of course, there is Christmas and New Year, Wimbledon – not forgetting the obligatory strawberries – the Grand National, Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, the Epsom Derby, holidaying on cruise ships and even at Crufts, for the humans, that is... not the dogs.

But you need no excuses to crack open a bottle. Gareth Birchley, private client sales at European fine wine merchant Bordeaux Index, says: "It's no longer reserved as a drink for the elite or just saved for special occasions; it's great with an evening meal or a summer barbecue.

In fact, sales of champagne are often higher during summer months when the sun is out and the weather is warmer."

The really extravagant have been known to bathe in it. Screen siren Marilyn Munroe took a bath in 350 bottles of the stuff, apparently, and supermodel Kate Moss and *Pirates of the Caribbean* star Johnny Depp were more recently rumoured to have shared a champagne-filled bath in a Notting Hill hotel.

But for most of us, drinking champagne usually suffices. As Lady Bollinger who took over the eponymous champagne house after the death of Jacques Bollinger in 1941, said: "I only drink 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."

The writer would like to acknowledge the help of Champagne Lanson which gave him an advanced copy of *The Little Black Book of Champagne* to help compile this report. Copies can be requested from lanson@phippsspr.co.uk.