

SNOW ON WINE

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"Come quickly, I am tasting stars!" – is supposedly what Dom Perignon said when tasting the first sparkling champagne. However, the first appearance of that quote appears to have been in a print advertisement in the late 19th century., more than a century after his death.

Nothing says *CELEBRATE* like those tiny bubbles exploding on our palate. Weddings, anniversaries, birthdays. – it's a ritual -- we ice the Champagne and when chilled, dry the bottle, un-"cage" the cork, let it ease up and hear that dramatic "pop"! Then the Champagne is poured into flute glasses, the beautiful bubbles emerge, we quaff it and we are *"Tasting Stars"*.

We all know the name, "Champagne," can only legally be applied to wine actually produced in that appellation of France and is produced under the rules of the appellation. But, we call any sparkler "Champagne," like we call facial tissue, "Kleenex." Many regions in France produce sparkling wines made using "Methode Champenois," and those must be called "Cremant." So let's focus on Champagne today, it's origin, how it developed, and separate the myths, fun as they are, from fact.

Romans brought grapes to the Champagne region, an area at the northern extremes for viticulture, in the 5th century. Most years grapes struggled to ripen, with acids too high, sugar too low, and little fruit. Resulting wines were unpleasant to drink and the Champenois were for centuries jealous of superior wines of nearby Burgundy.^{2,3} The Abbey of Hautvillers in Epernay was a major wine producer, and at age 19 our storied monk, Dom Perignon (1639 to 1715), began his life there. At this time their wine was red, still, and slightly sweet, and because cold autumn weather often stopped fermentation before completion, wine would be bottled with residual sugar. The warmth of Spring often reactivated fermentation and gas pressure exploded bottles or shot out corks, often in multiple bottle chain reactions.

Named "le vin du diable," or devils wine, it was hardly appropriate for sacramental wine. Dom Perignon did work tirelessly and successfully to improve the quality and renown of the still wines of Champagne, but **he did not invent sparkling wine, nor was he the first to make champagne.** Indeed, he worked hard to prevent a secondary fermentation which was seen as a fault...¹. Amongst Dom's reforms, grape "trodding" was replaced with mechanical presses, allowing production of white wine from black grapes. Under his guidance, grapes were picked in early morning while cold and damp, with care not to bruise or break the skin, and sorted to remove large or rotten grapes. Perhaps most importantly, Dom Perignon was probably the first to blend wine of several vineyards, different varietals, and more than one vintage, to give more balanced wine. And he taught aggressive vine pruning and lower grape yields. He left detailed lists of these rules which brought quality up and eliminated unfavorable comparisons to Burgundian wine. Later, in 1821, Dom Groussard, a monk in the same Abbey, promoted exaggerated tales of his predecessor Dom Perignon inventing the Method Champenois, and this "holy" untruth has been remarkably persistent.

The Methode Champenois was finally perfected in the early 1800's. This was now possible due to stronger glass (an English technology) and the 1844 invention by Adolphe Jaquesson of the "muselet" or cork cage. However, it is worth noting that an English professor, Christopher Merrit, first documented adding sugar for a second in bottle fermentation at the Royal Society of Britain in 1662. As done today, grapes are picked, pressed, and the "must" fermented to wine in tanks.



This still wine is skillfully blended as Dom Perignon did. The blended wine is bottled with a dose of yeast (*Saccharomyces Cerevisiae*), and some sugar (or unfermented must), and capped with a crown cap.

Fermentation and aging (usually 1 -2 yrs) are followed by remuage (riddling), a daily rotation with bottle top tipped down, until all the lees (dead yeast) collect in the neck. The neck of the chilled bottle is then immersed in liquid nitrogen, freezing the plug of lees. The crown cap is removed and natural CO₂ pressure (from the secondary fermentation), squirts out the frozen plug (disgorgement). Immediately the bottle is topped up with “le dosage” (wine from a previous vintage for Brut Zero, or with gradually increasing sugar percentage to adjust the sweetness for extra brut, brut, extra-dry, sec, demi-sec, or doux). Then it is quickly corked and the all-important “cage” added to retain CO₂ gas and pressure of about 5 Atmospheres.



Most Champagne is now made NV or non-vintage following “The Dom’s” lesson of blending not just different vineyard areas and varieties, but also previous vintages. This allows consistent high-quality year to year. And in the exceptionally good year, when vintage wine is made, the Champagne Houses doing so must reserve 20% of their wine for blending to improve future lesser vintages.

Most Champagne is a blend of the three allowed grapes, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier, and is white because the two black grapes (the Pinots) are gently pressed, producing white juice, and removed from the skins before pigments can be extracted. Blanc de noirs is made totally from Pinot Noir or Pinot Meunier or a mix of the two. Blanc de blancs is 100% Chardonnay. The amount of sugar added to the “dosage” used to top off bottles after disgorgement is what determines the final sweetness. Brut generally has the least sugar (although Brut Zero, and extra Brut are even drier). Progressively sweeter are extra dry, sec, demi-sec, and doux.

So, the good Dom didn’t invent Methode Champenois, but he made many lasting improvements to viticulture of Champagne, perhaps most importantly blending from many vineyards, varieties and vintages to achieve higher quality and consistently.

I propose to you, this holiday season, you treat yourself to REAL Champagne, and perhaps even a Prestige Cuvee. When you do, be sure to take time to enjoy the “pop”, the bubbles in glass, and be sure to **“Taste the Stars.”**



REFERENCES

- 1) ChampagneGallery.com.au; “Dom Perignon – The man and the myth”. P.O Box 118 Sandgate, Brisbane QLD 4017, ABN 96 109 250 982.
- 2) J. Robinson, ed. (2006). *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Third ed.). Oxford University Press. pp. 150–153..
- 3) H. Johnson, *Modern Encyclopedia of Wine*, Simon and Schuster (New York), 1983, Pp 171 – 180.
- 4) Wikipedia, Champagne.



MAKE IT A HAPPY NEW YEAR EVERYONE!!