

COLUMNS

Story behind Champagne's cost

July 3, 2014



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By **David Moritz**

We love to drink Champagne for celebrations and associate it with exclusivity and the high life. Why? When did that start?

More than a thousand years ago, royals bearing the name and title of Champagne served with Charlemagne, journeyed on the Crusades and, for a time Champagne, France, was a site for the crowning of kings.

At certain elevations in the region, at certain times of the year, due to natural barometric conditions, the Chardonnay would become naturally frothy. Being the local wine of the region, this is what was served at coronations and so began the association of Champagne and royalty. It is as ancient and pedigreed a reason to indulge as I can imagine.

The history of value of the authentic bubbly grows from there.

Vin win

By pre-industrial and industrial times, bottles strong enough to contain the liquid were available, but it was still very unstable and of inconsistent frothiness leading to spontaneously bursting glass during transit as a feature of the trade. The already inherent rarity of the product combined with this challenge led to naturally frothy price points abroad.

Today, after generations of skill and science, the wine growers of Champagne have managed those challenges, and the rarity and value is perpetuated by the fact that genuine Champagne can still only come from the Champagne region of France. But everybody knows that and it is just the beginning of the new story.

Today's bubbly is actually still rarer than most people understand and there are clear production reasons why it is still expensive.

The C.I.V.C., or Comite Interprofessionnel du vin de Champagne, governs and protects the label of Champagne. The goal is consumer confidence that anything which is labeled Champagne will be at least a certain minimum high quality standard, and the product will have certain Champagne-approved characteristics in taste range and other practical and sensory attributes, and its production will be controlled and regulated.

The organization has done a good job and it is largely true that if it legally says Champagne on the bottle it is from Champagne, France you can be confident that it is not going to be bad. The least bottle compared to any other sparkler will show with great advantage to say nothing of even the mid-tier or the best Champagnes in such a comparison.

You must be willing to admit that when it comes to Champagne, the variation in quality is nothing like the rest of the

wine category. We have the C.I.V.C., Charlemagne and the French growers and producers to thank for that.

Seeing the light

The story of rarity continues not every square inch of the "state" of Champagne is "Champagne" for purposes of the eponymous product. Only certain vineyards with the right soil, sunlight, elevation and slope of land in relation to the sun are Champagne vineyards.

You may see a very pleasant looking field of grass directly adjacent to an ancient vineyard the unplanted area did not make the grade.

As was explained to me most clearly: It is not the situation that you can have a house in Champagne, plant a vineyard in your front yard, and call the product Champagne. Mais non!

So we have now determined that actually quite little of Champagne is deemed suitable to make Champagne.

Beyond that, there are further rules about spacing between the vines, the intimate care taking of the individual vines my wife explains it that a grower we are close with "sings to his vines every morning," by way of metaphor that they are dearly beloved and well looked after and also about harvesting.

To ensure that there can be no temptation to harvest anything that is less than the best of the best within the dedicated regions, within the exclusive territory, of the pampered vines, only a limited quantity of what each vineyard produces can be harvested. The growers must pick the very best, staying within the quantities that they have been assigned to harvest that season. The rest must stay where it is: on the vine.

As if that is not already whetting your appetite to drink Champagne when you are thirsty, which is probably now, after all of that there are controls over the length of time that must be spent in pressing the grapes, and during the first fermentation long and slowly.

The famous second fermentation is done inside the bottle with approved strains of yeast: this is where the bubbles come from, and this is now when the clock starts ticking. The clock? In other words, the minimum aging times.

Time out

To be a non-vintage Champagne that means no age statement or year placed on the bottle, the normal production and regular product presentation of the winery you have to plan inventory a minimum of 18 months ahead of time.

Once the product goes into the bottle, it cannot be removed, and the bottles must stay "down" in the cellar or cave for a minimum of 18 months for a non-vintage. You cannot transfer the liquid out of the bottle, so whatever bottles you want to sell, you have to start with. In practice, no one really lets it out before two years.

For a vintage, which means that all of the grapes in the bottle were harvested in the same year, and that year is noted on the bottle this is the artistic expression of the winery, which varies with interpretation of the central expression around the best harvest over many seasons you have to plan four years out. It must be in the bottle a minimum of four years no transferring.

Note there is a special exception of super large formats, which I suppose the C.I.V.C. understands would be impractical to "riddle" or turn to manage the sediment. So, you have to have the bottles aging for at least four years for a vintage.

Remember that this is not like aging barrels of spirits, which can continue to be blended after period of aging, which can be moved around and resold in different combination, as a bulk product.

With Champagne, what is down in the bottle is the actual product that is going to have a label put on and go to market.

WHEN WE celebrate a promotion, birthday or wedding and we open a vintage Champagne, that exact specific bottle was sitting down in a French cave for at least four years usually six years and longer after centuries of cultivation of the vineyard itself.

I have skipped over the things that must be done to the bottles in the caves that is well covered elsewhere but every step is a regulated process.

Fortunately, the bottles are not typically exploding in our hands anymore, but there is a good reason why this product is perceived to be rare and expensive. It actually is.

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