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CHAMPAGNE'S ROLLER COASTER RIDE

CHAMPAGNE is undoubtedly the world's best wine story. No other region can claim to have been embroiled in world events or to have developed intricate technology over countless decades to perfect a wine from grapes that grow in the most demanding conditions. It is also a wine that is so closely married to its terroir that no other country can replicate it.

Patrick Forbes' 1967 seminal work on the region makes the point that champagne is an art not a science. He pays due testament to the artistic skills of the winemaker, yet he goes on to say that the most remarkable thing about the methode champenoise process is the "exceptional extent to which it enables man to manipulate grape-juice". It has literally taken many centuries of trial and error to perfect the process, and from this deep and fascinating history, many myths have grown up about champagne. I'd like to share a few of those tales, as well as expose one or two dirty little secrets.

Champagne, up until the 17th century, was a still wine. Up until the 1830s, 90 per cent of champagne production was red wine. The first sparkling wine in France was made by the monks of St Hilaire in southern France around the town of Limoux. The Blanquette de Limoux is a wine made from the rural or ancestral method which undergoes only one alcoholic fermentation. There is also recorded proof that in London sugar and molasses were added to wine to improve the "character" and to render them sparkling, which would make the English the nation who made the first secondary fermented sparkling wine. It was the English physician and scientist Christopher Merret in 1662 who mentioned the practise of

making a wine "sparkling" while presenting a paper to the Royal Society.

Dom Perignon, that famous monk at the Abby of Hautvillers, did not discover the art of making a wine sparkling, but treated it like a wine fault and used whisks to get rid of the bubbles. However, he did perfect the art of blending the grapes and made a white wine out of black grapes by pressing the juice gently with the use of a shallow press that is still used to this day.

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The history of champagne during World War I is astonishing and moving. In 1914 the UK's *Financial Times* reported with "interest and great encouragement" that even the war that was then beginning could not damage the champagne industry. Business did go on during the protracted war that engulfed the region for four years, but over 20 children were killed while harvesting the grapes in that first year of hostilities. The sad irony of such a setting for mass death and destruction is poignantly the theme of a classic poem *Champagne*, by American

poet Alan Seeger. If you are unfamiliar with the words I'd recommend finding it and reading it. Seeger never got out of France as he was killed in action during the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

The centre of champagne is around the towns of Epernay and Reims, and the surrounding three areas of Cote de Blancs, the Montagne de Reims and Vallee de la Marne. Here you find the famous Belemnite and Micraster chalk sub-soils which the Romans mined and created the deep cellars that maintain the perfect all year round cool temperature (10C) so perfect to mature champagne. The cellars were used as shelter for civilians in both world wars. The names of the soils are derived from the fossils that make up the chalk - belemnite is named after an extinct relative of the cuttlefish, while micraster is called after a sea urchin. More importantly, these soils grow grapes that are high in acidity with low aromatics, perfect attributes for making sparkling wines.

The region stretches a further 110km south of Epernay, down to the little talked about area of Cote des Bar (or the Aube). Here the sub-soil changes and is comprised of limestone known as kimmeridgian marl, the same as Chablis, Sancerre and Dover in southern England. The Aube is seen as a poor cousin to the rest of Champagne but in the Middle Ages it was more renowned for still wine than its more famous relatives to the north. The region shares more affinity with Chablis, 80km to the south and produces heavier wines.

The production of rosé champagne is also a little untold story. While some producers make their wines by the normal saignee

method, others, and possibly the majority, simply add a still red wine to their base cuvee to stain the wine a pink colour and then ferment it in bottle.

The 21st century in Champagne has already seen many changes. Mechanisation of the traditional process has seen a bottle of champagne that once went through 300 hands now handled only 45 times. There has been an increasing trend for growers to produce their own wines. These Growers Champagnes are small independent companies that often own their own vineyards and choose not to sell to the major champagne houses or co-operatives that traditionally run the market. There is also a strong movement towards organically made wines, which is a reversal of what occurred last century, and a dirty little secret. From the 1960s up until the mid-'80s, some Champagne vineyards were fertilised with minced decomposed city refuse from Paris and other towns. Reporters from that time comment on the smell and tiny blue fragments of plastic bags on the vineyards that would not decompose. This sludge from the city was known in French as *boues de ville*.

The future for champagne will again be an exciting ride as the region faces the effects of global warming and the possible decline of markets such as the UK. It was reported last year that the effects of Brexit has seen a decline of 17 per cent in volume. The rise of prosecco has hit the Champenoise as well as the expansion of the English sparkling wine industry, which is benefitting from the flip side of global warming. 



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