

# School of Booze

## By Jane Peyton



### Where's the Party? - Sparkling Wine

Pop the cork and the party begins. Sparkling wine has a unique ability to create anticipation and lighten the mood. Commonly known by the name 'champagne' regardless of where it is produced, fizz can only legally use that name if the grapes are grown and the wine made according to the rules of appellation in the French region of Champagne. French sparkling wines made in other parts of the country are known as crémant or mousseux.

Britons are the second most enthusiastic drinkers of champers after the French and with good reason. Sparkling wine made through secondary fermentation in the bottle may first have happened in England not France, albeit with imported French still wine. Although Dom Pierre Pérignon (c.1638–1715) has been credited with the invention of sparkling wine, it is not true. He was a winemaker and expert cellarman based at the Abbey de Hautvillers in the Champagne region and he worked to improve local wines and viticulture – but the credit for fizz belongs elsewhere. Sparkling wine was known by Dom Pérignon, but for many years fizzy wine was seen as a fault that caused bottles to break and create a chain reaction in the caves leading to its description as le vin du diable – the Devil's wine. The erroneous champagne invention myth may have arisen because of an account written by a priest called Dom Groussard more than a century after Dom Pérignon's death, in which he claimed the latter was the inventor of champagne. By then leading champagne houses such as Taittinger and Veuve Clicquot had been founded and were a source of national pride so perhaps Dom Groussard wanted to aggrandise Abbey de Hautvillers with his claims. Moët et Chandon must have believed it because they named their premier brand after Dom Pérignon.

England's connection with this marvellous creation is documented in a paper called *Some Observations concerning the Ordering of Wines* delivered in 1662 (six years before Dom Pérignon entered the abbey) by scientist Christopher Merret (also spelled Merrett) to the Royal Society in London. In it he described how 'our wine coopers of recent times use vast quantities of sugar and molasses to all sorts of wine to make them brisk and sparkling'. Six months later, cider maker Silas Taylor presented a paper to the Royal Society where he described bottling cider and keeping it in cool water, which made it 'drink quick and lively, it comes into the glass not pale or troubled but bright yellow, with a speedy vanishing nittiness (meaning full of small air bubbles)... which evaporates with a sparkling and whizzing noise.' It was already known that cider makers had added sugar to cider around 1632, before Dom Pérignon was born, so Silas Taylor was describing sparkling cider in his paper. Doing the same to wine was an obvious move.

Secondary fermentation of wine was not new. It often happened naturally in warm weather when yeast awoke and started fermenting residual sugars creating carbon dioxide bubbles. The problem was that carbon dioxide creates pressure in an enclosed container so whatever vessel wine or cider was stored in would need to be hardy enough to withstand the force. This is where England's claim to have intentionally created sparkling wine is bolstered and it is linked to three seventeenth-century glass-makers. James Howell and Sir Robert Mansel perfected a technique to make coal-fired glassware reinforced with iron and manganese ores making it more resilient than any other existing glass. Glassworks were set up in major ports where wine imported in casks could be decanted into the new heavy-duty glass bottles. Sir Kenelm Digby also experimented in glass-making by adding high ratios of lime and potash. The result, *verre anglais*, was robust and like Howell and Mansel's glass could withstand the carbon dioxide pressure from cider and wine undergoing a secondary fermentation in the bottle. But having a sturdy bottle is not much use unless it can be sealed. Kenelm Digby is credited as being the first person in England to use leak-proof corks to seal bottles. England had long-standing trade connections with Portugal where cork oaks grow. Until 1685 French winemakers used a plug of wood wrapped in fabric and soaked in tallow rather than a cork to seal the bottle.

Such devices would not have prevented carbon dioxide leakage and so the wine would no longer have sparkled. This factor is another reason to suggest that sparkling wine was not a French innovation.

England's winemaking history dates back at least to the Norman Conquest in 1066 although today's yields will not give French or Italian vintners sleepless nights. The undisputed champ of English vino is sparkling wine with some world-class vintages that have won top prizes in international competitions. The chalk sub-soil in Kent and Sussex where most of the grapes for sparkling wine are grown is almost identical to that of the Champagne region. The trouble is, calling it 'English sparkling wine' is rather an inelegant mouthful – not snappy like cava or prosecco. Hampshire producer Christian Seely suggests calling it 'Britagne' (pronounced 'Britannia') but this has yet to be adopted by the industry.

Champagne gained international renown due to the proximity of Rheims cathedral where French kings were traditionally crowned and who celebrated with the eponymous sparkling wine. In the eyes of the world's nobility and haute bourgeoisie, champagne meant luxury and power and it became the only drink worthy of festivities, rites of passage, celebrations. It still is.

**Winston Churchill's morning tea break consisted not of a cup of *Camellia sinensis* but a glass (large) of champagne brought by his valet every day at 11 a.m. He is quoted as saying 'A single glass of champagne imparts a feeling of exhilaration. The nerves are braced, the imagination is agreeably stirred, the wits become more nimble.' Churchill's favourite brand was Pol Roger and he maintained a stash during the Second World War, even though the Champagne region was occupied by the Nazis. When he died, as a mark of respect to their celebrated client Pol Roger added a black border to the labels of 'White Foil' sold in Britain.**

**Sabrage is a ceremonial method of opening a bottle of champagne by using a heavy knife or special sword (*sabre à champagne*) to cut open the top rather than pop the cork. The force of the blade makes a clean cut at the weakest part of the bottle on the neck just underneath the cork. It is not the sharpness of the blade that counts, rather the weight. Pressure**

**inside ensures that no glass shards fall into the bottle. One theory about the origin of the practice is that cavalry soldiers in Napoleon's army used their swords to whisk the top off the bottle rather than dismount and open it by removing the cork.**

**Madame Lilly Bollinger (who after her husband died in 1941 built up the eponymous champagne house into one of the world's leading drinks businesses) encapsulates the allure of fizz perfectly in this quote: 'I 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.'**

**In the 1800s champagne was noticeably sweeter than the modern version is. The trend towards a drier product began when Perrier-Jouët decided not to sweeten the 1846 vintage prior to exporting it to London. The**

**designation brut was created for the British market in 1876.**

**Making champagne was a dangerous business until French glassmakers perfected their own version of *verre anglais*. Until then it was common for bottles to smash during the secondary fermentation, especially in warm weather. Flying glass badly injured people working in the cellars and so they were issued with protective clothing including metal masks.**

**Why do racing drivers waste all that champagne by spraying it willy-nilly to celebrate a win? Blame an American motorsport driver called Dan Gurney who spontaneously doused his team mates on the podium after he won the Le Mans race in 1967. Other drivers followed suit and soon it became tradition. When Formula 1 races are held in Muslim countries (where alcohol is forbidden) the champers is switched to *waard*, which is a fizzy soft drink made from rose water and pomegranate.**

