



Rick's Grape Skinny



December 2016

“Come quickly...I am drinking the stars!”
(Dom Pérignon...upon drinking his first sip of Champagne)

A Brief History of Champagne!

Dom Pérignon -- The Brut-al Truth

The quote above is widely attributed to the Benedictine Monk, Dom Pérignon, when he first tasted a sparkling wine that later became known as *Champagne*. He very well may have uttered those clever words, but curiously, they weren't attributed to the Bubbly Monk until appearing in a print advertisement in the mid-1800s – over 100 years or so after the Dom's demise in 1715!

Dom Pérignon also is noted quite widely as the inventor of *Champagne!* But hey, don't go putting money on that notion – because it was in fact a British medical doctor and scientist, Christopher Merret, who was the first to document the production of sparkling wine. And he did that in 1662 – or some 40 years before the Dom's more notable endeavors came to light. Merret also created and codified the *Champagne*-making method that 200 years later became “*Méthode Champenoise*” – the universal benchmark and gold standard process used to craft the sparkling wines of *Champagne*.

The Dom's True Champagne Connection!

Dom Pérignon's actual role in the history of *Champagne* was that of a Cellar Master for the *Abbey of Hautvillers*. Paradoxically he strived to keep the cellared still wines in his charge from becoming bubbly! How's that for a bit of oeno-irony!?! In fact, bubbly wines presented a dangerous problem in that bottles were known to explode and cause injury! Such is the reason the unwanted gassed-up wine was known as *le vin du diable* – the Devil's wine!

The gassy bubbles that formed were Carbon Dioxide gas (CO₂) and the product of a secondary “in-bottle” fermentation which Dom Pérignon did indeed struggle to prevent! As the *Champagne* story evolved of course, common sense prevailed, and instead of trying to prevent the naturally-occurring second fermentation in-bottle, the Monks wisely took advantage of what was happening and *Voilà* – the result was *Champagne!* Over time, this sparkling

elixir became wildly popular – especially as it became associated with luxury and power -- and for being used to anoint the Kings of France. The production of *Champagne* grew from 300,000 bottles in 1800 to more than 20,000,000 bottles in 1850. That's a whole lot of French gas -- *n'est-ce pas!?*

In the process of taming the bubbly beast, Dom Pérignon developed both stronger bottles and a wire cage device, a *muselet*, to encase the explosion-prone corks. Deservedly, he became a respected and treasured winemaking expert. He was so revered that when he died, he was entombed in a parcel at the *Abbey of Hautvillers* that was traditionally reserved for Abbots. Ultimately, he earned his indelible distinction as the namesake for Moët et Chandon's most famous sparkling wine -- Dom Pérignon *Champagne!* Debuted in 1921, its name will forever be synonymous with the world's finest *Champagne*.

All that Sparkles is Not Champagne!

Without question, the typical enthusiast tends to refer to all sparkling wine as *Champagne* – but by virtue of French Regulation – and with the support of the international community – the only sparkling wines allowed to be called *Champagne* are those that are made in the Champagne Region of France. There are a few exceptions like here in the US where a handful of producers can call their bubbly “California Champagne” -- but for all intents and purposes, all other sparkling wines must go by some other name...even if made in France. As a for instance, sparkling wines made in the Burgundy and Alsace Regions of France are called *Crémant*.

Sparkling wine in Spain is known as *Cava* and in Italy they're known as *Spumante*. German and Austrian Bubbly are denoted by the term *Sekt* and in South Africa they're referred to as *Cap Classique*. To signify their similarity to the real “*de Gaulle*” as it were, one might also see the terms *Méthode Champenoise*, *Méthode Traditionelle* or *Metodo Champenoise* on a label – all to denote that traditional Champagne-making methods (*i.e. in-bottle secondary fermentation*) were used versus other methods such as the *Charmat* process where secondary fermentation is achieved in steel tanks.

Champagne or not, you might also see one of 7 basic terms on the label which characterize the general level of “dryness” or “sweetness” of the wine...which are pegged to the inherent amount of residual sugar present. From driest to sweetest, those terms are:

Brut Natural or Brut Zero - Extra Brut - Brut - Extra Dry or Extra Sec - Sec - Demi-sec - and Doux.
Santé!



Toast of the Month



“Here's to a world where all can belong
Where music is loud and the wine is strong.”
(Anonymous)

Holiday Stocking Stuffers!

Sparkling White

Schramsberg *Blanc de Blancs* 2013

Off-Dry, Rich and Scrumptious!

(Napa Valley -- Calistoga, CA)/\$30-\$35 -- This incredibly delicious “bubbly” was introduced in 1965 by its then and current owner and winemaker Hugh Davies...and it was immediately championed as America’s very first *Chardonnay*-based brut sparkling wine! Owing its name to the original owner and founding winemaker of Schramsberg Wines, Jacob Schram, current owner, Hugh Davies, preserved the name as a tribute to the winery’s history of ownership that was begun in 1862.

Among Schramsberg’s many distinctions, the one that most people remember is its use by President Richard Nixon during his renowned “*Toast to Peace*” in Beijing, China in 1972. Ever since then, this delightful sparkler is among the most popular sparkling wines in the country! Always made from 100% *Chardonnay* grapes and by the time-honored *Méthode Champenoise*, it’s typically aged for 2 years or more...and it can be safely cellared for decades! This is among my all time favorite apéritifs!

<http://schramsberg.com/>

Sparkling Rosé

Domaine Carneros *Cuvée de la Pompadour* 2013

Zesty and Zingy...it’s a Party in a Bottle!

(Carneros Valley, Napa/Sonoma, CA)/\$30-\$35

This exceptional sparkler is an homage to Madame de Pompadour, courtesan of King Louis IV. Made from 41% *Pinot Noir* and 51% *Chardonnay*, this beautiful Salmon-hued sparkling gem of a wine is a *Méthode Champenoise* bubbly that is a spitting image of the famous Claude Taittinger *Champagnes* of France...the very *Champagne House* that gave rise to this American clone in 1987. This spectacular wine is chocked full of both fruit and floral attributes...a product of allowing the *Pinot Noir* juice to rest with the skins for several days. This is the perfect Holiday Sparkler!!

www.domainecarneros.com

Reds

Blend

Ferrari-Carano *Tresor* 2009

Spectacularly Awesome Cab-heavy Elixir!

(Sonoma -- Healdsburg, California)/\$40-\$50 –

Famed viticultural duo Don and Rhonda Carano are the Proprietors, Growers and Winemakers -- and this magnificent blend of all five classic Bordeaux red grapes – 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Petit Verdot, 7% Merlot, 7% Malbec, and 6% Cabernet Franc provides nothing short of a distinctive and spectacular wine-drinking experience. Barrel-aged for 21 months in a 40% new and 60% older French oak...then bottle-aged for another 18 months, this phenomenal wine is classically structured, robustly complex and beautifully balanced. Oh, and it's also soft as a baby's cheeks! Although it can be enjoyed upon opening, it really should be allowed to breathe for a few hours so its soul is fully revealed upon the very first sip! If not this Vintage, then another! Any other! Suffice it to say, **Tresor is one of my all time favorite California red wines -- and it's one of those wines that you simply must experience!!**

<http://www.ferrari-carano.com/>

Blend

Chateau Bel-Air *Cuvée Jean-Gabriel* 2015

Rich, Elegant...and in a word...Spectacular!

(Lussac Saint-Emilion, Bordeaux FR)/\$25-\$30

A so-called “Jimmy Durante” wine for its extraordinary “nose” -- this “*Right Bank*” (Merlot based) Bordeaux red is from one of the region’s smallest and most intensely managed appellations – and it’s a great vintage year to boot! I think owner Jean-Noël Roi and his family put a magical spell on this union of 70% *Merlot*, 15% *Cabernet Sauvignon* and 15% *Cabernet Franc*...but they assign most of this wine’s special character to the terroir and the attention paid to growing and selecting the perfect fruit. And that it spent 18 months in 100% new oak was the finishing touch! Year in and out, it’s one of the best Bordeaux reds I’ve ever tasted...especially in this price range. If I thought I could get away with it, I’d buy at least another six bottles since this wine will age well for ten to fifteen years or longer!

<http://chateaubelair.fr/quality.aspx>

Season's Greetings!!