



## Rick's Grape Skinny



December 2015

**“Come quickly...I am drinking the stars!”**

(Dom Pérignon...upon drinking his first sip of Champagne)

### The Bubbly Monk...Dom Pérignon!

(The Brut-al Truth)

This month's quote (above) is widely attributed to Dom Pérignon, a Benedictine Monk, when he first tasted the incredible sparkling wine that later became known as “*Champagne*.” He very well may have been the first to utter those clever words, but curiously, they first saw the light of day in a print advertisement in the mid-1800s – over 100 years or so after the Dom's demise in 1715! W-h-a-t-e-v-e-r! 🍷

Beyond being the possible author of this most famous of *Champagne*-related quotes, Dom Pérignon also is noted quite broadly as the inventor of *Champagne* -- but don't put your money on that erroneous piece of lore! It was in fact a British medical doctor and scientist, Christopher Merret, who was the first to document the production of sparkling wine by intent in 1662 – or some 40 years before the Dom's more notable endeavors. Interestingly, Merret also employed and codified an approach that nearly 200 years later became known as the “*Méthode Champenoise*” – the now famous and gold standard process used to craft the sparkling wines of *Champagne*. Dom Pérignon's actual role in the history of *Champagne* was that of a cellar master for the *Abbey of Hautvillers* where “paradoxically” he labored and strived to keep the cellared still wines in his charge from becoming bubbly! It was such a huge and dreaded problem that it was not uncommon for bottles of wine 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! So how's that for a bit of irony?

The Carbon Dioxide gas bubbles that formed were the product of an undesirable secondary in-bottle fermentation which Dom Pérignon did indeed struggle tirelessly to prevent! As the *Champagne* story evolved of course, Mother Nature and common sense prevailed, and instead of trying to prevent and circumvent a naturally-occurring process, 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 came to be associated with luxury and power... and for its use in anointing 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 lot of French gas -- *n'est-ce pas!*?

In the process of trying to tame the bubbly beast with both stronger bottles and that odd little wire cage (*muselet*) to encase the mushroom cork, Dom Pérignon 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. In due course, 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 not being an average bear of course, you know better! Indeed, by 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 exceptions...even in the US...but for all intents and purposes, all other sparkling wines go by some other name. As a for instance, champagne-like sparkling wines made in the Burgundy and Alsace Regions of France are called *Crémant*.

Sparkling wines in Spain are called *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 denote their similarity to the real “*de Gaulle*” as it were, one might also see the terms *Méthode Champenoise* or *Méthode Traditionelle* printed on the label – all to suggest that historically traditional methods of producing *Champagne* (i.e. *in-bottle secondary fermentation*) were practiced versus other methods such as the *Charmat* process (used in making most *Spumante*) where secondary fermentation is achieved in stainless 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!*

*Seasons Greetings!!*



## Toast of the Month



“Here's to champagne for our real friends  
And to real pain for our sham friends.”  
(Anonymous)



## Holiday Stunners For Gifting or Gulping!

### Sparkling White

**Schramsberg Blanc de Blancs 2012**

**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 2012**

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

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

Made from 71% *Pinot Noir* and 29% *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](http://www.domainecarneros.com)

### Reds

#### Bonarda

**Domados 2008**

**Inky Dark and Sinfully Succulent!**

(Uco Valley, Mendoza, AR)/\$10-\$12

*Domados* translates to the word “tamed” in English and it was chosen by Italian immigrants Don Giocondo Ficcardi and Humberto Spigatin who founded the vineyards in 1920. Like taming a horse, they believed it took taming the soil and the grapes with knowledge, patience and meticulous care to make great wines. And lest there be doubt, they succeeded exceedingly well and today, their grandchildren, Daniel, Fernando and Reinaldo carry on their families’ tradition of making some of Argentina’s best wines. The late-ripening *Bonarda* used to be Argentina’s most prevalent grape...but by the early 2000’s, it fell to the # 2 spot thanks to its now more easily grown and popular cousin – *Malbec*. Known in other parts of the world as *Charbono*, the *Bonarda* makes spectacularly rich, flavorful and elegant wines -- and this 100% varietal expression is no exception. Regardless of vintage, hunt this wine down and try it! You’ll be really glad you did!

[www.domadoswines.com.ar](http://www.domadoswines.com.ar)

#### Blend

**Chateau Bel-Air Cuvée Jean-Gabriel 2014**

**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 60%-40% blend of *Merlot* and *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 18 months it spent 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. In fact, 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>