

Uneconomic Bubbles

THE MAINSTREAM MARQUES MAY RULE THE ROOST, BUT FOR A REAL FESTIVE EXPERIENCE, THESE EXCLUSIVE CHAMPAGNES HAVE THAT LITTLE EXTRA SPARKLE, WRITES **SIMON TAM**



STEVEN MEISEL / ART + COMMERCE

WITH THE HOLIDAY season approaching, whose thoughts don't turn to champagne? The starlet of the wine world, champagne has a well-earned reputation as a prima donna. Not only is the name "champagne" reserved for wines that are produced in Champagne, France, but individual brands jealously guard their own trademarks, stopping at nothing to retain the prestige and exclusivity they have worked centuries to establish.

In one example of Big Champagne's muscle-flexing, Veuve Clicquot sued an obscure Tasmanian wine producer for daring to use an orange label on its sparkling wine that was similar to Veuve's famous yellow one. Although Veuve won, the Tasmanian producer, Stefano Lubiana, rode

the coat-tails of the controversy, using it to gain plenty of publicity for itself.

Champagne is a juggernaut with a reputation so stellar that it can even override the authority of France's powerful wine regulators. The region has been granted leave to ignore the rules of appellation d'origine contrôlée, whereby the initials AOC must appear on every wine label.

Within the 25,000-sq-km Champagne area, there are many small vineyards, but the powerhouses of the region are the major brand empires: Veuve Clicquot, Moët et Chandon and the Heidsieck trio (Charles, Piper and Monopole).

Each house, or marque, has a distinctive style. Moët et Chandon, Hong Kong's favourite, has a predominantly





**Dom Pérignon
Oenothèque 1995**

Chardonnay style that tastes subtle and elegant, with a flavour that lasts.

Veuve Clicquot, on the other hand, commands attention. The world-famous yellow-label wine is known for its power, richness and depth of flavour, which is caused by its heavier Pinot Noir influence.

Expensive, deluxe champagne cuvées are made of a blend of just those two grape varieties: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. A third, Pinot Meunier, is present in other champagne but seldom makes an appearance in the blends of the region's top drops.

While Moët et Chandon and Veuve Clicquot dominate the Hong Kong market, the choice of champagnes is much broader. Below is a suggested tasting menu for the wealthy and adventurous to try this holiday season.

Ruinart Blanc de Blancs

Our champagne-tasting journey begins with Ruinart, a tasteful and refined introduction to the intricacy of champagne and how it interacts with the palate.

Pale in colour, Ruinart Blanc de Blancs (about HK\$600 in Hong Kong) is easy to appreciate, featuring notes of flowers, citrus and baked brioche, with a rich, creamy flavour. The bubbles foam up in the mouth, creating a

satisfying mouth feel.

Blanc de blancs (white wine made from white grapes) is a style that, although well-loved elsewhere around the world, is new in Hong Kong, where blanc de noirs (white wine made from red grapes) is more common.

Suggested food pairing: Simple sushi of white fish, such as snapper.

Delamotte Brut

A comparison in style to Ruinart is Delamotte, a palate-stimulating wine. Delamotte's brother in the Laurent-Perrier Group is the legendary Champagne Salon, a single-vineyard wine that is without peer among blancs de blancs for elegance and longevity. Salon is released only in years when the house deems the vintage to be perfect.

Delamotte Brut retails for a most reasonable \$300. Suggested food pairing: Fatty fish, such as salmon or hamachi.

Delamotte also makes a blanc de blancs. The wine's true personality and complexity are revealed only after 25-plus years. When young and adolescent, it lacks depth, but from its mid-20s it matures into a rich wine with depth of personality and adaptability, especially when it comes to food matching.

When aged, pair Delamotte (or, indeed, any mature blanc de blancs) with pan-fried veal, tartare of veal or roast sea bass served with an aromatic sauce. Or do as I do, and sip and savour an aged blanc de blancs on its own so the food does not distract from the wine's subtle complexity. Delamotte Blanc de Blancs 1995 retails for about \$660.

Delamotte's flavour is more defined than that of Ruinart, with a crisp, citrus character and less-vigorous bubbles. Tasting one after the other is sure to be educational.

Piper-Heidsieck Cuvée Rare

Deluxe cuvée Piper-Heidsieck Rare is the house's crème de la crème and epitomises Piper-Heidsieck's rich, elegant house style.

An outstanding blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Piper Rare is a harmony of flavours, all beginning and finishing in unison, and long-lasting on the palate.

Fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier married fashion and fine wine by dressing collectable bottles of Piper Rare in red vinyl corsets. It's not the first time champagne and the Parisian fashion world have been bedfellows: Karl Lagerfeld directed Dom Pérignon's kinky Oenothèque marketing campaign, starring supermodel Helena Christensen, and his clothing designs have incorporated stylised Dom Pérignon bubbles in the form of crystals. Alexander McQueen and Christian Lacroix have both designed bottles for Pommery.

Suggested food pairing: Piper Rare's richness pairs well with grilled salmon skin and yakitori skewers. A '79 vintage costs about \$9,000.

Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Brut

There are many ways to label a wine – vintage, non-vintage, deluxe cuvée – and then there are bottles that are named after legendary characters. Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Brut is named for the woman who, when she married François Billecart in 1818, helped to give the house its name.

Elisabeth Salmon Brut is a contemporary sparkling rosé that is elegant and sensual, with notes of baked cherry pie and red-fruit Danish pastry. Subtly flavoured, the Pinot Noir-Chardonnay blend is best served alone as a palate cleanser. A 1998 sells for \$1,170 in Hong Kong.

Dom Pérignon Oenothèque Collection

Dom Pérignon is named after a legendary figure in champagne history: the monk rumoured to have created the process that gives the wine its bubbles.

Elevating the wine's already high status a step further is the house's Oenothèque collection, which recreates elegant Dom Pérignon vintages that are almost extinct.

Oenothèque collection bottles are cellared by the company until their release, and are aged there for a further 14-plus years on top of the standard six to eight. Cellar Master Richard Geoffroy tastes every single wine before corking, looking for wines that accurately express vintage characteristics.

Geoffroy says the wines have three planes of flavour. The first takes 14 years to reveal itself, the second takes another 14 years and the third another 14. Vintages currently

available in Hong Kong include those from 1959, 1969, 1971, 1975, 1983, 1985 and 1995. They come with a hefty price tag (\$16,000 for the '69, \$13,280 for the '71 and \$11,680 for the '75) but also a guarantee of quality.

The Oenothèque vintage collection advances that quality even further through its contact with lees, residual dead yeast at the bottom of the barrel. The lees keep wine fresh and vibrant and encourage it to develop differently from wines that are bottle-aged, gaining yeasty flavours and rounding out the bubbles.

For wine-lovers who are lucky enough to have access to both a Dom Pérignon bottle-aged wine and an Oenothèque vintage, the comparison will be delicious and educational.

Krug Clos d'Ambonnay

Krug Clos d'Ambonnay – a 100 percent Pinot Noir wine – has more power and intricacy than an Oenothèque. The Krug family has been producing pretty much peerless champagne for generations and Clos d'Ambonnay is no exception: rich, powerful and immensely complex.

Grown in the vineyard of Montagne de Reims in the village of Ambonnay, Clos d'Ambonnay is a single-vineyard wine of limited production that proudly wears the Krug brand. It requires a huge amount of understanding to appreciate a 100 percent Pinot Noir wine and pricey (\$25,000) Clos d'Ambonnay is not for the faint-hearted. Its sibling, Krug Clos du Mesnil, is a 100 percent Chardonnay wine of elegance and sensuality that retails for \$9,000. Both can be cellared for a few decades before they are at their best.

As a tasting couplet, Clos d'Ambonnay and Dom Pérignon Oenothèque are chalk and cheese. Together, they epitomise what great champagne is all about: absolute elegance, seamless structure and indisputable power. ■

