

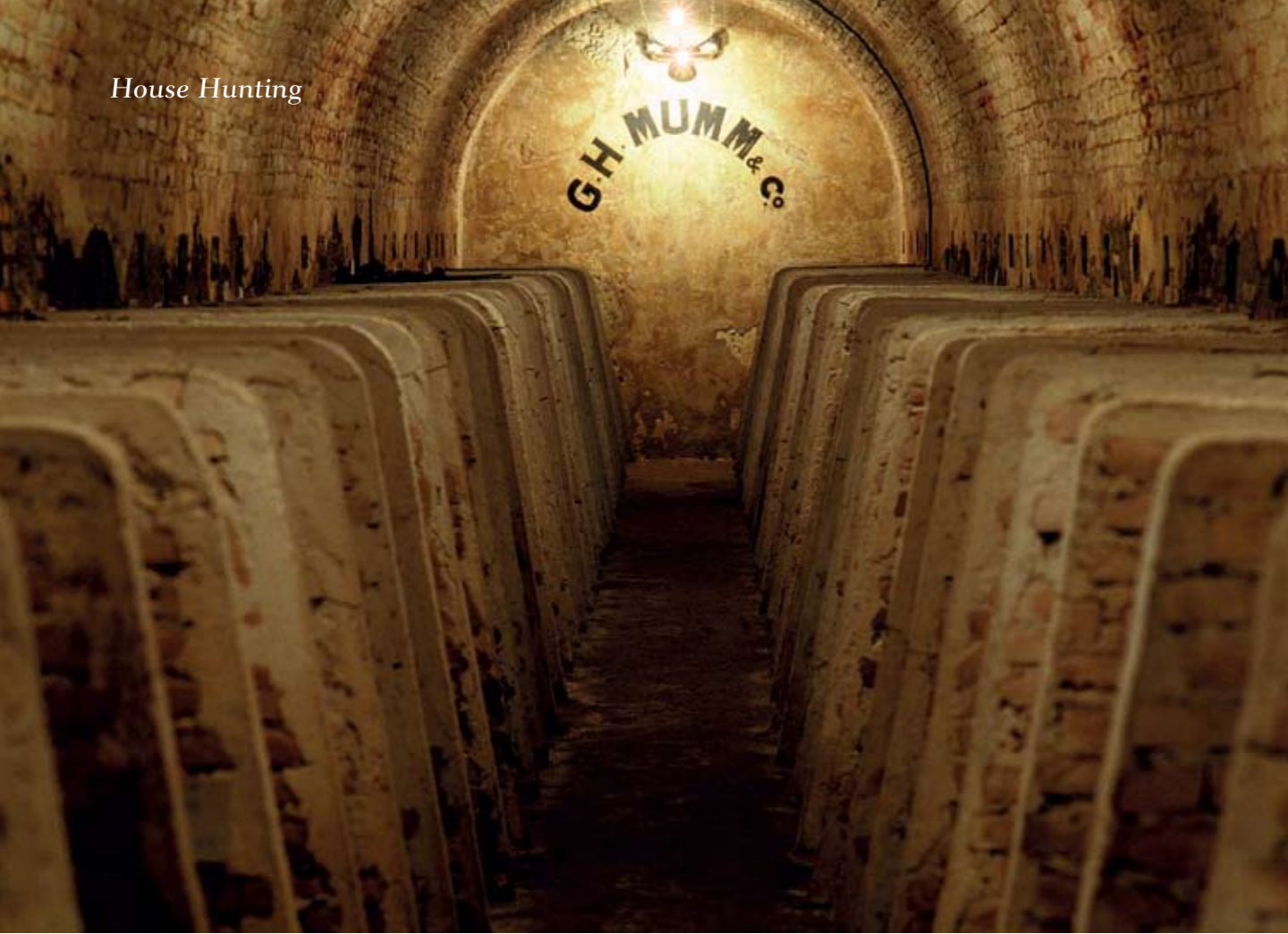
House Hunting

TO COLLECT OR TO DRINK? WE OPEN THE BOTTLE ON CHAMPAGNE HOUSES AND ENCOUNTER BREASTS, TSARS, WIDOWS, HELLO KITTY AND ANTARCTIC EXPLORERS.

BY STEVE WILLIAMS



Ice-cold Mumm marked Commander Charcot's triumphant voyage across the Antarctica.



“CHAMPAGNE MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE IT’S SUNDAY AND BETTER DAYS ARE JUST AROUND THE CORNER.”—MARLENE DIETRICH

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illpower. That’s probably the most important prerequisite in becoming a collector of champagne. Sure, there are other minor details such as a more than a rudimentary knowledge of champagnes, storage facilities and a fairly healthy bank account, but having the willpower not to consume your collection is vital. If you are the least bit concerned by this, might I suggest a slightly less palatable collection such as stamps or coins.

The history of Champagne couldn’t be more clouded in mystery, intrigue and confusion. There aren’t enough pages in *Robb Report Singapore* to document the development of the renowned beverage that has launched many a ship, and been consumed at countless joyous celebrations from coronations to birthdays to board meetings. It has toasted couples at the start of their marriage and marked the end of protracted and messy divorces. For years champagne has been rather wantonly sprayed

around winners’ podiums from Monte Carlo to Melbourne, and used to toast virtually any occasion such as the opening of an envelope.

We all know drinking champagne can be a religious experience, but its history has very strong bonds with the clergy, and is also splashed with bloody wars.

Rewind about seventy million years. The Champagne region of France was covered by oceans that receded, leaving chalk-like deposits just under the surface. Then a mere 10 million years later, earthquakes brought marine sediments up to the surface. This unique combination of geographical events resulted in the soil that has and produces the world’s finest Champagnes. The region has been sacked and pillaged by wars countless times over the years, from Attila The Hun, to the two World Wars. Thankfully these days it’s more of a battle of market-share.

The Romans were the first winemakers of the Champagne region, though before the 17th century it was better known for producing high-class wool. The man

Georges Hermann Mumm modernized champagne production by building new cellars and facilities around 1852.



anointed as being the “Father” of Champagne (no religious pun intended) is the Benedictine monk Pierre Pérignon, rather crassly referred to in some circles as “the drunk monk”. Pérignon was appointed cellar master at Abbaye d’Hautvillers in 1668. He has been credited with adding those venerated bubbles – the soul of Champagne, but in fact he tried to rid them from the “mad wine”. He wasn’t too successful, but he has been acclaimed for devel-

oping the blending of grapes, pressing black grapes to yield white juice, introducing stronger bottles and the cork, which replaced the wood and hemp stoppers. Methods that Dom Pérignon introduced in the 17th century are still being used today.

The religious theme does appear frequently through the development of Champagne – even to the names of the larger bottles. There’s the three-litre Jeroboam through to the very thirsty 16-litre Nebuchadnezzar. Incidentally Mr. Nebuchadnezzar was the King of Babylon from 605 – 562 BC, and fans of *The Matrix* movies will also be familiar with the name.

Collecting Champagnes has been a favored past time for centuries, these days there are even “plaquemuse-



philiacs” who collect the champagne bottle tops. As I saw on a website, “been there, drunk that”. With your lovely bottle tops, you could also add some limited edition Hello Kitty Champagne glasses. See www.kaboodle.com if you’re keen.

Serious collectors will no doubt be interested in Christie’s wine auctions in Hong Kong this year. The first is in May and as Rik Pike, a Christie’s wine specialist says, “Hong Kong is a strong and robust centre for fine wine sales.” His advice to collectors? “There are some great buying opportunities in the current economic climate. Do your research, pick up the phone and call Christie’s and talk to a wine specialist, email or visit the website.” (www.christies.com).

The most expensive Champagne sale ever at Christie’s? Three bottles of Dom Pérignon 1921 were sold in New York in June 2004 for US\$24,675 or US\$8,225 a bottle. Perfect with your new Hello Kitty glasses.

Another fascinating lot was a bottle of Heidsieck & Co Monopole, Vintage 1907, which was recovered from the shipwreck of a Swedish schooner, sunk in 1916 in the Baltic Sea. The wreck was salvaged in 1997, and the champagne was found to be in perfect condition due to the constant temperature and pressure. The bottle was auctioned at Christie’s for around US\$3,700.

Champagne collectors obviously concentrate on the major champagne houses, so let’s start with possibly the most famous.



Opposite: The coveted 1993 Oenothèque champagne from Dom Pérignon and the distinguished-looking presentation box; Dom Pérignon Vintage 2000 is a tribute to champagne’s “creator” (top).



Last year, after a seven-year wait, Dom Pérignon unveiled its latest creation – Vintage 2000 – an homage to the aforementioned Pierre Pérignon.

Richard Geoffroy, Dom Pérignon's Chef de Cave was in Singapore for the launch of Vintage 2000 last year, and chose 25 "exceptional individuals" in Singapore who "embody the spirit of Dom Pérignon" to receive a bottle. Unfortunately, he must have lost my phone number.

The vintage was described as a "classic example of the Dom Pérignon spirit, but with its own mysterious quality and strong presence". Which sounds like the trailer for a new Batman film.

Like all Dom Pérignon vintages, it is made from grapes grown on Dom Pérignon's eight grands crus, together with the Hautvillers premier cru.

Geoffroy's tasting notes describe Vintage 2000 as "Fresh, crystalline and sharp, the first nose reveals a unique vegetal, aquatic world, with hints of white pepper

The Vintage 1995 white gold jeroboam comes in a bottle sheathed in laser-engraved white gold.



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and gardenia. The wine's maturity then makes a gentle appearance before exhaling peaty accents. In the mouth, the attack is direct, a prelude to a lusty roundness that seems to curl up like a plant.

"The notes of anis and dried ginger glide over fruit skins (pear and mango), creating an effect that is more tactile than fleshy. The finale stretches out and then comes to rest, calm, mature, and diffuse. An ineffable charm has made itself felt, with no effect on the wine's integrity."

Collectors searching for some rare Dom Pérignon Champagnes may be interested in investigating the Oenothèque label. Dom Pérignon vintages are only released after being aged for seven years. A small portion of each vintage is kept on the lees in the cellars even longer, to continue the development and reveal its natural qualities.

When a vintage is released for the second time, it merits the "Oenothèque" (wine library) label. It is up to the cellar master to decide this, and, to ensure its excellence,

every Oenothèque bottle is tasted at disgorging by a Dom Pérignon winemaker.

An example of Dom Pérignon's "Oenothèque" vintages is the 1993, which was described as a "vintage characterized by its precocity". Tasting notes reveal, "The first hints of dried herbs on the nose rapidly give way to candied grapefruit and cinnamon. This is rounded off with notes of biscuit and raisin." And on the palate? "The sensations follow one after another closely, with rhythm, precision and intensity. The initial density evolves into a creamy amplitude. Its finesse draws out and takes off on a sappy note."

On a non-sappy note, if bling's your thing, last year Dom Pérignon launched what it described as "the world's most expensive Champagne Jeroboam" – the limited edition Vintage 1995 White Gold Jeroboam. It's sheathed in white gold and laser-engraved with the Dom Pérignon signature Vintage 1995 label. It was unveiled officially at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, and was

The champagne terrain features a special mix of chalk-like deposits and marine sediments.

priced at S\$24,000. One for the collection. Then again, if you want to think pink, that white gold would sit very nicely with a vintage 1959 Rosé. Two bottles of this mythical “rarer than rare” vintage sold for a record price of US\$84,700 at an auction of rare champagnes in New York last year. Their value was estimated at between US\$7,000 – \$8,000. A nice little earner. Other lots included a magnum of vintage 1928 which sold for US\$12,705.

It makes you wonder what would have happened if Nicole-Barbe Ponsardin’s husband François Clicquot hadn’t passed away on October 23, 1805. As a result of this tragic event, the 27 year old became known as Veuve or “widow” Clicquot, and the rest as they say, is history.

Madame Clicquot took over the running of the business that had been founded by her father in law in 1772, which, up until that time, had been involved in wool trading, banking and Champagne production. Consolidating the business, Madame Clicquot focused solely on Champagne, and in so doing was responsible for “industrializing” Champagne production.

Veuve Clicquot’s La Grande Dame was created in hom-

Apparently Rémi Krug doesn’t make promises, but he says, “There is one I make without reserve and without hesitation: you will never forget your first taste of Krug.” This statement by the President of Krug rings true for champagne connoisseurs and collectors alike, and has done since 1843.

Krug is renowned for the individual character of its champagne, which no doubt stems from the founder of the house, Johann-Joseph Krug.

Krug was a German immigrant, a maverick who gave up a comfortable position at a successful champagne house to branch out on his own. Pun intended.

Very few champagne houses produce only premium blends. Krug is one of them and they say it’s this attention to detail that is reflected in each bottle. Krug’s wines are made from selected chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier grapes which are first fermented in 205 litre oak casks, made from trees that are at least two hundred years old, not the large stainless steel vats favoured by other houses.

Another signature of the Krug style is they are made to



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age to a. The first cuvée of this champagne was the 1962 vintage celebrating the bicentennial of Veuve Clicquot. The 1998 vintage was aged for eight years in the Crayères (chalk cellars) before being released.

La Grande Dame 1998 is made from grapes from eight top-rated grands crus. The supplied tasting notes reveal, “On the first nose, typical Chardonnay characteristics come to the fore, with the arrival of floral and mineral aromas (acacia, ferns, chalk). By agitating the wine, scents of candied fruit (citrus fruits, apricots, quince) and sweet almond emerge, to reappear later in the mouth. After rotating the wine for a few minutes more, rare notes such as peaty malt, tobacco and delicate herbs, are gradually unveiled. This aromatic, impressively complex bouquet is confirmed in the mouth. On the palate, the wine is clear-cut and pure, perfectly balanced with a delightful silky smoothness. La Grande Dame 1998, with its lace-like construction, has a long, lively, and structured finish. This wine has unbelievable ageing potential.” Which is exactly what collectors want to hear.

mature for at least six to eight years. Then each year, the members of the Krug family blend the different wines in a process known as “assemblage”. This art of blending has been passed on from one Krug generation to the next. That must make for interesting family get-togethers.

All of this history and dedication is evident in the Krug Grande Cuvée. According to Krug, this is the “timelessly stylish signature of Krug and the supreme demonstration of the art of blending”.

A signature of the Krug style evident in the Grande Cuvée is that the grapes are sourced from what they describe as an “intricate mosaic of fine-quality plots, some of which are not much bigger than gardens”.

In fact, some farmers have been supplying grapes to Krug for generations.

Krug Grand Cuvée is blended from as many as 50 wines from three grape varieties, and between six and ten different years. Krug sum up the key elements of Grand Cuvée in three words: individuality, superiority and modesty. Yes, that’s all very nice, but what about the

The widow Clicquot had an amazing business sense (top). The brut champagne honoring Madame Clicquot (opposite).





all-important taste? Krug describe it as “a gleaming gold colour, an extravagantly expensive bouquet, and almost creamy texture. Then, an explosion of flavours, at once mellow and mature, crisp and clean. Toast – soft spices – dried fruit – candied fruit.”

The final word on Krug Grande Cuvée comes from Rémi Krug: “If Johann-Joseph Krug tasted today’s Grand Cuvée, he would no doubt say that it was exactly what he dreamt of when he founded Krug in 1843.”

Last year the house released “the rarest of all Krugs”,

champagne began at the Reims-Gueux circuit in France’s Champagne region. It wasn’t until 1966 that the first podium champagne shower occurred. As Jo Siffert, the winner of his category in the Le Mans 24-hour race stood on the podium clutching his champagne, the cork exploded out of the overheated bottle, spraying the crowd. The next year Dan Gurney was quite deliberate about it, and it’s since become a ritual at sporting events around the world. For years, jeroboams of Mumm Cordon Rouge have awaited the victors of Formula One races.

Clos d’Ambonnay 1995. This Champagne is the product of a small, single walled vineyard in the village of Ambonnay, using 100 percent Pinot Noir grapes.

Krug Clos d’Ambonnay 1995 has been described as having “an intense copper-gold colour and a rich, creamy bouquet with distinctive hints of ripe fruit and fresh toasted brioche.” Only 24 bottles were released in Singapore retailing for S\$3,800 (excluding GST). A real collector’s item.

It was taking the term “champagne on ice” to the extreme. On Bastille Day, July 14 1904, Commander Jean-Baptiste Charcot celebrated his achievement of becoming the first Frenchman to cross Antarctica. The choice of refreshment that day on the ice floe? A bottle of G.H. Mumm Cordon Rouge Champagne. Obviously.

The House was officially established in Rheims in 1827, and in 1852, Georges Hermann Mumm, the son of one of the founders, took control. He set about building new cellars and facilities and went as far as introducing a bonus system and injury allowance for his workers. Apart from a social conscience, he had lofty ambitions—his maxim of “only the best”, reverberates through the house of G.H. Mumm today.

In 1876 he introduced that famous red sash that still adorns bottles of Mumm’s Cordon Rouge.

As well as the ice, Cordon Rouge has links with the sea and air – the House has sponsored many yachting events over the years, and Walther de Mumm took part in air races as co-pilot to the famous French aviator Louis Blériot in two monoplanes in the early 1900’s.

Back on the ground, champagne has been a part of motorsport celebrations since 1950, when the tradition of paying tribute to the winner with a bottle of



If you haven’t had the chance to take the chequered flag of an F1 race, the supplied tasting notes of Cordon Rouge reveal, “The bubbles are rich on the palate, but never overpowering. The mix of fresh fruit and caramel aromas give even more intensity to the finish. This is a subtly balanced wine with a remarkable capacity to linger in the mouth.”

I wonder if Lewis Hamilton would agree?

The “grapes of wrath” could well apply to Moët & Chandon’s Grand Vintage 2003.

The vintage illustrates the fragility and fickleness of champagne production. The 2003 harvest had to endure a bitter French winter with temperatures plummeting to -11°C and the most severe frosts since 1957, destroying around 13,000 hectares of vineyards. Then add to the equation the earliest blossoming since 1971, the most meagre yield since 1985, and the hottest summer on record. Disaster. The harvest commenced on August 18, which was the earliest since 1822.

Moët & Chandon’s Grand Vintage 2003 basically had everything thrown at it except biblical plagues, locusts and pestilence.

The House triumphed over adversity and its 68th vintage came into being. But more about that later.

Moët & Chandon have long held links with royalty.

Going back a few years to 1446, the brothers Jean and Nicolas Moët were confirmed as nobles by King Charles VII. Then in 1743, Claude Moët, a descendant of the brothers who founded the Maison Moët, having been a wine merchant since the early 18th century. Nobles and aristocrats became regular customers and champagne became the beverage of choice during the reign of King Louis XV. In fact, the King’s mistress, Madame de Pompadour, was a serious devotee of Moët and became an “ambassador” in 1745. She apparently said, “Champagne is the only wine that makes women beautiful even after drinking it!” Incidentally, the legend that Champagne glasses were modelled on the shape of Madame de Pompadour’s breasts is just that, a legend. Though it’s also been credited to Marie Antoinette, Empress Josephine and Helen of Troy. Sadly, Pamela Anderson didn’t make the list.

The links to royalty continued in 1893 when Queen Victoria granted her royal warrant to Moët & Chandon. This continued when Queen Elizabeth II assumed the throne in 1953 and is still in force today.

So back to Moët & Chandon’s Grand Vintage 2003 – a part of a long and illustrious history for the Champagne house. They are quite rightly proud of the vintage, the result as they say of a “spectacularly difficult year”.

The product of an extremely difficult year is the rare grand vintage 2003 (top).



The supplied tasting notes describe it as “A powerful wine: its velvety maturity is immediately apparent, forceful in its creamy blondness”. I’m sure Her Majesty is enjoying a quiet glass in Buckingham Palace even as we speak.

It would be interesting to see what Louis Roederer would think of this invitation to drink his beloved champagne. “Let’s sip the Cris and get pissy-pissy”. It’s a paradox that over the years such a refined brand has been embraced by popular culture and immortalized by hip-hop artists such as Jay-Z, the late Tupac Shakur and others. There was a media storm a few years ago involving Jay-Z and his so called “boycott” of the champagne. Cristal is also the beverage of choice for Mariah Carey whose contract rider apparently requires a chilled bottle in her dressing room. If media reports are correct, Lindsay Lohan wasn’t impressed at a music awards night when there was only one bottle waiting in her dressing room, not the alleged required ten. Didn’t realise La Lohan was such an avid champagne collector.

Speaking of Hollywood, the history of Louis Roederer would make a good script, possibly a dramatic thriller, with tales of Tsars, and legends of assassinations.

Louis Roederer inherited his uncle’s champagne house in 1833 giving it his own name. Assisted by his brother and a colleague, they turned the fortunes of the champagne house around. Louis Roederer II succeeded his father and continued the success, reaching sales of 2.5



million bottles in 1872, a tenth of champagne production at that time. Louis Roederer is still controlled by the family, and is one of the largest independent houses.

The famed Cristal Champagne came into being due to the fact that Louis Roederer senior broke into the Russian market and went straight to the top. Tsar Alexander II was rather partial to Roederer’s wines and ordered a special cuvee to be

made, dispatching his cellar master to France. The Tsar was offended that nothing distinguished the Champagne bottles on his table from those of the others, so Roederer commissioned a Flemish master glass worker who designed a flat-based, untinted crystal bottle, with the imperial coat of arms. Suitably impressed, the Tsar appointed the House of Louis Roederer official supplier to the imperial court of Russia. Unfortunately, the October Revolution of 1917 got in the way.

There are fables that the Tsar was paranoid of assassination attempts and ordered a transparent bottle to avoid being poisoned. This is like so many stories involving the romantic, mythical, tumultuous stories of champagne. Stories.

Cristal is the shining jewel in the Louis Roederer crown, a much-loved wine sought out by collectors (and hip-hop artists). So when you’re adding it to your wine cave, that is if you can resist opening it, think of bling and Russian Tsars, an interesting paradox – but it’s that mystery surrounding champagne that makes it even more appealing. À votre santé! ☞

The shining jewel in the Louis Roederer Crown: Cristal (top).