



The sparkling widows of Champagne

Images : Michael Zak, Debbie McKinstry

Provincial Living's sommelier, Neil Allanby, takes us on a waltz through the history of Champagne with the many "merry" widows who made the famous drink what it is today.

The history of Champagne is full of "Merry Widows", not to mention a monk or two. It seems you had to be single to succeed in the Champagne industry; a fact that lends a new meaning to the phrase "married to the bottle".

At first glance, it's a little surprising that the Champagne industry was one of the few in which women were able to break through the ranks of the boys' club. The Champagne department is the most northerly of the French wine growing regions. It's a challenging environment in which to grow grapes, with cold winters, mild summers, spring frosts and autumn storms. The winemakers of Champagne have always had to adapt to succeed. But perhaps that's why they were so willing to welcome the widows into their ranks.

Champagne's winemakers first introduced their wines to the Royal Court at Versailles during the second half of the 17th Century. At that time, Champagne wines were not at all like the Champagne we drink today – they were non-sparkling, light, acidic and pinkish in colour. But who would have had the courage to tell King Louis XIV, the most powerful man in the world, that the wine he served was not up to scratch?

Of course, nobody did, and it soon became popular across the channel, too. When London high society heard that a new kind of wine had become all the rage at the French court, it simply had to try some. Wine merchants imported the wine to London in bulk, where it was bottled and sold. They faced two major problems, however – a large proportion of the bottles

exploded, and those that managed to stay intact grew cloudy over time.

Enter a monk whose name is synonymous with Champagne – Dom Perignon from the Abbey of Hautvillers. He worked out that the fermentation process of the bulk wine had ceased in winter, prior to bottling, and had then recommenced in the warm summer months after bottling. This caused a build up of carbon dioxide gas, creating a pressure too strong for the bottle.

The English developed hardier bottles, made from thicker glass, and better corking methods. So we have both Dom Perignon and England to thank for sparkling Champagne. Interestingly enough, Dom Perignon preferred to use his understanding of the fermentation process to prevent the bubbles forming. (He also, reputedly, never drank alcohol!)

Further developments were required to create the Champagne that we know today, however. The wine may have gained its signature bubbles, but the bottles were still growing cloudy. Luckily, Champagne vineyard owner, Francois Cliquot, married Mademoiselle Nicole Barbe Ponsardin in 1798.

Appropriately enough, the wedding took place in a Champagne cellar. M. Cliquot died just seven years later, however, leaving his wife, Veuve (Widow) Cliquot, in charge of the business. She changed the name to Veuve Cliquot Ponsardin and ran the Champagne House for the next 60 years, increasing business turnover by an astonishing 2000%.

Veuve Cliquot is credited with inventing the *pupitres* (wooden stands which hold the bottles at an angle) that are used in the remuage process to remove the lees sediment in Champagne. So it's thanks to her that we have crystal clear sparkling wine.

When Veuve Cliquot's long reign as Champagne's widow-in-chief drew to a close, another widow quickly stepped up to the plate – Veuve Pommery. Still one of the largest Champagne Houses, the House of Pommery began life in 1836. Back then, it was named after its first owner, Narcisse Greno, who produced still red wines. In 1858, Greno invited Alexandre Louis Pommery and his wife, Louise, into partnership. When M. Pommery died two years later, and M. Greno retired, Veuve Louise Pommery took full control of the House.

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It was Veuve Pommery who decided that the House should produce sparkling wines. She also encouraged and motivated other Champagne producers, showing them the way forward to greater prosperity. During her 30 years at the helm, Veuve Pommery built a fabulous *château* for the House headquarters and bought 120 limestone and chalk pits, which ran for 20km beneath Reims. In these natural cellars, she could store over 20 million bottles at a constant temperature. Pommery's *prestige cuvée*, Cuvée Louise, is named after her.

The next Champagne widow to rise to prominence was Veuve Laurent Perrier. Alphonse Pierlot founded the Champagne House that was to become Laurent Perrier in 1812. Upon his death, he willed the company to his cellarmaster, Eugene Laurent, who ran it with his wife, Mathilde Perrier. Eugene died in 1887 and Mathilde took total control of the House with great success. She produced 600,000 bottles of Champagne and became an industry leader. In 1889, Veuve Mathilde created a new bone-dry style of Champagne, which she called Grand Vin Sans Sucre, later to be renamed Ultra Brut.

Veuve Laurent Perrier's success story continued up until the outbreak of the First World War. Between the wars, however, the Champagne region faced tough times, and Laurent Perrier fell into a slow decline. Mathilde died in 1925. By 1939, the company was almost bankrupt, when yet another widow decided to purchase it.

Marie-Louise Lanson de Nonancourt, whose brothers ran Lanson Pere et Fils, trained her sons to run Laurent Perrier. When her youngest son Bernard took over in 1949, he successfully expanded production



and sales territories, to the extent that Laurent Perrier is now the third best selling Champagne in the world.

Having a widow run your Champagne House turned out to be such a pre-requisite for success that the House of Bollinger also tried it in the mid 20th century. Fourth generation Jacques Bollinger married Elisabeth Law de Lauriston-Bourbers, known as Lily, in 1923. When Jacques died in 1941, Lily Bollinger took over the venerable old Champagne House, continuing to expand production and to launch new styles of Champagne.

Lily is best known for travelling the world to promote the brand we now refer to as "Bolly". In an interview with London's Daily Mail in October 1961, she famously said of Champagne, "I drink it 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!" >>

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10 things you may not know about Champagne

- Before the mid-19th century, Champagne had a much higher sugar content and was about six times sweeter than it is now
- The growing area for Champagne was officially set in 1927 and has hardly changed since
- If the Champagne region was located further north, the grapes wouldn't ripen enough to make wine
- The Champagne region has 280,000 grape plots, with 150,000 growers
- All Champagne grapes are harvested by hand, requiring a staggering 120,000+ labourers every year
- There are an estimated 1.5 billion bottles of Champagne stored in underground chalk cellars in the Champagne region
- A professional bottle turner (*remueur*) will hand-turn around 40,000 bottles every day
- In 1887, the Champenois won their first case to restrict the use of the word "Champagne" to describe wine from the Champagne region alone
- The highest price ever paid for a bottle of Champagne was €30,000 for a bottle of Veuve Cliquot from the 1800's found on the ocean floor of the Baltic Sea
- The average vineyard in Australia is 23ha, but the average in Champagne is only 0.1ha ♣



"I drink it when I'm happy and when I'm sad...Otherwise, I never touch it – unless I'm thirsty!" - Lily Bollinger