

Champagne Houses

Where it is all at

Visiting Champagne is a precious experience. But when you go visiting its champagne house, you are taken on a guided tour by no less than the gentlemen whose names adorn the label, the experience does go to another bubbly level

Text & Photographs: **Farzana Contractor**

My introduction to champagne houses and champagne tasting in Champagne could not have been better. At Dom Pérignon. In scale and history it is right up there. With added

advantage of its architectural legacy, its vast green area, its café, its abbey... The abbey, which is where we headed right at first. I was glad to pay homage to the man, the Benedictine monk, Dom Pierre Pérignon,

who put all his passion and drive into forming the basis of what we today happily allow to cascade down our parched throats! Ah, champagne, evermore!

Dom Pérignon, the brand is owned by

the champagne house Moët & Chandon. The producers are co-founders of LVMH – a French multinational luxury goods conglomerate, owning brands like *Bulgari*, *Givenchy*, *Louis Vuitton*, *Hennessy*, among other luxury brands.

As is obvious *Dom Pérignon* is not named after a location, or is the founder's name. The brand actually tells the story of Dom Pérignon who lived back in 17th and 18th century. He is famous for being an important quality pioneer for the production of Champagne wine. Obviously he was an important figure in the history of Champagne otherwise Moët & Chandon wouldn't name their brand after him.

His work was aimed at preventing the wine from re-fermentation and breaking of the wine bottles which used to lead to chain explosions of the bottles in proximity to each other. He is said to have established certain winemaking rules so that the sparkly wine doesn't explode. Stories also proclaim that the monk was the first one to use cork instead of wood, that he could name the exact vineyard by tasting a single grape. It is he who exclaimed to his fellow colleagues, "Come quickly... I am tasting stars!" when he first tasted his bubbly creation, much in the fashion of Archimedes' 'Eureka'!

If champagne is the king of wines, *Dom* is the king of champagnes. The price of this bubbly, the bottles still carry the *khaki* colour label of yore, varies depending on the age of the champagne. *DP*, if we can dare to shorten the name to that, has sold at auctions for as much as \$170, 641. Or as little, depending on who is consuming this little bit of trivia.

Seated at a giant teak wood table, in

a long, high-ceiling room, with the abbey clock striking 12 noon, the beautiful Axelle Araud, oenologist at *Dom Pérignon* took us through three tastings of *Dom*. Two Brut, vintage 1998 and 2004, the third, a Rosé, 2003. In one sentence, I loved them all. And no, I did not spit any of it out. That, I leave to the specialists. And I approve of them doing that only at trade fairs, where they go tasting 100s of wines and champagnes in a matter of a few hours. And I do wonder, don't the insides of their cheeks go numb?

Well, it doesn't really matter, all I know was the champagne in Champagne was giving me pink cheeks, you could see it even through my tan.

The next few days were quite a whirl, with more visits to other champagne houses, more meetings with producers and winemakers, more tastings, many cellar walks, more information, more knowledge, experiences to cherish.

What I found so disarming was the passion with which representatives of each house took us through their respective premises. But before I go further, a quick run-through on what, why and how of champagne...

What makes champagne unique is the



In Hautvillers



Dom Pérignon



In the abbey of Dom Pérignon



Dom Pérignon, flying buttress and all



Axelle Araud, oenologist at Dom Pérignon



In the beautiful tasting room of Dom Pérignon

We tasted stars at Dom



The meticulous and expressive guide at Bollinger



bubbles. In Champagne it is done through what is known all over the world as *Méthode Champenoise*. In this method, first a dry wine is produced using the standard method of pressing as in all other areas. The wine is then placed in bottles with a dose of yeast and added sugar, so a second fermentation can occur in the bottle. The bottles are capped and placed on racks in the cool cellars of the champagne house (in Champagne, wineries are referred to as houses). While in bottle the yeast consumes the sugar and creates carbon dioxide (CO2). Since the bottle is capped there is nowhere for the CO2 to go, so it dissolves into the liquid waiting for a chance to escape. Once there is no more sugar to consume, the yeast cells die and float to the bottom of the bottle. This process is called ‘remuage’.

Traditionally this was done by hand and a skilled remueur could do 40,000 bottles a day. Today, it is mostly done by machines. Once ready, the necks of the bottles are dipped into a freezing brine solution which freezes the lees into a solid plug. The crown cap is removed and the pressure of the CO2 emerging from the liquid forces the plug out of the bottle. The bottles are then topped off with a bit of sweetened wine called ‘dosage’, which allows for a bit more fermentation in the bottle. It is then closed with the traditional cork and wire cage and allowed to rest. For a minimum of 18 months, after which we may drink it. Thus armed with detailed knowledge I followed the others into the next champagne house, Bollinger. The guide, now a petite and fragile woman, as French as you can get, *chapeau* in place, took us on a tour of Bollinger explaining in great lengths about the soil, the vines, the weather, the four seasons and what work happens in each. She even took us to the shed which houses the repairs of their barrels, showing



At Bollinger



In the cellar at Bollinger



Through the narrow streets of Ay



They were one better than the other





Jean-claude Fourmon -President, Joseph Perrier



In the cellar of Joseph Perrier



The exclusive vault at Joseph Perrier



us the old-fashioned tools still in use. The walls displayed picture frames, advertising Bollinger 50 years ago. The tasting itself was in a bright, cheerful and cozy room, atop the main mansion. Needless to say, I was loving it all.

I do feel tastes and after effects of champagne or any wine for that matter is a very personal affair. And while I may discuss it when I am drinking it, I would hesitate to offer my views in writing, so others may go by it. That would be being presumptuous. For what seems good in my mouth may not, in someone else's. Also, I have noticed there are times my opinion changes about the same wine and I have put it down to my varying moods. Or situations, or locations. But honest, by and large, I don't think I have ever tasted a champagne I have not liked. It's just, good, better, or the best.

Like when we were at Joseph Perrier's. I found the company of Jean-Claude Fourmon, president of his multiple generations, family-owned, champagne house, so much fun, I enjoyed the contents of *Josephine* from his artistically designed bottle, immensely. He was quite a riot; charming to say the least, but also funny, intelligent, forthright and totally committed. In the cellar, with the help of a torch light he explained to us the map of the area, before leading us around his cellars, made in a manner where natural light comes filtering in, just substantially so. Dinner, later in Reims with his wife, was outstanding. Every server knew him and clearly loved him. He is the kind who would be a great hit with Indians should he ever come to holiday in our part of the world. It might seem strange but I liked the champagne because of his company.

The aura of a big time champagne house owner (producer, if that sounds more refined), communicated to me through Antoine Roland-Billecart. Champagne Billecart-Salmon is recognised in the world of champagnes as great producers. And Antoine personified that. He casually walked into the sedate tasting room, with high stools in a niche corner, elegantly dressed and smelling divine. Dashing looks, infectious smile. And my mind went,

'Hmm... a cross between Robert Kennedy and Robert Redford.' And like an idiot I told him so, even before I said anything about his champagnes!

But yes, we did visit the Billecart-Salmon vineyards, small, exclusive parcels of land. As well as the cellars, where they offered us unbreakable glasses to wear, so that we shield our eyes, in case of any untoward accident. We checked their floor area with the gleaming stainless steel vats and then settled in to do some tasting. The vicinity of this champagne house, with its

surrounding formal French gardens and beautiful mansion was really appealing.

R&L Legras had sixth generation owner JulienBarbier pouring out the *Cuvée St Vincent 2000* for us to taste. Understated and relaxed, he told us how this Cuvée had spectacular ageing potential, living easily through the decades. It was indeed delightful. Learning about the grapes and *crus* can get very addictive. Like it was fascinating to note St Vincent first made its presence felt as Vintage 1964

and has since then been on sale through the following vintages, '69, '71', '73, '76, '81, '88, '90,

'96 and then 2000. At R&L Legras, they specialise in creating champagnes which go well with the gourmet and epicurean thought. Like *Evanesence*, a Cuvée which has no added sugar, is bright and shiny gold in hue. I noticed loads of bottles on the mantle piece with attractive, especially created labels for a range of 3-starred Michelin restaurants, including Paris'



Billecart-Salmon mansion



One of the exclusive vineyards of Billecart-Salmon mansion



The cellar master's jottings at Billecart-Salmon



Cheers, says Antoine Roland-Billecart



In Chouilly at R&L Legrasas



Julien Barbier, the boss of R&L Legrasas



La Tour d'Argent, Guy Savoy and Ledoyen. Sotheby's, the auction house has also launched its own label champagne and it's courtesy Julien Barbier.

The tour that I enjoyed the most was at Lanson. These are the bottles you will see at Wimbledon tennis, where they have been partnering the grand slam tournament for the last 25 years. Lanson, founded in 1760, focused then (as also today), on exports and found patronage in royalty. Lanson was supplying champagne by royal appointment to the courts of the United Kingdom, Sweden and Spain. It still remains a purveyor of champagne to the British Royal Family and displays the coat of arms of Elizabeth II on its bottles.

The facility at Lanson is huge. And state-of-the-art. Steel vats in various sizes have the village names scripted upon them, in a stylish gold font, marking the origin of the grape from their various plots, a staggering 1200 acres. I learnt



the House of Lanson always blend their champagnes using a majority of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, giving it a good balance between power and finesse. Their range of wines are labelled as *Black, Rosé, Ivory and Gold*, the last one being vintage. But what I really liked was the limited edition *Pink Label*. Lanson, a pioneer in the production of Rosé champagne, has created the first entirely pink bottle. The effervescent design of this new, customisable limited edition would be perfect to serve at the International Pink Day, a cause gaining momentum the world over to highlight breast cancer, where the most famous of architectural structures in international cities are bathed in pink. Our very own Taj Mahal (hotel) in Bombay being one such.

At Champagne Charles Mignon, we got to try our hands at blending. You begin to understand just what that means only when you get down and dirty. Phew, the art and science of blending wines is best left to the masters. I was a total write-off, even if Rajiv Singhal and Karan Vasani, a young winemaker from Sula, India, did a wee bit better. I would never be able to drink what I created in the test tube via the contents of unlabelled bottles handed





to me. But Bruno Mignon, the owner of the house, a bit shy and reserved, could not help laughing at our antics. Thank you Mr Mignon, kind of you to allow us to try our hand at blending wines. But I sure am glad I am a publisher, editor and photographer and not winemaker.

While I was already familiar with the other brands, Jacquart Champagne was for me, the first time. A beautiful mansion

housing some incredible champagnes, Jacquart was set up in 1962 with currently 1800 growers and 5760 acres under its belt. That's 7% of the Champagne region, no small feat.

There are five labels under the Jacquart name, *Brut Mosaïque*, *Rosé*, *Extra Brut*, *Blanc de Blancs* and *Brut de Nominée*, and Gloria Connesson, the Hospitality Manager took us through them with panache! *Brut Mosaïque* their entry level wine, found great favour with me. I found it to be soft and lingering in the mouth way after the tasting, sitting with me in the car even as we left for our next destination; dinner at the Michelin-starred *Le Millénaire* in Reims. Where we had some more of the good life, this time with a little bit of help from Chef Laurent Laplaige.

I went to sleep that night digesting on some champagne trivia; there could be anywhere between 50 million to 250 million bubbles in a champagne bottle. Wow, no wonder it tastes like tingling stars.



Gloria Connesson takes us through the tasting at Jacquart



The entrance to Jacquart champagne house



Chef Laurent Laplaige of Le Millénaire