

Continuing our discussion of Champagne, we want to find out what is out there to make us rush to the nearest retailer and spend all the money in the wine fund. Let's start with "style" because Champagne is really not one wine, but a range of wines that span a spectrum of flavors and textures. At one end are the light-bodied Champagnes with fine citrusy acidity and delicate creamy flavors. At the other end are the opulent, full-bodied Champagnes with toasty, biscuit, vanilla flavors and dense, custardy textures. Karen MacNeil has done us the favor of presenting this range of Champagnes to us in the form of a chart. Allow me to present it to you because most of the Champagnes mentioned are available in Lowcountry stores.

- Light. Champagne Lanson, Abele, Bricout, and Tailvent
- Light to Medium. Champagne Billecart-Salmon, Laurent Perrier, Perrier-Jouet, and Tattinger
- Medium. Charles Heidsieck, Deutz, Moët Chandon, Mumm, Piper-Heidsieck, and Pol Roger
- Mediumm to Full. Gosset, Ruinart, and Veuve Cliquot Ponsardin
- Full. Bollinger, Krug, and Louis Roederer

Before you spend all the money in the wine fund, experiment with one or two of those mentioned. These wines are expensive so go easy.

Next we should look at what is meant by “Vintage vs. Non-Vintage and Prestige Cuvee”. Here again Karen MacNeil shows us the way. There are four factors that help determine the differences between vintage, non-vintage, and Prestige Cuvee. They are the vineyards, the grapes, the blending and the aging.

- **VINEYARDS** are rated 80 to 100. The higher the number the better the Vineyard. For non-vintage and vintage Champagne, grapes usually come from vineyards rated 80 to 90. For the Prestige Cuvee the grapes come from a vineyard rated 100.
- **GRAPES.** Most Champagnes are a blend of Chardonnay, Pinot noir, and Pinot Meunier. For vintage and non-vintage Champagne, Pinot Meunier is used sparingly because it has an earthy and fruity flavor. For the Prestige Cuvee, most houses rarely include it in their product.
- **BLENDING.** All Champagnes are blends. Blending is considered the most critical skill a winemaker **MUST** possess. For non-vintage and vintage Champagnes, 30 to 60 still wines from the inventory of the winemaker, are used in the blend. (Yes, the winemaker actually has that many still wines, and maybe more, available to him. This is undoubtedly a logistics nightmare that I will leave to the experts to handle.) For the Prestige Cuvee, only the best wines from the best vineyards that is available to the winemaker.
- **AGING.** In accordance with legal minimums: Non-vintage Champagne is 15 months or more, Vintage Champagne is three years or more, and Prestige Cuvee is four to seven years.

A good example of a Prestige Cuvee is The House of Roderer. They produced a Champagne for Czar Alexander 11 in 1876. It was called Cristal because it was shipped in Crystal Bottles. Today it is still called Cristal and it is easily recognized when you see the bottles wrapped in yellow Cellophane. The price is \$\$\$\$\$. Another Prestige Cuvee is of course Dom Perignon produced by Moet Chandon. Again the price is \$\$\$\$.

We move now to “Types” of Champagne. This section is brief, however necessary. There is “Blanc de Blanc,” a term translated literally “from white to white.” Blanc de Blanc Champagnes are produced 100% from Chardonnay grapes. The next type is “Blanc de Noir,” produced from Pinot Noir grapes. The wine is still produced with a white color. This is accomplished by allowing the grape juice a very short contact with the dark Pinot Noir skin. Blanc de Noir is rare

in Champagne. The opposite is true in California where Blanc de Noir is predominate. (A story for another day.)

Our last Type is Rose Champagne. This is only five percent of the production from Champagne, but it is the crème de la crème. Rose is made by adding a small bit of Pinot Noir still wine into each Champagne bottle before the second fermentation. This is an expensive and very difficult procedure that does not carry with it a guarantee that the color will be the same from each production lot.

A few words about sweet and dry Champagnes.

Champagne labels will reveal sweet or dry by using the terms Extra Brut all the way to Demi Sec. Here is a solution based on a personal opinion. Pass over the Extra Brut and go to the Brut. It is best served as an aperitif or with a meal. Dry and Demi Sec are best to end a meal or to serve with a fruit dessert.

Cheers!

Next stop: Burgundy.

WINESPEAK

Nothing beats a quality tour and tasting of a good winery. That is exactly what happened to me in Champagne. I spent a good deal of time at a winery called Pommery, a producer of Prestige Cuvee located in the heart of Rheims. The facility dates back to the early 1800's, when the chalk caves were improved upon and Louise Pommery, who took over the reins of the winery as a widow and built a very successful Champagne house. The tour included an overview of production, storage, and a complete explanation of how the wine was hidden from the Germans

in World War 2. (I'll never tell.) I also discovered that making arrangements way ahead of time for a private tour is the way to go. I did this on the recommendation of a friend and I am glad I took his advice.