

1824



2024

THE  
**ATHENÆUM**  
PALL MALL LONDON

# **CHAMPAGNE TASTING DINNER**

to be held on

**Thursday 4th July 2024 at 7pm**

**Introduced by**

**Mr. Richard Mair**

**Sabrage demonstrated**

**by Mr. Christopher P. Noon**

**Chaired by**

**Professor James Crabbe**

LA CUVÉE



## MENU

**Wiston Estate Blanc de Blancs 2018, ABV 12% with Sabrage**



**P. Brugnon Premier Cru Brut NV, ABV 12% and  
Champagne Barnaut Blanc de Noirs Brut Grand Cru Bouzy NV ABV 12.5%**

*Royal Greenland prawns with iceberg lettuce, Marie Rose sauce and smoked  
salmon*



**Laurent Perrier Cuvée Rosé NV, ABV 12% and  
Camel Valley Cornwall Brut 2021, ABV 12.5%**

*Supreme of corn fed chicken stuffed with mushrooms and tarragon,  
Dauphinoise potatoes, woodland mushrooms and peas, heritage carrots, chicken  
and Champagne jus*



**Nyetimber Cuvée Chérie Demi-Sec NV, ABV 12% and  
Pol Roger Brut Réserve NV, ABV 12.5%**

*Strawberry and basil Eton Mess*

# CHAMPAGNE, SABRAGE AND ENGLISH WINES

## Sabrage and the Confrérie du Sabre d'Or

Sabrage is the art of opening a bottle of Champagne with a sabre. It is believed to date from the time of Napoleon, when cavalry officers would slice the corks off Champagne bottles with their swords, rather than put themselves to the trouble of getting off their horses and opening the bottles by hand.

While sabrage sounds quite daunting, it can be performed in the comfort of one's own home, with a suitably chilled bottle and a blunt sword. There is a global society—The Confrérie du Sabre d'Or—which is dedicated to organising events to promote the enjoyment of Champagne and the noble art of sabrage. Their Maîtres-Sabreurs (licensed, insured instructors) can be hired to attend private events, and have experience teaching sabrage to people of all ages. As you will see from the instruction before tonight's dinner, it is quite safe, very straightforward and good fun!

## Origins of Sparkling Champagne

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, as a wealthy and powerful nation with limited winemaking resources, England had a marked influence on the development of sparkling Champagne. Non-sparkling Champagne became popular in London society following the arrival of epicurean Charles de Saint-Évremond in 1661. At parties and banquets, Saint-Évremond promoted the wines of the Champagne region. Wine was often transported to England in wooden barrels and merchant houses would then bottle the wine for sale. English glassmakers used coal-fuelled ovens and produced stronger, more durable glass bottles than wood-fired French glass. The English also rediscovered the use of cork stoppers, once used by the Romans but forgotten for centuries after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. During the winters of the Champagne region, temperatures would drop so low that the fermentation process was prematurely halted, leaving some residual sugar and dormant yeast. When the wine was shipped to and bottled in England, the fermentation process would restart when the weather warmed and the cork-stoppered wine would begin to build pressure from carbon dioxide gas. When the wine was opened, it would be bubbly.

The English were among the first who saw the tendency of Champagne to sparkle as a desirable trait. In 1662, the English scientist Sir Christopher Merret presented a paper at the Royal Society detailing how the presence of sugar in a wine led to it

developing a sparkle, and that nearly any wine could be made to sparkle by adding sugar before bottling. This is one of the first known accounts of understanding the process of sparkling wine and suggests that British merchants were producing "sparkling Champagne" even before the French Champenois were deliberately making it. The popularity of sparkling Champagne steadily grew.

## **Champagne Grape Varieties**

The three principal grape varieties used in Champagne are the Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. However, four other grape varieties are allowed and are sometimes used: the Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Petit Meslier, and Arbane.

The Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier are both black grapes so a "Blanc de Blancs" is made exclusively from the white Chardonnay.



**Chardonnay**



**Pinot Noir**



**Pinot Meunier**

## “Méthode Champenoise” or “Traditional Method”

The **primary fermentation** is the process of making still white wine (the base wine, or *vin clair*). This is basically the same as making any other still wine. Although primary fermentation is typically complete within one to two weeks after harvest, the base wines are generally aged for a period of months prior to the next step of the process.

Historically the base wines were aged initially in large oak barrels. However, in recent years other types of tanks such as stainless steel tanks, concrete tanks, and even large clay jars (amphorae) are sometimes used.

**Malolactic fermentation** is an optional step in the winemaking process. It's a process in which bacteria react with the malic acid that is naturally present in the grape juice, and convert the malic acid into lactic acid. This can create a more buttery flavour.

Winemakers often choose to ferment the base wines separately. They can then **blend** them together to achieve the flavour that they are aiming for. This blending process is called *assemblage* in order to produce a so-called **reserve wine**.

Next, the wine is bottled into individual bottles for the **second fermentation**, called the *tirage*. The secondary fermentation is what gives Champagne its bubbles. Because the original yeast in the still wine has died by this point, a small amount of additional wine with sugar and yeast – the *liqueur de tirage* – is added to each bottle to restart the fermentation process.

The bottle is then closed with a crown cap, allowing the pressure of carbon dioxide gas generated by the second fermentation to build up. The second fermentation typically takes from 2 weeks to 3 months, and ends naturally once the sugar from the *liqueur di tirage* is consumed. Once the yeast runs out of sugar, it dies and these dead yeast cells settle as sediment – called the **lees** – in the bottle. The time that the wine spends in contact with these dead yeast cells is called **lees ageing**.



During lees ageing, the bottle is stored on its side and over time the sediment eventually settles along the bottom side of the bottle. The bottles are then transferred to **racks** or *pupitres*. **Riddling** or *remuage* is the process of rotating and tilting the bottle more and more each day until the neck is pointed downwards, shifting the lees down and concentrating them in the neck of the bottle. Riddling is done traditionally by hand over a period of 8 to 10 weeks but some houses use a machine called a *Gyropallete* to tilt an entire rack of bottles all at once. Using this machine, the process can be completed in as little as one week.

**Disgorgement** or *dégorgement*: the neck of the bottle is dipped in a refrigerated ice salt bath, freezing the wine and sediment in the neck of the bottle. When the cap is removed the small plug of frozen wine and sediment with dead yeast cells is forced out leaving behind the clear wine.

The wine that was lost during disgorgement is then replaced in a process known as *dosage*. The liquid that will be added is typically aged Champagne with a small amount of cane sugar blended in, called the *liqueur d'expédition*. The amount of sugar used will determine the level of sweetness of the final wine – from *brut nature* up to *doux*.

The bottle is then corked and a **wire cage** or *muselet* wrapped around the cork to hold it in place. Bottles are then stored in a cool cellar and continue their ageing process inside the bottle, until the time comes for the bottles to be labelled and wrapped in metal foil ready to go on sale.



## Champagne Levels of Sweetness



The level of dryness indicated on a champagne label relates to how much sugar is added to the wine during *dosage*. There are seven levels of sweetness recognized in Champagne:

| <i>Indication (label term)</i> | <i>g/L of Sugar</i> | <i>Quality of Taste</i> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Brut Nature (Brut Zero)        | 0-3                 | Bone dry                |
| Extra Brut                     | 0-6                 | Very Dry                |
| Brut                           | 0-12                | Dry                     |
| Extra Dry/Sec                  | 12-17               | Detectable Sweetness    |
| Dry/Sec                        | 12-32               | Moderately sweet        |
| Demi-Sec                       | 32-50               | Sweet                   |
| Doux                           | 50+                 | Extremely sweet         |

In the early days of champagne history, the fashionable drinking style was on the sweeter side. The contemporary palate favours quite the opposite. The top three driest styles are the most popular, with zero dosage examples making a trendy splash on the market — particularly with the rise of the grower-champagne movement from which many *brut natures* hail.

Brut champagne is the most common of all the levels on the market because it is a very balanced style—a high enough dosage to soften the acid, but not so high as to impart sweetness.



## THE WINES

### **Wiston Estate Blanc de Blancs 2018, ABV 12%**

The Wiston Estate, near Ashington in West Sussex, has been owned by the Goring family since 1743. The Romans are thought to have cultivated vines on the South Downs during their occupation nearly 2000 years ago, but anyway in 2006 the Gorings planted a 16 acre site with Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay. The vineyard now extends to 30 acres.

Marcus Rayner-Ward is the winemaker. The Blanc de Blancs won a Gold Medal at the 2023 International Wine Challenge. It is a vintage wine from 2018, aged for 3½ years on the lees. Lemony hints on the nose and greengage, apples and pastry flavours on the palate.

## **P. Brugnon Premier Cru Brut NV, ABV 12%**

Many Champagne houses don't own the vineyards that supply their grapes. Instead, they contract with the vineyard owners for their grapes. In some cases, vineyard ownership in Champagne has been passed down for generations and a family might own and manage just a few rows of vines. In other cases, wines are produced by the same person that farmed the grapes. These are known as "Grower Champagnes", an example of which is the Brugnon Champagne we are tasting today.

Philippe Brugnon grows grapes in two Premier Cru villages: the Chardonnay comes from his father's village (Écueil), and the Pinots Noir and Meunier come from his mother's village (Rilly-la-Montagne, where his cellars are based). His Brut NV comes primarily from the 2018 harvest and was aged for two years before disgorgement. The composition is 65% Pinot Noir, which brings strength and character, 30% Chardonnay, which offers bright, clear citrus notes, and 5% Pinot Meunier, which provides a floral aspect and a lingering freshness and fruitiness.

## **Champagne Barnaut Blanc de Noirs Brut Grand Cru Bouzy NV, ABV 12.5%**

In 1873, Edmond Barnaut married Apolline Godmé-Barancourt, descendant of an old vigneron family of the delightfully named Bouzy in Champagne. The following year he opened for business in Bouzy and developed his own brand, separate from the dominant powerhouses of Reims and Epernay. His traditions have been maintained down to the current 5th and 6th generations.

Grower Champagne Barnaut today cultivates 32 holdings totalling 11 hectares (28 acres) in the grand cru vineyards of Louvois, Bouzy, and Ambonnay. Furthermore, the domain cultivates 4.6 hectares (11 acres) of grapes in the Marne Valley, which it sells to the cooperative that produces the Nicolas Feuillatte brand, reserving a portion of the Chardonnay for a Blanc de Blancs. In stainless steel, all of the wine's cuvées go through malolactic fermentation. This wine is a Blanc de Noirs based solely on Pinot Noir, disgorged in December 2017 and is primarily of the 2015 vintage.

## **Laurent Perrier Cuvée Rosé NV, ABV 12%**

A former cooper and bottler, André-Michel Pierlot settled in Tours-sur-Marne in 1812 as a champagne wine merchant. It was in this Grand Cru village that he founded what was to become Maison Laurent-Perrier.

The House went through several changes of ownership, including Veuve Laurent-Perrier who was one of the famous champagne widows along with Veuve Clicquot and Veuve Pommery.

Over the years Laurent-Perrier has risen to become the world's third best selling champagne brand, behind Moët et Chandon and Veuve Clicquot. They were one of the first to introduce a Rosé Champagne around 50 years ago.

This is a fine example of a Rosé Champagne, which is on the Coffee Room Wine List. It is made 100% from Pinot Noir, and maceration lasts from just 48 to 72 hours depending on the vintage, which is enough to extract sufficient colour from the grapes to give the wine this very pretty pink colour. Experts identify a wide range of red fruits - raspberry, redcurrant, strawberry and cherry – on the nose and the palate.

## **Camel Valley Cornwall Brut 2021, ABV 12.5%**

Ex-RAF pilot Bob Lindo and his wife Annie planted their first 8000 vines in 1989. They won their first award in 1993, and have gained many prizes in subsequent years. Notably, they won the Vintners Trophy for the best UK English sparkling wine in 2007 and 2008, and the Trophy for Best International Traditional Method Sparkling Wine in 2010 in Verona, ahead of Bollinger and Roederer Champagnes.

In 2018, Camel Valley became the first English wine producer to be granted a royal warrant, to the then Prince of Wales.

This is perhaps the most remarkable of English sparkling wines, based on a slate subsoil, and in particular producing wines of such high quality.

## **Nyetimber Cuvée Chérie Demi-Sec NV, ABV 12%**

Nyetimber is situated near West Chiltington in West Sussex, and was mentioned in the Domesday Book. In 1988 Stuart and Sandy Moss planted a vineyard at Nyetimber, consisting of the three Champagne grape varieties, with the intention of producing traditional method sparkling wine. The first wine from Nyetimber was

released in 1997, and won an International Wine & Spirit Competition Gold Medal. In 2022 Nyetimber won two medals at the Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships

The prominence of Sussex as a wine-producing region is further emphasised by being the location of Plumpton College, which specializes in viticulture and winemaking courses, and has become the Centre of Excellence for the UK wine industry.

Nyetimber Classic Cuvée NV has been available by the glass for a couple of years in the Morning Room and on the Coffee Room Wine List, at very close to the same price as Club Champagne. We also had another English sparkling wine, Ridgeview, but that has now sold out.

Today we are tasting Nyetimber's Demi-sec, which I think is gorgeous and I hope that you do too. Referring to the above table, it has 38g/L of sugar. Some however prefer to keep their Champagne dry and for them we have our last Champagne, Pol Roger.

## **Pol Roger Brut Réserve NV, ABV 12.5%**

Pol Roger made his first sale of wine in January 1849 to a merchant in Ay, the native village of Pol Roger. The firm developed rapidly. From Ay, it moved to Epernay in 1851.

As early as 1855, Pol began to favour the production of brut Champagne. He knew that this was the type of Champagne which the English preferred. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pol received an imperial and royal warrant to supply Champagne to the Austro-Hungarian court. More recently, Pol Roger held the Royal Warrant as purveyors of Champagne to Queen Elizabeth II.

Pol Roger famously became the favourite champagne of Winston Churchill. Churchill once memorably said: "My tastes are simple: I am easily satisfied with the best champagne."

This wine is Non-Vintage and is on the Coffee Room wine list.

**Richard Mair, June 2024**

### **Acknowledgements**

Fizz! Champagne and Sparkling Wines of the World – Anthony Rose 2022  
Champagne School, Las Vegas, NV 89119

## Members and Guests

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