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Champagne: small bubbles, big dreams

By Keith Spicer

REIMS. “My only regret is that I did not drink more champagne,” groaned famed British economist, John Maynard Keynes, on his deathbed. Here in Champagne’s capital, you share his regret. A dizzying 4,733 producers, 65 cooperatives and 284 mix-and-market houses offer the “heavenly stars” that Dom Pérignon perfected (but did not invent) in 1670. Tottering home after bubbly indulgences from the Champagne region’s 250 kilometers of caves, you yearn like a rueful fisherman for the bottles that got away.

From the start, royals (real, or self-appointed like Napoleon), clerics, extravagant Englishmen and flighty ladies early took to this nectar of the gods. Louis XIV and Dom Pérignon were both born the same day, and died the same day. The Sun-King’s bubbly praise got the monk’s well-blended, cleverly-corked new version of Champagne off to a giggly, if not roaring, start. Abandoned Queen Marie-Antoinette, awaiting Louis XIV’s grandson Louis XVI to rise to the occasion, found solace in the divine potion. By dubious legend, she designed bubble-killing Champagne glasses in the shape of her breasts – a pitch to her flagging hubby’s imagination.

Seven British monarchs since 1884 have favoured Bollinger Champagne -- James Bond’s tipple when not flirting with Moët et Chandon’s *Dom Pérignon*. But pound-rich Brits today still like Pol Roger Champagne. Along with brandy, this fine blend helped Winston Churchill win the Second World War. His reward from Pol Roger: a case a week for life. As for the afterlife: Winnie’s name graces a special blend called *Pol Roger Winston Churchill*. (History disputes whether Churchill or Napoleon first said: “I drink Champagne when I win, to celebrate...and I drink Champagne when I lose, to console myself.”)

True to their wartime PM, who quaffed a bottle a day (plus brandy), Brits down awesome quantities of “champers:” roughly 37 million bottles a year. Serious boozers of anything except aftershave, they are by far France’s thirstiest customers

Another reason Europe’s royals may like Champagne: for centuries, kings of France were crowned in the Cathedral of Reims, “France’s Westminster Abbey.” It was here that Charles VII – aptly called “the well-served” – was crowned in 1429 in the presence of a famous groupie, Joan of Arc.

Clerics, adroitly ricocheting between heaven and hell, often condemned this libido-stirring libation as the devil’s drink. But the region early got an ecclesiastic boost: Pope Urban II (1088-1099), a local boy, let it be known that offering him a quantity of Champagne wine (not yet even bubbly yet) might secure an audience. With a pope onside, marketers, adding bubbles, went crazy. Certainly Urban II did: he launched the First Crusade.

Today, many countries sell sparkling wines that surf on Champagne’s reputation for celebratory prestige. Italy’s *Spumante* and *Prosecco*, Spain’s *Cava*, Germany’s *Sekt* are the best known. Georgians and Americans, among others, have also exploited the “Champagne” name that France’s diplomats and European Union trade negotiators

fiercely protect. Even other French regions produce “Champagne-style” wine that’s often not bad: *Crémant d’Alsace*, *Crémant de Loire* are sometimes better than low-end Champagne. But the real McCoy, conferring top prices, comes only from the 32,341 hectares of the official Champagne region.

A visit to the chalk caves running beneath Reim’s streets can chill you to 12 degrees C. as you watch workers giving millions of bottles a quarter-turn to help fermentation. Among big houses offering tours and tastings: Heidsieck, Ruinart, Pommery, Taittinger, Lanson, Roederer. But the real fun lies in discovering your own small producer among those 4,733 producers. Proud of their products and trampled by the mass-market weight of the big houses, they will spend hours with an individual. You may form a friendship and lifelong attachment to a splendid brand nobody has heard of.

“It’s hard work,” avows Josiane Daviaux-Quinet, who produces fine Champagnes with husband Philippe. “But it’s a joy to craft such exquisite tastes.”

Much of modern Champagne mythology comes from the movies. Scores of them from *Casablanca* to *An Affair to Remember* use bubbles to tickle hearts. Perhaps the most charming film was *Gigi*, with a girlish Leslie Caron teasing older-man Louis Jourdan with these words:

*The night they invented champagne*

*It's plain as it can be*

*They thought of you and me*

*The night they invented champagne*

*They absolutely knew*

*That all we'd want to do*

*Is fly to the sky on champagne.*

Madame Caron, now elegantly escaped from teenage delirium, runs her own enchanting inn, *La Lucarne aux Chouettes*, in tiny Villeneuve-sur-Yonne, 100-odd kilometers south of here in Burgundy. Her fine restaurant serves four top Champagnes: Bollinger, Pommery, Ruinart and Besserat de Bellefon.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she told me last month, “but I don’t have a favourite because -- to tell you the honest truth – I am like our new President, Nicolas Sarkozy, a non-drinker!”

Nevertheless, you can join her there to sip your own favourite. And, with a little luck, fly to the sky.