

# THE ESSENCE OF EFFERVESCENCE

*Exploring the art of French Champagne at the Absa Champagne Festival*

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHAMPAGNE

Champagne wines predate medieval history, and have strong ties to religious and royal ceremonies. It was the Romans who introduced the vines to the Champagne region. The transitional oceanic climate, chalky subsoil and sloping landscape saw the planting of many vineyards and the area became known for its still red and rosé wines.

During early Christianity, vineyards were in the hands of the monasteries, and the wine was used in Holy Communion celebrations. On Christmas day in 496 AD, Clovis was baptised in Reims Cathedral and crowned the first King of France and Champagne wines were used in the Consecration. Centuries later, Joan I, Queen of Navarre and Countess of Champagne married Philip IV ('The Fair'), King of France establishing an eternal link to the French Crown. This Royal link saw Champagne wines flow freely at every coronation banquet that has been held in Reims since 898, and were in addition offered to any royal visitors to the region.

The wine's reputation spread beyond national borders during the 12th Century and Champagne as we know it, appeared in the 17th Century, once vintners, spurred on by the developments made by the monk Dom Perignon, began mastering the natural effervescence of the local wine. By the 18th Century, Champagne was so entrenched in popular imagination, it was the only wine served at the Fête de la Fédération held on the Champs de Mars on 14 July 1790, to toast the outcome of the French Revolution. Since the 19th Century, the wines have been used to celebrate the signing of important treaties, royal weddings and many other ceremonial occasions. They became prized as a symbol of excellence, quality and achievement and of the French spirit.

In July 2015, the Champagne hillsides, houses and cellars were added to the Unesco World Heritage List. The listing specifically names the historic vineyards of Hautvillers, Ay and Mareuil-sur-Ay, Saint-Nicaise Hill in Reims, and the Avenue de Champagne and Fort Chabrol in Epernay. These three components – the supply basin formed by the historic hillsides, the production sites (with their underground cellars) and the sales and distribution centres (the Champagne Houses) all bear testimony to the birth of a very specialised artisan activity that has become an agro-industrial enterprise.

## THE PRODUCTION OF CHAMPAGNE

After 1945, Champagne was no longer seen as just a drink for the aristocracy, and it became popular in wider social circles. Today, the annual production exceeds 300 million bottles, and the interests of the independent Champagne producers are represented by the Comité Champagne, a trade association with a mandate to promote the vines and wines of Champagne.

There are strict rules surrounding the production of a true Champagne wine. Firstly, these wines are exclusively produced







from grapes grown, harvested and made into wine within the Champagne delimited region in France. They are produced from just three authorised grape varieties: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier. The vines must be short pruned according to Cordon de Royat, Chablis and Guyot pruning techniques, and there are capped grape yields per hectare. Juice extraction is strictly limited to 102 litres of must per 160 kilos of grapes and there are minimum annual required alcohol levels by volume. The wine makers must have dedicated Champagne wine-making and storage premises and the Champagne is produced according to a natural winemaking process known as the 'Méthode Champenoise'. Prior to shipping, each bottle must have undergone a minimum 15 months storage period. This increases to three years for Vintage Champagne and considerably longer for the Special Cuvees.

#### A DIVERSE RANGE

There is an amazing range of Champagne wines to savour, each a result of a careful combination of Crus, grape varieties, vintages and dosage. The term 'Cru' refers to a particular winegrowing location, with a specific growing environment, especially soil and climate that is more suited to growing one grape varietal over another. Champagne is represented by 320 crus and 275,000 individual vineyard parcels, each with its own unique profile. The grapes themselves have their own unique personality that will reveal itself differently according to the terroir. Blanc de blanc Champagnes are blended from white Chardonnay grapes, while blanc de noirs are blended from black pinot noir or Pinot Meunier grapes.

One can also choose from Brut non-vintage or vintage Champagnes. Non-vintage are traditionally blended from grapes grown in different years, but may also combine wines from a range of crus and varietals, depending on the style of the Champagne. These blends allow for a consistent house style, which is unique to each brand of Champagne, regardless of vintage variability. Vintage Champagne is blended from wines of a single outstanding year, which the individual producer chooses to declare as a vintage. Have you ever noticed that each Champagne has a different colour to the next? From pale gold to green-gold, old-gold to grey-gold, and more. The Champagne's colour is the result of the chosen blend and the style of the wine in question. The more powerful the wine, the deeper the colour. Rosé Champagnes are made via maceration of whole, uncrushed black grapes, or by blending white wines with a 'still' red Champagne appellation wine. The deeper the flavour and aroma, the darker the wine. More than 90 percent of Champagne's are categorised as 'Brut' which means that it has been bottled almost in its natural state, with only the smallest addition of sweetness to reveal its aromatic expression. The additional sweetness known as the dosage, is the base of Champagne's sweetness scale. Extra Brut on the one end, has no dosage, while Doux on the other is the sweetest of Champagnes. Covering the middle ground are Brut, Sec and Demi-Sec





## ABSA 15TH ANNUAL CHAMPAGNE FESTIVAL

The festival is the only French Champagne event in South Africa and was the perfect opportunity to celebrate the exceptional offerings from 26 of France's premier Houses. For the first time the event was run over three days, from the 19th to 21st October 2016, with the opening and closing nights reserved for Absa's specially invited guests. In keeping with the prestige of such an event, it was hosted in the luxurious Polo Room at the Inanda Club in Sandton, Johannesburg.

The huge demand for tickets over the past few years saw the sponsors increase the festival's duration from two nights, to three, in 2016. Winston Monale, Head: Absa Wealth Management explains, "The Champagne Festival is incredibly successful, very popular and quite niche. We like it because it speaks to our specific market. We like that we can be in that sort of environment having cool, easy, relaxed conversations with our clients in a very open space. The Inanda Club is a great venue, it's very fresh and it's in the heart of the Sandton CBD where most of our clients are based. We went for three nights this year because of its popularity. We had to make the considered decision of keeping it niche, boutique like, and intimate, and not having too many people at the function. So we went with the decision to balance it by adding one more night, rather than adding more people to the event. On the Wednesday night, we had Absa Wealth and Investment Management clients, and then on the Friday our colleagues at the Corporate and Investment bank, sponsored their clients at the event for the evening. The Thursday evening was reserved as the public event and as we've seen every year, the tickets sold out very quickly."

The closed client evenings allow Absa, and the Corporate and Investment banking teams the opportunity to network with their clients in a very relaxed setting, and to celebrate their clients' achievements, as well as the journey they take together. It is also a thank you, to their high net worth client base for their continued support, and the chance for everyone to shrug off their more serious sides, and enjoy a light-hearted evening of great food, great atmosphere and great conversation. "We really like the event, particularly because you can really talk to the Champagne makers, and get to find out about the different brands,

the different estates, and the history behind them. That's my favourite part of the festival. I love the history of champagne. I love the artistry that goes into making the Champagne and the commitment that is made to it by the families, so there's this whole interweaving of the story of Champagne and the remarkable stories that we are trying to craft on the journey that we embark on with our wealth clients," says Monale.

From a visitor's perspective, it was clear that the sponsors and organisers truly understood the meaning of luxury, offering their elegantly-dressed guests an opportunity to interact with the Houses on a very personal level in a spacious, quiet and uncrowded setting. The soft white décor, crystal chandeliers, and ambient pink lighting, spoke whimsically to the visitors' enviable opportunities to sample both white and rosé champagnes, while they mingled with other guests. We enjoyed taking our time, unhurried and unpressured, to savour the many varietals and learn more about the incredible and unique stories behind 26 of France's leading Champagne Houses. The incredible gastronomic delights that evening, were as exquisitely opulent as the Champagne they accompanied. The oyster and sushi tables in particular, proved a hugely popular meeting place between tastings. A highlight for all, was dessert - presented as an extravaganza of light, sound and food flair - which proved as decadently delicious on the palate, as it was creative in its production. This is a must attend event to put in your diaries now, for the 2017 season. ■ Lindsay Grubb

Photos: Courtesy of Absa Wealth and Investment



The following Champagne Houses were represented at the 15th Annual Absa Champagne Festival held in the Polo Room at the Inanda Club in Sandton in October 2016

LANSON  
GRATIOT  
BESSERAT  
COMTESSE ALEXIA  
BILLECART-SALMON  
BARONS DE ROTHSCHILD  
LE MESNIL  
DRAPPIER  
TAITTINGER  
LARMANDIER-BERNIER  
POL ROGER  
BOLLINGER  
RUIINART  
ARMAND DE BRIGNAC  
MAILLY  
FOLLET-RAMILLON  
TRIBAUT  
PIPER HEIDSIECK  
NICOLAS FEUILLATTE  
LIÉBART-REGNIER  
JACQUINOT  
LAURENT-PERRIER  
GH MUMM  
De VENOGE  
LOUIS ROEDERER  
JACQUESSON

