

PASSIONS

TIME
WELL SPENT

DRINK

CHAMPAGNE BEYOND THE BUBBLES

It's the drink of choice for celebrations, but Champagne is a wine that deserves to be enjoyed long past the hors d'oeuvres.
By Lindsey Tramuta



Armand de Brignac paired with a menu by Michelin-starred chef Arnaud Lallement.



A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE MAY POP every two seconds somewhere in the world, but if enduring assumptions about how and when it should be consumed are any indication, they are likely celebratory pours. In his new book *Champagne: The Essential Guide to the Wines, Producers, and Terroir of the Iconic Region*, author and ChampagneGuide.net founder Peter Liem writes that the result of marketing Champagne by brand rather than by region over the past century has brought the heritage product worldwide success but also “de-emphasized the concept of Champagne as a wine, marking it more as a beverage for celebrations or special events, or an aperitif—with ‘real’ wines reserved for the dinner table.”

Add to that the wine’s inextricable association with royalty and celebrity, a link dating as far back as 496 AD, when King Clovis converted to Christianity in Reims, and you have an image that’s difficult to bend. Think of the Emperor Napoléon, who is rumored to have been the first to saber a bottle while riding astride his horse.

“It’s always bothered me that Champagne is situated between Alsace and Burgundy, two regions where people come to talk about terroirs and great wines,” says Anne Malassagne, the fourth-generation co-owner of AR Lenoble Champagne, an independent and family-owned producer. “But when people come to Champagne, they ask about bubbles, luxury, and celebrities instead.” The emerging prominence of grower Champagnes—sparkling wines produced by the same estate that owns the vineyards—has sparked a movement that emphasizes viticulture and terroir in Champagne production. That’s a good start, but the discussion around it remains niche and largely confined to the wine industry, unlikely to reach the average Champagne consumer.

Still, there’s room to shift the context for

drinking it. Even Armand de Brignac, one of the industry’s priciest brands (acquired by Jay-Z in 2014), is focused on diversifying its audience beyond nightclubs and VIP settings. “It’s not about taking away the element of celebration but expanding perception beyond special occasions,” explains Bernadette Knight, the company’s CMO. One simple way to do that is by encouraging its Champagnes be served in a white-wine glass. “It’s easier to get the nose in the glass and allows drinkers to explore the notes and characters the way they would with a still wine,” adds Knight.

Actively engaging that shift in perception has led many producers to direct their attention toward experiences that highlight the pairing possibilities with a full meal, from low-key picnics to gastronomic tasting menus.

AR Lenoble recently inaugurated a professional tasting room and state-of-the-art kitchen in its Damery headquarters, where cooking ateliers (by appointment only) demonstrate firsthand that simple really is best (in other words, roasted chicken absolutely does go down better with a glass of AR Lenoble Brut Intense). Come spring, the producer will be offering Champenois lunches in a historic cabin that sits at the heart of its vines in Bisseuil.

On the high end of the spectrum, Armand de Brignac has launched an exclusive pairing menu with triple-Michelin-starred chef Arnaud Lallement at L’Assiette Champenoise, his five-star Relais & Châteaux hotel near Reims—the only culinary experience in the world (500 euros per person) to offer each of the house’s five prestige cuvées in one place.

The initiated know that Champagne is first and foremost a grand wine, but combining it with exceptional meals, both high and low, creates an association that has the power to take it beyond the hoary image of a rarefied party accessory for a broader base. Because the inherent sexiness of *les grandes maisons* has worn thin, says AR Lenoble’s Malassagne, and the discourse around Champagne, like everything we consume today, requires substance: “It’s not enticing anymore. People want to talk about wine, about values, and what is sincere.” Let’s raise a glass to that. ■

FROM LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID MUIR—GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF JUILLET JERUSALMI FOR CHAMPAGNE ARMAND DE BRIGNAC