Champagne: marketplace icon

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Champagne: marketplace icon

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ABSTRACT
What makes a simple wine, grown in a rather mediocre wine-growing region, one of the most famous and magical marketplace icons of today? How did champagne establish such a unique position, against all the odds, and become the global symbol of celebration? In seeking answers to these questions, this marketplace icon contribution elaborates on what 250 years of avant-garde champagne marketing can tell us about champagne’s ever-shifting image and role in consumer culture. I argue that the “imperishable fame” of champagne stems primarily from four epic myth-making moments that not only came to shape a national identity but also modern consumption ideologies in important ways.

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Pleasure without champagne is purely artificial. (Oscar Wilde)

Apéritif

Champagne, an effervescent wine assembled from the grapes of Champagne region of France, stands as the quintessential device and symbol for celebration in today’s consumption society. Any birthday, wedding, party, business deal, sport event, art exhibit, or lustrous shopping trip just does not feel quite right if champagne is missing. Surely it is not only the mysterious bubbles that explain why champagne has indeed become the institution of celebration but, as I will argue, requires a careful examination of champagne’s curious and eventful journey during the last 500 years or so. Above all, a glance into the history of champagne marketing reveals an enviable story of persistent collective myth-making that stands as an avant-garde cultural branding case.

Champagne first emerged as an underdog regional wine label aiming to challenge powerful rivals of Burgundy and Bordeaux already in vogue in Royal courts around Europe. While essentially a product of a collective determination of hundreds of local wine houses and thousands of wine producers, champagne’s story also owes greatly to a group of institutional actors that contributed to its imperishable fame. Notably, these include monarchs, emperors, monks, soldiers, artists, aristocrats, politicians, rebels, mistresses, celebrities, and also widows. Along the way, champagne’s image transformed from a practically insignificant no-brand wine label in the fifteenth century to a holy elixir served and elaborated by Benedictine monks; to an ostentatious and seductive fashion item in the court of the Sun King Louis XIV; to a crucial symbol of French national soul and values; and, towards the late nineteenth century, champagne established itself as an expression of modernity and icon for the global leisure class and celebration. This formidable and unlikely development has made champagne one of world’s favourite and most successful wines and luxury products.

While many powerful brands such as Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Pommery, and Dom Pérignon have played an important role in building the reputation of champagne, in the following
I argue that champagne as an icon is essentially collectively forged. Champagne’s uniqueness is also striking in comparison to other much younger iconic alcohol and beverage brands such as Jack Daniel’s, Budweiser, Corona, or Mountain Dew that merely follow the logic of cultural brands as “ideological parasites” suggested by Holt (2004, 2006). Instead of gaining its symbolic value through strategic articulation in relation to thriving (existing) marketplace myths – that is, imaginative stories and images that people use for making sense of their selves and the world around them – champagne contributed substantially to the creation of both national (French) and global myths (see e.g. Guy 2003). The aura of champagne continues to resonate so powerfully that whenever the entire Western mode de vie is being called into question, criticized, or under attack, it does not take long before champagne is mentioned as its effective symbol and representation.

As a result, I suggest that champagne’s enchanting charm is best understood through its mythical but also ambiguous (Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz II 2013) character as a consumption object. For example, champagne is the only luxury brand that can be bought at the supermarket. It is essentially an everyman’s drink but one of the most prestigious markers of class at the same time. It draws from a legacy of heritage and mythologized past while recombining avant-garde images of haute-couture fashion. A sacred drink elaborated by humble monks infused with profane tastes of glamour and flamboyance. A white wine from black grapes. The list goes on. It is exactly this “taste of contradiction” (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 4) that makes up champagne and scintillates our collective imaginations. Next, I will examine these issues through a brief history of champagne’s collective myth-making that began around 500 years ago.

**Myth of origination (circa 1500)**

Even though the cult of winemaking had been brought to the Champagne region ages ago by the Roman settlers, coming to the early sixteenth century the region was nowhere near famous for its wines. Rather Champagne was known mainly for its wool trading (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 20). Being the northernmost wine-growing regions in Europe, it was often considered ill-suited for wine production due to colder temperatures, limited sunlight, and nutrition-thin soil. The small quantity of wine produced – at that time rather mediocre non-sparkling red wine – was mainly for local consumption or used as a promotional gift to entice potential wool customers at the trade fair. In the rare case when wines of Champagne were exported outside the region, for instance to Paris, they were not called champagne but often bluntly “vins de France”, a general label referring to any French wines. It was clear that these wines were of no comparison to the reputed wines of neighbouring Burgundy or renowned Bordeaux that were already among the favourite wines in Royal Courts all around of Europe.

The quality and reputation of Champagne wines did not significantly change before the Benedictine monks in local churches and monasteries began cultivating and harvesting grapes (Guy 2003; Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005). Wine was particularly needed for raising funds for the monasteries but also in religious celebrations such as sacrament of Eucharist. While investing themselves into the careful study of grape varieties, assemblage, and innovative cultivation methods, the monks soon turned wine production into a form of art. Only the well-ripened quality grapes were assembled, carefully handpicked, and pressed thereafter. This soon improved the taste, colour, and quality of the wine dramatically. However, champagne was not invented by the monks – not even the famous “Dom” Pierre Pérignon (1635–1713) who ran the monastery of Hautvillers in Reims for much of his life. Rather father Pérignon was resurrected in the “origination myth” as a promotional strategy much later by champagne marketers who sought to signal heritage, authenticity, and roots when facing an increasingly crowded market (Bonal 1995; Beverland 2005). The wine that the monks cultivated was still red, albeit a bit “clowdy”, considerably sweet (sugar was added to facilitate fermentation), and mainly “flat” – not sparkling (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 27). Nevertheless, the improvements to wine quality by the monks were so important that they brought the region early winemaking fame. They also contributed to the “méthod champenoise”, a local winemaking practice,
that later became definitional for what is considered champagne. In addition, the monks’ oenological skills and involvement in the early wine business helped set out an endlessly mythical cultural resource for crafting the collective imagination of the holy elixir: the becoming of champagne.

So who invented champagne? No one, in fact, as the formation of bubbles is natural for all wines. When the grapes are being pressed the yeasts of the grape skin get in contact with sugar and start producing carbonic gas. This process is called fermentation. The “magic” of champagne’s famous bubbles is in fact the cold weather that cuts the fermentation process in the wintertime, as yeasts hibernate, and resume a second fermentation when the yeasts wake up again in the spring. Moreover, the earliest mentions of a “foaming wine” date back to 1531 and were recorded by another sect of Benedictine monks working at the monastery of Saint-Hilaire in the South of France (Stevenson 2003). What comes to our friend Dom Pérignon, who was most likely in contact with his Southern brethren, it is told he worked all his life trying to eliminate the bubbles from his wine – without success (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 25). For him, the bubbles were an unfortunate imperfection and a flaw, not acceptable in a quality wine, or for Mass.

The curious and persisting fizz, however, caught the interest of the wool producer’s customers who regularly received bottles as gifts. Over the centuries, orders for champagne began to rain in. It was thus the wool producers who picked up champagne business from the monks. Instead of investing in gradually stalling wool markets families including the Moëts, Ruinarts, Clicquots, and Pommerys, they decided to focus exclusively on producing champagne, a new and exciting market. Encouraged by the quickly evolving tastes, they switched away from traditional red still wines to fine bubbly white wines. Yet, the origination myth about the holy men and magical elixir lived on.

Myth of opulence (circa 1600)

Another foundational myth of champagne dates back to Christmas day in 496 when the Frankish Warlord Clovis was baptized to Christianity after he defeated a hostile Germanic tribe near Reims. Since then it has been a tradition to coronate French monarchs in Reims. Kings Philip Augustus, Charles IV, and Philip VI among others enjoyed the Royal festivities that were accompanied with an abundance of local produce, food, and wine. This marks the origin of champagne’s fame as a celebratory drink (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 9).

The Sun King Louis XIV, too, had his first taste of champagne in the magnificent Reims Cathedral, at the age of 16. It was Louis who nearly single-handedly connected champagne into a taste regime of opulent fashion, status, and luxury. Born in the same year, coincidentally, as Dom Pérignon, Louis commanded a life filled with luxury in the pompous palace of Versailles. The fashion trends in aristocratic society and Royal Courts in Europe, all in awe of Versailles, were basically on his fingertips. Early on, he acquired an eye for fashion, arts, sports, and gardening, and among other things, invented the Ballet. In particular, Louis adored champagne. According to a legend, he rarely drank anything else (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 28). Champagne was even recommended to him by his doctors as a healing and spirit-lifting medicine.

Records suggest that noble merchants further strengthened champagne’s foothold in Versailles and other courts around Europe. Young Claude Moët was among the pioneers. His access to the Royal Court was made possible by his family’s prior achievements – one of his ancestors had fought in Jeanne d’Arc’s victorious army in 1429 (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 47). With persistence and effort, Claude managed to establish connections with noble women such as Madame de Pompadour, the famous trendsetter and mistress of Louis XV. Claude influenced the tastes by sending in occasional shipments of his newly established champagne venture and by passing on the word that champagne is essential for any successful soirée and that it even left women more beautiful after drinking it (Guy 2003, 14). Ruinarts, on their part, were successful in establishing clientele in the court of Charles X, while the Heidsiecks, the Roederers, and the Cliquots were most occupied with charming the court and tsar of Moscow.
One of the first-known depictions of champagne in the chateau of Versailles is the painting by Jean-François de Troy, a piece commanded by King Louis XV. *Le Déjeuner d’huîtres* (1735, see Figure 1) is a marvellous and uniquely intimate expression of typical court life pleasures, elegance, and “good life”. Setting scene in a sumptuous aristocratic marble- and angel-decorated dining room, fresh oysters are keenly being savoured with champagne by a group of gentlemen, possibly after a hunting trip. Following the eyes of participants in the painting it is possible to trace the projectile of a champagne bottle cork, flying across the air. According to the legend, both oysters and champagne are united in their aphrodisiac virtues, which sets another possible reading of the painting.

Champagne’s fame in the Court went to such an extreme – as in the case of Duke Philip of Orleans, the Sun King’s brother – that it started to highlight the decadence and looming decline of the monarchs. Although an otherwise prominent, well-mannered, and industrious statesman, Philip is said to have been under champagne’s influence for much of his rule. Extravagant parties with his entourage of young women and men, often turned into frivolous escapades and orgies, did not help save his lustful reputation either. This did not go unnoticed by critical revolutionist commentators including Voltaire – who was soon banished from Versailles. It was also here that champagne, with its gaiety and explosions of froth, was first turned into a symbol of sexuality and a device of seduction (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 43).

Figure 1. *Le Déjeuner d’huîtres* by Jean-François de Troy, 1735. Permission for reproduction under Wikimedia Commons License: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Déjeuner_d%27huîtres_Jean-François_de_Troy.jpg.
Another important push for the industry was King Louis XV’s decree that for the first time champagne – and only champagne – could be shipped in glass bottles instead of wooden casks (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 50). This meant a world of difference to the producers, as wood allowed gas to escape, making the wine flat. In addition, the new law contributed to the careful elaboration of champagne packaging – one of the earliest cases of modern marketing. Celebrity endorsement was immediately common in etiquettes featuring superstars such as Marie Antoinette, Jeanne d’Arc, victorious army officials, affluent Counts, artists, and the like. Champagne sellers understood that such reputation-building techniques were needed to spread word about their brands and to appeal the desires of growing and increasingly affluent customer base. Yet, still in the eve of the nineteenth century, sparkling champagne was rare and the business remained relatively small despite important international connections. What is more, champagne marketing was fixed on promoting the manufacturer, house, or family names and rarely mentioning the appellation “champagne” at all (Guy 2003, 16).

**Myth of nation (mid 1800)**

The French Revolution in 1789 cut champagne’s association with the monarchs and aristocrats like a guillotine. It also set forward the third, and perhaps the most powerful myth-making cycle that rooted champagne to the “soul” and virtues of the newborn republic. This observation was made and eloquently documented by economic historian Kollen M. Guy in *How Champagne Became French* (2003). Champagne had accumulated enough fame to become a prominent national symbol and a collective achievement worthy of respect. Not only “champagne reflects our nation”, as famously declared by Voltaire but it also came to be viewed as “the most glorious expression” of French civilization (Dion cited in Guy 2003, 2). Linking champagne firmly with its terroir – the inseparable combination of soil, climate and topography and the transcendent soul of the wine producer – became thus the central myth driver propelled by amore patrio. It was a moment where champagne and national identity became “so intertwined that it is difficult to invoke the other without eliciting the other” (Guy 2003, 4).

Champagne’s role was not least important in the Napoleonic empire when national aspirations for expansion triggered new bold adventures. Income from exports was needed to cover the expenses of military campaigns and a strong agricultural sector for feeding the growing population. The new emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), was personally involved in supporting the champagne business – after all he grew up in a wine-producer family. Moreover, his objective was to establish a new industrious and loyal bourgeois society. Several accounts document the emperor’s frequent visits and close correspondence, for example, with Jean-Rémy Moët, the grandson of Claude Moët, in Épernay. The keen relation between the two was bounded by a shared history – Napoleon spent several years in the Royal Military Academy of Brienne, in Champagne, observing the everyday wine production during his studies. When Napoleon was advancing the ranks in the French army, Jean-Rémy was establishing Moët in the USA and acquiring new clients – including President George Washington. Napoleon, too, loved champagne. His famous dictum was, “in victory you deserve it, in defeat you need it” (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2005, 65).

Yet, while Napoleon’s Grande Armée ultimately failed in conquering the Europe, champagne was victorious (Guy 2003, 15). So strategic were the champagne producers, including the famous Madame “Veuve” Clicquot, that when the enemy’s troops reached the city of Reims chasing Napoleon, she opened the champagne caves and invited soldiers warmly for “degustation”, letting them finish all the bottles they could in order to celebrate victory. Meanwhile, Madame Clicquot was confident this strategy would significantly help her “peaceful conquest” of Russia, increasing brand awareness and fame in her largest market.

The “golden age” of champagne production began right after the collapse of Napoleonic regime, with the consequent industrialization of Europe. Greater and faster access to markets, not least to effective railroad networks, was like fuel in the fire. Champagne sales grew on a staggering rate:
from 1850s’ 5.9 million bottles to 28 million in 1900 (Guy 2003, 17). New and innovative production techniques replaced cumbersome manual ones. Not only did they reduce bottle breakage – a costly and common hindrance – but they also improved the quality, making champagne even more beautiful, tastier, and attractive than before. This was also the birth of modern capitalism, which left many of the champagne growers and workers struggle on the brink of sustenance, while the already affluent champagne families got richer and richer (Wolikow and Wolikow 2012).

Champagne’s success also brought in undesired copycats and counterfeits. There was practically no legal protection system for the term champagne so anyone could use it to boost sales. “Faux champagne” from Hungary, Russia, Spain, and the USA began appearing into the markets. Even some of the original champagne firms started to purchase cheaper grapes outside the Champagne region. This was a major concern and source of discontent in the champenois wine-producer community and they continued to appeal the state for securing the national treasure. Finally, in 1882, a collective “Syndicat du Commerce des vins de Champagne”, representing 60 champagne houses, was set up to govern and protect the “territorial brand” (Spielmann and Chartres 2014). However, it was not before the 1930s that the Champagne region (counting approx. 34,000 hectares of vineyards) finally obtained an international Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée – a law determining that no other wine, sparkling or still, can be called champagne. This was the ultimate result of centuries of systematic marketing efforts by the Champagne community (e.g. Guy 2003; Wolikow and Wolikow 2012; Spielmann and Chartres 2014).

Myth of modernity (circa 1900)

Champagne’s surge as a global marketplace icon coincides with the “belle époque” and the “modern” revolution in consumption. It soon became the centrepiece of new bourgeois society, an integral social marker of status and membership. The associations with the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, and cultural elite helped attract the burgeoning middle class that by the turn of the 1900s was already the largest single customer group for champagne (Guy 2003). This serves as the most recent myth-making backdrop connecting champagne with the emergence of modern consumption symbols and rituals, such as gastronomy and fine wines, that attracted the aspiring and new bourgeoisie to advance in the newly formed social hierarchies marked by status and wealth rather than birth lineage (Veblen [1899] 1973; Bourdieu 1984).

Airplanes, hot-air balloons, towering steamships, transcontinental trains, cars, sports, and other “modern” wonders were often featured in quickly proliferating champagne advertising. Framed as a symbol of the new world of economic and technological progress, champagne was used for ceremonial christenings of ships as well as for forging business relationships. Neither was it an accident that champagne was sipped at the Paris world exhibition in 1889, or in the MS Titanic – the “floating grand hotel of luxury” (Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz II 2013). Champagne producer Eugéne Mercier was famous for leveraging people’s and media’s appetite for spectacle. He organized wine tastings in a hot-air balloon floating over Paris and collaborated with the Lumière brothers to envision and produce the first-known advertising film. He also built the largest wine barrel in the world presented at the Paris world fair – containing 200,000 bottles of wine. Only the transportation of the giant barrel was a state-of-the-art marketing feat: “twenty-four white oxen and eighteen horses received coverage in newspapers from Hungary to San Francisco” (Guy 2003, 37).

Champagne was also the natural way to wipe off the tears and horrors of the First World War that touched the region deeply and dramatically. The turn of the 1920s came to be known as “the Crazy Years” swinging with jazz and dancing balls. Champagne became the ritual and device of celebration, for business meetings, dinners, weddings, or social gatherings, such as those held at the legendary nightclub Maxim’s at Paris. It was where artists, industrialists, and nouveau riches of all range joined for a drink of glamour. These were the contemporary royalties and elite. Painter Pierre Bonnard’s 1896 advertising poster for France-Champagne perfectly resonates such emerging lifestyles (see Figure 2). Famous for impressionist dreamlike imagery spilling with colour and poetic allusions,
Bonnard gently draws a seductive dance of excessively foaming champagne and a charming lady at the soirée.

Champagne advertising in the intra and post-war era had to adapt to a whole new customer base and heavy competition coming principally from other fine sparkling wines that quickly burst into the market, including Spanish cava, Italian prosecco, and German sekt, and French vin mousseaux or crémant (Epstein 2011). In order to sustain success and to aspire the growing mass market, champagne brands framed themselves primarily as prestigious status signals. Most often this required recreating the mythic past through heritage and legacy inferences (Beverland 2005).

The return of Dom Pérignon as a spin-off brand produced by Moët & Chandon is a curious case in point. It was the first prestige cuvée, re-mythologized as the “Father of Champagne” – a marketing legend rather than a fact – that hit the markets with unmatched success in 1936. In addition to Dom’s mythical cultural ingredients, its success stems from a focus on vintage champagne, that is, wine made only from the best years’ harvest. This feature was soon copied by many other champagne brands. After its launch, Dom became the must-have champagne for all quality restaurants (Epstein 2011).

Towards the twenty-first century, popular culture and celebrities, including film, music, and sports stars, took over the re-enactment of champagne’s already established myths and legacy. James Bond’s stylishness for Dom Pérignon, Taittinger, and Bollinger is one example of this. Audrey Hepburn’s glamour in the iconic Breakfast at Tiffany’s is another. A more recent one can be found in

![Figure 2](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PP_D139_poster_by_bonnard_for_france_champagne.jpg)
superstar singer Beyoncé and her husband, media mogul and flamboyant rap star Jay Z, who decided to buy champagne house Armand de Brignac – or “Ace of Spades” in hip-hop parlance – in 2014. This hints back to champagne's contemporary acuity and continuing resonance as a global marketplace icon certainly that deserves further examination and research.

**Digestif**

While writing this brief history of champagne marketing in Paris in the fall of 2015, a deeply reflexive moment hit me, like other Parisians, and much of the Western world. News of the horror of Paris terrorist attacks of Friday 13 November, where 130 innocent people were brutally murdered and nearly 400 wounded, soon spread the globe. Ordinary people and friends were killed in cafés, restaurants, music concert hall, and on the streets of one of the liveliest and joyful corners of Paris, not far away from Place de la Republic and Bastille. It was already the fourth deadly terrorist attack in France the same year, in my counting, and the deadliest since the Second World War. However, this one seemed to target, more than anything else, the entire Western way of life – of all religions – and above all the essences of contemporary consumption society: liberty, freedom, celebration, and joy. Interestingly, the term champagne popped up in the media discourse frequently, even among the very first key words. For example, Charlie Hebdo – a weekly newspaper that was the target of terrorist attacks earlier the same year – reacted, as they usually do, by drawing a cartoon. Their magazine’s front page depicted a contrast of fighting against the terrorist by drinking champagne. “You have arms. F**k you, we have champagne!”, cried the title. Hebdo’s cartoonist Joann Sfar, who barely saved his life from the previous attacks, summed up his thoughts in a drawing, insisting:

... Thank you for #prayingforparis but we do not need more religion. Our faith goes to music! Kisses! Life! Champagne and Joy! #parisisaboutlife.

These comments point to thought-provoking questions. Why is it that champagne, rather than anything else, is used as the effective representation of our values, mode de vie, and collective emotions? Indeed, it seems champagne has become an icon for the life and liveliness that the terrorists try to do everything to repress. Such a powerful metaphor and social and emotional connector that even left-wing journals such as Charlie Hebdo have picked it up, regardless of champagne’s elitist, aristocratic, bourgeois, and catholic/traditional legacy. A marketplace icon that can even be used as a symbolical shield and a source of hope at the moment of terror, anxiety, and despair. I find it hard to imagine any other brand being used in a similar manner.

**Note**

1. Commonly Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier grapes.

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