Level Up

Your Champagne Game

A QUICK GUIDE

contents

01

INTRODUCTION

02

WHAT'S IN A NAME
- BIG VS SMALL

03

WHAT THE LABEL
TELLS YOU

04

ALTERNATIVE
CHOICES
-CHEAT SHEET

01

CHAPTER

01

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Do you stress every time you go into a bottle shop to buy a bottle of champagne?

Are you overwhelmed by the choices on offer so find yourself reaching for the same old 'safe' option of a label that you know?

Would you like to be more adventurous with your choices and have the confidence to expand your selection?

Then this guide is for you! I have broken down the most important information on a bottle of champagne that you need to look for when you are buying.

Once you are able to understand exactly what you should be looking for on the bottle, you will find that a whole new world of champagne discovery awaits you!

It's time to Level Up Your Champagne Game!

02

CHAPTER

02

WHAT'S IN A NAME - BIG VS SMALL

Big Houses

The champagne houses now account for more than two-thirds of all champagne shipments, and make up 90% of the export market.

These are the names that are instantly recognisable and that you are most likely to reach your hand towards at the bottle shop.

The well-known brands focus on making a style of wine that represents their brand and remains consistent year in, year out. It is a very unique talent that the cellar masters have in order to achieve this, and comes about from buying in grapes from independent growers from selected vineyards to blend into their individual style. It is the talent and expertise of these large houses that has made champagne famous the world over.

When you buy a bottle of champagne from a big house you expect not to be disappointed with the drink inside, and if it is being offered as a gift, for the receiver to be touched by your generosity.

Small Growers

As opposed to the big houses, the small growers own their vineyards and produce their own champagne on their property. They own 90% of the land in Champagne, but only produce 10% of all Champagne. That is because many of them sell their grapes to the bigger houses in order to generate an income.

However, some do make champagne bottled under their own label. Because they are using their own grapes, and not blending with grapes bought in from elsewhere, their champagnes are typically an expression of the terroir, or land, where the grapes are grown.

Believe it or not, the type of soil plays a large part in the overall taste of a particular grape variety, and some grapes do better in particular soils than others.

Passionate grower/producers are like artists who paint a picture of their land and bottle it for others to enjoy,

There are currently over 100 different small growers represented in Australia.

They are usually available in independent liquor stores and are perfect if you want to start getting brave with your champagne choices and try something new rather than always stick to an old favourite.

03

CHAPTER

03

WHAT THE LABEL TELLS YOU

So you've gone to your liquor store and are standing in the aisle looking up at the vast array of champagnes arranged before you and you are wondering 'When did the choice ever become so hard?'. 'What am I supposed to be looking for?'

Before you reach for that old faithful with the comforting label, here are a few things to look for on the label that might make your choice easier.

CHAMPAGNE

Now that might seem obvious, but not everyone realises that the word 'champagne' is required to be clearly marked on the label. Just because the label is written in French if you can't easily see the word champagne, it will just be French sparkling wine from another region.

THE STYLE

The label will also tell you the level of sweetness of the champagne. Most champagnes will say 'Brut', meaning they contain between 6g -12g of sugar per litre. This is the standard. The styles in order of driest to sweetest are:

Brut Nature (or zero dosage): 0-3g/l
Extra Brut: 3-6g/l
Brut: 6-12g/l
Extra-Sec: 12g - 17g/l
Sec: 17g - 32g/l
Demi-Sec: 32g - 50g/l
Doux: > 50g/l

Don't get too caught up on the exact 'dosage' within the Brut range. The main idea is that the champagne is well balanced. It is good to be aware that some champagnes are drier or sweeter than the average, as this will affect what foods will pair better with them.

THE BRAND

The house name or grower name must also be clearly displayed. This is what often will draw people to a particular bottle to start with.

TWO TINY INITIALS

Look very closely at a label and in very small letters down the bottom (usually), you will see the words 'elaboré par', which means 'produced by' with a name, followed by an address indicating the village or commune and two little initials. They might be small, but they actually tell a big story about what is in the bottle and if it comes from a small grower who grows their own grapes and is responsible for all levels of production, a large house who has to buy grapes from other people in order to make their champagnes, or even a co-operative, who are a group of growers who get together to make their own style of champagne. The initials you will find as defined by the Comité Champagne are:

NM : Négociant manipulant. A person or legal entity that buys grapes, grape must or wine to make champagne on their own premises and market it under their own label. All of the big champagne houses belong in this category.

RM : Récoltant manipulant. A grower who makes and markets champagne under their own label, from grapes exclusively sourced from their own vineyards and processed on their own premises.

RC : Récoltant-coopérateur. A cooperative-grower who markets co-op produced champagne under their own label.

CM : Coopérative de manipulation. A wine co-op that markets champagne made from members' grapes.

SR : Société de Récoltants. A family firm of growers that makes and markets champagne under its own label, using grapes sourced from family vineyards.

ND : Négociant distributeur. A distributor who buys in finished bottles of champagne for labelling on their own premises.

MA : Marque d'Acheteur. An 'own brand' wine label produced exclusively for one client (supermarket, celebrity or other).

These initials will help you understand the quality of the champagne. Expect to pay more for RM and NM and less for MA

THE VINTAGE

If there is a year clearly marked on the bottle, it means the champagne is a vintage champagne, made from grapes harvested solely from the year indicated. Some vintages are considered better than others because of the particular growing conditions of that year. Very good vintages can be kept for many, many years. They continue to evolve in the bottle and can still be extra-ordinary even after 25 or 30 years and beyond. By contrast, a non-vintage champagne should be consumed within 2-3 years.

Some recent exceptional vintages to look out for are 1996, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2012.

THE TYPE OF CUVEE

There are different types of cuvées that give a different style to the champagne. Most champagnes are a blend of 3 grapes: chardonnay, pinot noir or meunier. Each of those grapes lends a different characteristic to the blend.

Chardonnay adds elegance and finesse.

Pinot Noir adds body and structure.

Meunier adds fruitiness.

Sometimes a champagne will be made from just one of those varietals and this is marked on label.

Blanc de Blanc - made from 100% chardonnay.
Blanc de Noir - made from 100% black grapes (could be both pinot noir and meunier, but often just pinot noir).
Blanc de Meunier - made from 100% meunier.

If the champagne is a rosé, that will also be written on the bottle. Because there are two ways to make rosé some producers also choose to put that on the label, although it is not a requirement.

Rosé d'assemblage - rosé made from mixing some still red wine with the blend. This is the most common way.

Rosé de saignée - this is made from macerating the skins in the juice for a short time to achieve the desired colour without affecting the taste. It is more labour intensive and less common to find.

THE BLEND

Some producers will also choose to put the blend of grapes used, although this is usually on the back label. This helps you to choose one particular brand over another if you already know the style of champagne you prefer. For example, some people prefer the lighter, more elegant style of chardonnay, others prefer the richer more robust style of something that is pinot dominant.

NON-VINTAGE LABEL FROM A GROWER

04

CHAPTER

04

ALTERNATIVE CHOICES - CHEAT SHEET

It's all well and good to be able to read the label, but sometimes you just want know that you are going to like the style of something.

To help you make some different choices which I hope will really level up your champagne game, I have created a cheat sheet.

This lists some more well known champagnes against some alternative ones that share similar characteristics.

These champagnes won't taste exactly the same, and may be in a different price range, but they have enough similarities that you should not be disappointed.

BRAND	ALTERNATIVE	STYLE
Veuve Cliquot Yellow Label	Lanson Black Label NV Devaux Grand Reserve NV Bollinger Special Cuvee NV	Pinot Noir characteristics dominate. Rich, well balanced
Moet et Chandon Brut Imperial	Ayala Brut Brut Majeur NV Mumm Cordon Rouge NV Perrier Jouet Grand Brut Taittinger Brut Reserve Jacquart Brut Mosaique	Chardonnay characteristics dominate. light and elegant
Pol Roger Brut Reserve NV	Pommery Cuvée Royal Charles Heidsieck Brut Reserve NV Deeutz Classic NV	Equal balance of all three grape vairties
Billecart Salmon Brut NV	Roederer Brut Premier 'R' de Ruinart Henriot Brut Souverain NV	Rich and complex due to amount of reserve wines

Amanda Reboul
CHAMPAGNE

@thebubblediva

www.amandareboul.com