Fabricating Effervescence: Creating, Maintaining, and Defending Champagne's Bubble(s)

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Abstract

This paper explores the fabrication, managing, and defending of the "champagne bubble" during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bringing together heterogenous elements – material, cultural, economic, political, legal, mythical – champagne is a powerful symbol and extremely valuable brand. I show how the champagne bubble is both fragile and rigid, both needing to be actively defended, and capable of rising from the ashes of wars as well as economic crises. Just as the bubbles in a champagne glass are influenced by numerous forces, so the metaphorical champagne bubble is subject to complex influences. Some of these are explored in this paper.

Introduction

In November 2020, upon learning that the company's Covid-19 vaccine trial had been successful, the head of Pfizer's Vaccine Research and Development, Kathrin Jansen, celebrated with champagne – "some really good stuff" (Cohen). Bubbles seem to go naturally with celebration, and champagne is fundamentally associated with bubbles. Yet, until the late-seventeenth century, champagne was a still wine, and it only reached the familiar levels of bubbliness in the late-nineteenth century (Harding). During this period and on into the early twentieth century, "champagne" was in many ways created, defined, and defended. A "champagne bubble" was created, within which the "nature" of champagne was contested and constructed. Champagne today is the result of hundreds of years of labour by many sorts of bubble-makers: those who make the bubbly drink, and those who construct, maintain, and defend the champagne bubble. In this paper, I explore some elements of the champagne bubble, in order to understand both its fragility and rigidity over the years and today.

Creating the Champagne Bubble – The Labour of Centuries

It is difficult to separate the physical from the mythical as regards champagne. Therefore the categorisations below are always overlapping, and embedded in legal, political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. Just as *assemblage* – the mixing of wine from different grapes – is an essential element of champagne wine, the champagne bubble may be called heterogeneous assemblage. Indeed, the champagne bubble, as we will see below, is a myriad of different sorts of bubbles, such as *terroir*, *appellation*, myth and brand. And just as any assemblage, its heterogeneous elements exist and operate in relation to each other. Therefore the "champagne bubble" discussed here is both one and many, all of its elements fundamentally interconnected, constituting that "one" known as "champagne". It is not my intention to be comprehensive of all the elements, historical and contemporary. Indeed, that would not be possible within such a short paper. Instead, I seek to demonstrate some of the complexity of the champagne bubble, noting the elaborate labour that has gone into its creation.

The physical Champagne and champagne – from soil to bubbles

Champagne means both a legally protected geographical area (Champagne), and the wine (here: champagne) produced in this area from grapes defined as acceptable: most importantly pinot noir, pinot meunier ("black" grapes), and chardonnay ("white" grape). The method of

production, too, is regulated and legally protected: *méthode champenoise*. Although the same method is used in numerous locations, these must be called something different: *metodo classico* (Italy), *método tradicional* (Spain), *Methode Cap Classique* (South Africa).

The geographical area of Champagne was first legally defined in 1908, when it only included the areas of Marne and Aisne, leaving out, most importantly, the area of Aube. This decision led to severe unrest and riots, as the Aube *vignerons* revolted in 1911, forcing the inclusion of "zone 2": Aube, Haute-Marne, and Seine-et-Marne (Guy). Behind these regulations was a surge in fraudulent production in the early twentieth century, as well as falling wine prices resulting from increasing supply of cheap wines (Colman 18). These first *appellations d'origine* had many consequences – they proved financially beneficial for the "zone 1", but less so for the "zone 2". When both these areas were brought under the same *appellation* in 1927, the financial benefits were more limited – but this may have been due to the Great Depression triggered in 1929 (Haeck et al).

It is a long-standing belief that the soil and climate of Champagne are key contributors to the quality of champagne wines, said to be due to "conditions […] most suitable for making this type of wine" (Simon 11). Already in the end of the nineteenth century, the editor of *Vigneron champenois* attributed champagne's quality to "a fortunate combination of […] chalky soil […and] unrivalled exposure [to the sun]" (Guy 119) among other things. Factors such as soil and climate, commonly included in and expressed through the idea of *terroir*, undoubtedly influence grapes and wines made thereof, but the extent remains unproven. Indeed, *terroir* itself is a very contested concept (Teil; Inglis and Almila). It is also the case that climate change has had, and will continue to have, devastating effects on wine production in many areas, while benefiting others. The highly successful English sparkling wine production, drawing upon know-how from the Champagne area, has been enabled by the warming climate (Inglis), while Champagne itself is at risk of becoming too hot (Robinson).

Champagne is made through a process more complicated than most wines. I present here the bare bones of it, to illustrate the many challenges that had to be overcome to enable its production in the scale we see today. Freshly picked grapes are first pressed and the juice is fermented. Grape juice contains natural yeasts and therefore will ferment spontaneously, but fermentation can also be started with artificial yeasts. In fermentation, alcohol and carbon dioxide (CO_2) are formed, but the latter usually escapes the liquid. The secret of champagne is its second fermentation, which happens in bottles, after wines from different grapes and/or vineyards have been blended for desired characteristics (*assemblage*). For the second fermentation, yeast and sugar are added. As the fermentation happens inside a bottle, the CO_2 that is created does not escape, but dissolves into the wine. The average pressure inside a champagne bottle in serving temperature is around 5 bar – 5 times the pressure outside the bottle (Liger-Belair et al).

The obvious challenge this method poses has to do with managing the pressure. Exploding bottles used to be a common problem, and the manner of sealing bottles was not very developed, either. Seventeenth-century developments in bottle-making, and using corks to seal bottles, enabled sparkling wines to be produced in the first place (Leszczyńska; Phillips 137). Still today, champagne comes in heavy-bottomed bottles, sealed with characteristically shaped cork, which is secured with a wire cage known as *muselet*. Scientific innovations, such as calculating the ideal amount of sugar for the second fermentation in 1836, also helped to control

the amount of gas formed during the second fermentation, thus making the behaviour of the wine more predictable (Leszczyńska 265).

Champagne is characteristically a "manufactured" wine, as it involves several steps of interference, from *assemblage* to *dosage* – sugar added for flavour to most champagnes after the second fermentation (although there are also *zero dosage* champagnes). This lends champagne particularly suitable for branding, as it is possible to make the wine taste the same year after year, harvest after harvest, and thus create a distinctive and recognisable house style. It is also possible to make champagnes for different tastes. During the nineteenth century, champagnes of different *dosage* were made for different markets – the driest for the British, the sweetest for the Russians (Harding).

Bubbles are probably the most striking characteristic of champagne, and they are enabled by the complicated factors described above. But they are also formed when the champagne is poured in a glass. Natural impurities on the surface of the glass provide channels through which the gas pockets trapped in the wine can release themselves, forming strains of rising bubbles (Liger-Belair et al). Champagne glasses have for centuries differed from other wine glasses, often for aesthetic reasons (Harding). The bubbles seem to do more than give people aesthetic pleasure and sensory experiences. It is often claimed that champagne makes you drunk faster than other drinks would, and there is, indeed, some (limited) research showing that this may well be the case (Roberts and Robinson; Ridout et al).

The mythical champagne – from Dom Pérignon to modern wonders

Just as the bubbles in a champagne glass are influenced by numerous forces, so the metaphorical champagne bubble is subject to complex influences. Myth-creation is one of the most significant of these. The origin of champagne as sparkling wine is embedded in the myth of Dom Pérignon of Hautvillers monastery (1638–1715), who according to the legend would have accidentally developed the bubbles, and then enthusiastically exclaimed "I am drinking the stars!" (Phillips 138). In reality, bubbles are a natural phenomenon provoked by winter temperatures deactivating the fermenting yeasts, and spring again reactivating them. The myth of Dom Pérignon was first established in the nineteenth century and quickly embraced by the champagne industry. In 1937, Moët et Chandon launched a premium champagne called Dom Pérignon, which enjoys high reputation until this day (Phillips).

The champagne industry has been active in managing associations connected with champagne since the nineteenth century. Sparkling champagnes had already enjoyed fashionability in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century, both in the French Court, and amongst the British higher classes. In the second half of the nineteenth century, champagne found ever increasing markets abroad, and the clientele was not aristocratic anymore. Before the 1860s, champagne's association was with high status celebration, as well as sexual activity and seduction (Harding; Rokka). As the century went on, and champagne sales radically increased, associations with "modernity" were added: "hot-air balloons, towering steamships, transcontinental trains, cars, sports, and other 'modern' wonders were often featured in quickly proliferating champagne advertising" (Rokka 280). During this time, champagne grew both drier and more sparkling, following consumer tastes (Harding).

Champagne's most important markets in later nineteenth century included the UK, where the growing middle classes consumed champagne for both celebration and hospitality (Harding),

the US, where (upper) middle-class women were served champagne in new kinds of consumer environments (Smith; Remus), and Russia, where the upper classes enjoyed sweeter champagne – until the Revolution (Phillips 296). The champagne industry quickly embraced the new middle classes in possession of increasing wealth, as well as new methods of advertising and marketing. What is remarkable is that they managed to integrate enormously varied cultural thematics and still retain associations with aristocracy and luxury, while producing and selling wine in industrial scale (Harding; Rokka). This is still true today: champagne retains a reputation of prestige, despite large-scale branding, production, and marketing.

Maintaining and Defending the Bubble: Formulas, Rappers, and the Absolutely Fabulous Tipplers

The falling wine prices and increasing counterfeit wines coincided with Europe's phylloxera crisis – the pest accidentally brought over from North America that almost wiped out all Europe's vineyards. The pest moved through Champagne in the 1890s, killing vines and devastating *vignerons* (Campbell). The *Syndicat du Commerce des vins de Champagne* had already been formed in 1882 (Rokka 280). Now unions were formed to fight phylloxera, such as the *Association Viticole Champenoise* in 1898. The 1904 *Fédération Syndicale des Vignerons* was formed to lobby the government to protect the name of Champagne (Leszczyńska 266) – successfully, as we have seen above. The financial benefits from *appellations* were certainly welcome, but short-lived. World War I treated Champagne harshly, with battle lines stuck through the area for years (Guy 187).

The battle went on also in the lobbying front. In 1935, a new *appellation* regime was brought into law, which came to be the basis for all European systems, and the *Comité National des appellations d'origine* (CNAO) was founded (Colman 1922). Champagne's protection became increasingly international, and continues to be so today under EU law and trade deals (European Commission).

The post-war recovery of champagne relied on strategies used already in the "golden years" – marketing and lobbying. Advertising continued to embrace "luxury, celebration, transport (extending from air travel to the increasingly popular automobile), modernity, sports" (Guy 188). Such advertisement must have responded accurately to the mood of post-war, pre-depression Europe. Even in the prohibition US it was known that the "frivolous" French women might go as far as bathe in champagne, like the popular actress Mistinguett (Young 63). Curiously, in the 1930s Soviet Russia, "champagne" (not produced in Champagne) was declared a sign of good living, symbolising the standard of living that any Soviet worker had access to (at least in theory) (Gronow).

Today, the reputation of champagne is fiercely defended in legal terms. This is not only in terms of protection against other sparkling wine making areas, but also in terms of exploitation of champagne's reputation by actors in other commercial fields, and even against mass market products containing genuine champagne (Mahy and d'Ath; Schneider and Nam). At the same time, champagne has been widely "democratised" by mass production, enabled partly by increasing mechanisation and scientification of champagne production from the 1950s onwards (Leszczyńska 266). Yet champagne retains its association with prestige, luxury, and even royalty. This has required some serious adaptation and flexibility. In what follows, I look into three cultural phenomena that illuminate processes of such adaptation: Formula One (F1)

champagne spraying, the 1990s sitcom Absolutely Fabulous, and the Cristal racism scandal in 2006.

The first champagne bottle is said to have been presented to F1 *grand prix* winner in Champagne in 1950 (Wheels24). Such a gesture would have been fully in line with champagne's association with cars, sport, and modernity. But what about the spraying? Surely that is not in line with the prestige of the wine?

The first spraying is attributed to Jo Siffert in 1966 and Dan Gurney in 1967, the former described as accidental, the latter as a spontaneous gesture of celebration (Wheels24; Dobie). Moët had become the official supplier of F1 champagnes in 1966, and there are no signs that the new custom would have been problematic for them, as their sponsorship continued until 1999, after which Mumm sponsored the sport for 15 years. Today, the champagne to be popped and sprayed is Chanson, in special bottles "coated in the same carbon fibre that F1 cars are made of" (Wheels24). Such an iconic status has the spraying gained that it features in practically all TV broadcasts concerning F1, although non-alcoholic substitute is used in countries where sale of alcohol is banned (Barker et al, *Quantifying*; Barker et al, *Alcohol*).

As disturbing as the champagne spraying might look for a wine snob, it is perfectly in line with champagne's marketing history and entrepreneurial spirit shown since the nineteenth century. Nor is it unheard of to let champagne spray. The "art" of *sabrage*, opening champagne bottle with a sable, associated with glamour, spectacle, and myth – its origin is attributed to Napoleon and his officers – is perfectly acceptable even for the snob. Sparkling champagne was always bound up with joy and celebration, not a solemn drink, and the champagne bubble was able to accommodate middle classes as well as aristocrats.

This brings us to our second example, the British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*. The show, first released in 1992, featured two women, "Eddy" (Jennifer Saunders) and "Patsy" (Joanna Lumley), who spent their time happily smoking, taking drugs, and drinking large quantities of "Bolly" (among other things). Bollinger champagne may have initially experienced "a bit of a shock" for being thus addressed, but soon came to see the benefits of fame (French). In 2005, they hired PR support to make better use of the brand's "Ab Fab" recognisability, and to improve its prestige reputation in order to justify their higher price range (Cann). Saunders and Lumley were warmly welcomed by the Bollinger house when filming for their champagne tour *Absolutely Champers* (2017). It is befitting indeed that such controversial fame came from the UK, the first country to discover sparkling champagne outside France (Simon 48), and where the aspirational middle classes were keen to consume it already in the nineteenth century (Harding).

More controversial still is the case of Cristal (made by Louis Roederer) and the US rap world. Enthusiastically embraced by the "bling-bling" world of (black) rappers, champagne seems to fit their ethos well. Cristal was long favoured as both a drink and a word in rap lyrics. But in 2006, the newly appointed managing director at the family owned Roederer, Frédéric Rouzaud, made comments considered racist by many (Woodland). Rouzard told in an interview with *The Economist* that the house observed the Cristal-rap association "with curiosity and serenity". He reportedly continued: "but what can we do? We can't forbid people from buying it. I'm sure Dom Pérignon or Krug would be delighted to have their business". It was indeed those two brands that the rapper Jay-Z replaced Cristal with, when calling for a boycott on Cristal.

It would be easy to dismiss Rouzard's comments as snobbery, or indeed as racism, but they merit some more reflection. Cristal is the premium wine of a house that otherwise does not enjoy high recognisability. While champagne's history involves embracing new sorts of clientele, and marketing flexibly to as many consumer groups as possible (Rokka), this was the first spectacular crossing of racial boundaries. It was always the case that different houses and their different champagnes were targeted at different clienteles, and it is apparent that Cristal was not targeted at black rap artists. Whereas Bollinger was able to turn into a victory the questionable fame brought by the white middle-class association of Absolutely Fabulous, the more prestigious Cristal considered the attention of the black rapper world more threatening and acted accordingly. They sought to defend their own brand bubble, not the larger champagne bubble.

Cristal's reputation seems to have suffered little – its 2008 vintage, launched in 2018, was the most traded wine of that year (Schultz). Jay-Z's purchase of his own champagne brand (Armand de Brignac, nicknamed Ace of Spades) has been less successful reputation-wise (Greenburg). It is difficult to break the champagne bubble, and it may be equally difficult to break into it.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked into the various dilemmas the "bubble-makers" of Champagne encountered when fabricating what is today known as "champagne". There have been moments of threat to the bubble they formed, such as in the turn of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and eras of incomparable success, such as from the 1860s to 1880s. The discussion has demonstrated the remarkable flexibility with which the makers and defenders of champagne have responded to challenges, and dealt with material, socio-cultural, economic, and other problems. It feels appropriate to end with a note on the current challenge the champagne industry faces: Covid-19.

The pandemic hit champagne sales exceptionally hard, leaving around 100 million bottles unsold (Micallef). This was not very surprising, given the closure of champagne-selling venues, banning of public and private celebrations, and a general mood not particularly prone to (or even likely to frown upon) such light-hearted matters as glamour and champagne.

Champagne has survived many dramatic drops in sales during the twentieth century, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the post-financial crisis collapse in 2009. Yet they seem to be able to make astonishing recoveries. Already, there are indicators that many people consumed more champagne during the festive end-of-year season than in previous years (Smithers). For the moment, it looks like the champagne bubble, despite its seeming fragility, is practically indestructible, no matter how much its elements may suffer under various pressures and challenges.

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