

NAME DROPPER:

“Dom Perignon”

EVER WONDERED WHY WINE BRAGGERS LIKE TO DROP CERTAIN WINE NAMES MORE THAN OTHERS? IN THE FIRST INSTALMENT OF A SERIES ON THE WORLD'S MOST NAME-DROPPED WINES, CHRIS BARNES POPS THE CORK ON A BOTTLE OF DOM PERIGNON TO EXPLAIN WHAT ALL THE FUSS IS ABOUT.

Words **Chris Barnes**

There are few icons of cool that surpass the name James Bond and it's not surprising that his favourite wine is vinous icon of luxury and sophistication. In *Dr.No* champagne is poured into a triangular flute.

“That's a Dom Perignon '55 – it would be a pity to break it”, says Dr. No when Bond gets agitated.

“I prefer the '53 myself”, responds Bond, with smooth confidence.

Then in the movie, *Goldfinger*, Bond is seducing a lady and has two bottles of Dom Perignon '53 chilling. He says to her,

“My dear girl, there are some things that just aren't done, such as drinking Dom Perignon '53 above a temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit. That's as bad as listening to The Beatles without earmuffs.”

Later he hooks up with, “Pussy Galore”, also known as “Champagne Leader”.

Apparently Bond agrees with another icon of style, Marilyn Monroe. She often said that her favorite drink was the 1953 Dom Perignon.

Dom Perignon was treasurer and Cellarmaster of the abbey at Hautvillers from 1668 until his death in 1715 at the ripe old age of 77. He was responsible for the abbey's vineyards and making wine from their grapes for church use and for sale to support the abbey. It's a popular myth that Dom Perignon “invented” the wine we know today as Champagne. In fact, bubbles were a naturally occurring phenomenon, then seen as a problem, according to

Champagne by Don and Petie Kladstrup (William Morrow, 2005), and most of the wines Dom Perignon made were actually red and still.

Even though he didn't really "invent" Champagne, Dom Perignon was the first to make white wine from black grapes, essential for present day Champagne. But more important in the development of the Champagne was the discovery that blending is all important in this magical wine.

Blending between the classic and mandated varieties of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier, as well as blending between the vineyards and sub-regions within Champagne itself is at the heart of the wine style. Like many Champagnes, Dom is a blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but never any Pinot Meunier, which is the most-planted grape in Champagne. Some consider Pinot Meunier's exclusion to be a mark of high quality.

"Chardonnay provides the front to middle palate, and Pinot is the middle to the finish. The middle is seamless – the dissolve to the finish", says Richard Geoffroy, in charge of production of the prestige cuvée (that's French for blend) since 1996. "Sometimes there's more Chardonnay, sometimes more Pinot, although the blend is roughly 50/50."

The wine ages on its lees (spent yeast cells) in the bottle for a minimum of seven years before disgorgement, when the sediment is removed. This ageing provides the characteristic complexity and ultra-smooth creaminess of Dom on release.

Moët & Chandon launched Dom Perignon, Vintage 1921, in 1936. It was the world's first commercially available prestige cuvée, packaged then, as now, in a replica of an 18th century bottle and twice as expensive as the top vintage Champagnes of the time. A bottle of Dom is a luxury, the current release in Australia is the 1998 at \$250 full retail – it's clearly not for everyday drinking. However, there are actually many such prestige cuvée's from Champagne houses such as Krug, Louis Roederer and Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin, as well as Bollinger, which has become another Bond choice. In *GoldenEye* he presses a button

on his Aston Martin's dashboard to reveal a secret refrigerated compartment cradling a frosty bottle of the '88 Bollinger Grande Année and two glasses. One can only wonder what it cost Bollinger for 007 to change his Champagne allegiance.

Here in Australia the production of sparkling wines in the mould of Champagne, Methode Champenoise, goes back to the latter part of the 19th Century. The Seppelts of Barossa fame imported a couple of Frenchmen to create the bubbles. They even dug huge tunnels, or "drives" in the cool granite of Victoria's Western District at a place that became known by the name Great Western, a brand still drunk at the Melbourne Cup today. In those days, the varieties used weren't the classics of Champagne, but whatever was available. These included whites such as Muscadelle and Ondenc and even Shiraz to make the unique Aussie invention, Sparkling Burgundy.

It wasn't until the 1980s that the widespread planting of Chardonnay at first, then followed by the Pinots, that we could really try to emulate the great Champagnes. We also had to accept that many of the traditional wine regions of Australia are

of time on lees. As we've seen, Dom spends at least seven years resting in the cellar before the disgorgement of lees, liquering and final release. This time factor, although essential to the style of what's known as Late Disgorged, or RD, is costly. There are few producers that can afford this today, let alone in the 80s before the current boom time for Australian wine. That said there were some exceptions. The early wines from Petaluma in the Adelaide Hills under the Croser label had at least three to four years on lees. Also, from its foundation in the mid 80s Domaine Chandon in the Yarra resolved to put wine away on lees and make an "LD" (late disgorged) style.

On the retail shelf today two wines stand out as very good value and high quality in the mould of the famous monk's wine. For some years now a wine from Northern Tasmania made by Ed Carr has scooped the pool at wine shows. His Arras with its distinctive packaging (each bottle has a hand wrapped cord around the neck) has proved what a virtually 50/50 blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, with at least four years resting on lees, can do. It also represents what Tasmania's Tamar Valley is probably best for in terms of viticulture;

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– James Bond, *Goldfinger*

simply too hot to produce grapes with the finesse and delicate acidity essential to top Methode Champenoise. Thus the Yarra Valley, Tasmania and the hills around Adelaide became sought after as the source of the fruit needed in the blend. Here we took Dom Perignon's blending philosophy to new heights with blending of fruit from one end of Australia to the next and even the inclusion of New Zealand grapes.

The next step in Australian winemakers recognising that we could produce our own prestige cuvées was the understanding

delicate wines with great acid structure. The current release of the 2002 Arras is a fresh, yet complex wine and worth all its retail price of \$50.

At Chandon in Victoria, the current icon sparkling is the superb 1995 Green Point Cuvée. This is a wine with serious time on lees, eight years, and a nutty and almost mushroom complexity that begs fine food. There is not much around, but this rare beast is worth tracking down, and at \$55 it might even tempt 007 away from his intemperate Vodka Martini tipping. ■