



Francois Hautekeur,
Winemaker, House of Veuve
Clicquot, reintroduces us to the
bubbly that was once favoured
by Europe's haute bourgeoisie.

Interviewed by Riaan J. George

The drink of the Gods

Upon hearing the words 'Veuve Clicquot' for the first time, most of us might have bent our tongues out of proportion trying to pronounce the name of this famous French champagne house. After overcoming the phonetic challenges posed by the French language, we soon discovered that behind this iconic champagne was one of the greatest businesswomen that France has ever known—Madame Clicquot. Widowed at an early age in 1805, Veuve (French for widow) Clicquot found herself at the helm of an enterprise involved in different activities. She effortlessly rose to the occasion and put together a wise marketing strategy, which aimed at making champagne truly a drink for the elite.

Today, Veuve Clicquot is one of the world's most recognised brands of champagne and has become



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a veritable symbol representing France’s oenological heritage. We spent an evening with Francois Hautekeur, senior oenologist from the House of Veuve Clicquot in Reims. Monsieur Hautekeur is now part of the tasting panel headed by Chef de Cave Jacques Peters. We sampled the famous Yellow Label and Veuve Clicquot Rosé while he shared with us his passion for the drink of the Gods as well as some pairing tips.



We like to think of it as a more fun process. We make entertaining wines with a lot of character and which tell many stories. We pay attention to creativity at every step and ensure that we add a touch of quirkiness to everything we do. There is a certain method to our madness. It's not only about the champagne, it's about a lifestyle, which is why an increasing number of young people are enjoying champagne. In China, for instance, people are growing increasingly fond of buying champagne during

Mr. Hautekeur, the first thing that strikes us about the Yellow Label is its signature ripe fruity notes of pineapple, apricot and peach. Please elaborate.

Exactly. These notes are complemented with hints of vanilla and caramel. This wine is fresh and easy to drink. I like to compare its composition to a human body; the Pinot Noir provides the muscle while the Chardonnay acts as a backbone. On the other hand, the Rosé is far more feminine. Its nutty and caramel aromas are seductive and sensual. You will notice that both these wines are not overbearingly sweet. We keep the sugar content low so as not to hide the quality of the wine.

A brand that was founded over two centuries ago retains its status and popularity. What explains this?

Madame Clicquot believed in the philosophy, "Only one quality—the finest!" This belief has been enforced strictly over the years. For people around the world, champagne has come to symbolise the elite class and the high-life.



"THE NOTES IN THE YELLOW CHAMPAGNE ARE COMPLEMENTED WITH HINTS OF VANILLA AND CARAMEL."





an evening out. In India, young people in the cities have begun enjoying a flute of bubbly before or with a meal. Champagne brunches are also becoming increasingly popular, something that was not seen in India a decade ago. It is, therefore, very important for champagne makers to constantly reinvent themselves, at the same time preserving the age-old legacies that people look up to them for.

Do you think that traditional champagne might be facing a threat from the great quality of sparkling wines from the New World?

We in France are blessed with a great geographical location, weather and soil that are unbelievably conducive to champagne production. Besides that, we have the capacity and savoir-faire to produce champagne on a very large scale. Therefore, in my opinion, it is not possible to recreate the champagne experience. I have tasted some excellent sparkling wines from the

New World, which might cost the same as some premium French brands. But I just don't feel the same. I sampled a great sparkling wine from a vineyard in Tasmania that produces only a few thousand bottles a year. So, comparing is very difficult.

Do you think champagne goes well with Indian food?

Before my first Indian champagne pairing meal, I was afraid and had many reservations. However, I was pleasantly surprised. The thickness, length and body of champagne make it excellent to pair with Indian cuisine. But diners must keep in mind that the food cannot be too spicy. Spice may enhance the experience of Indian food but there should be a balance. The champagne should not be overshadowed. Also, the food cannot be too hot (temperature wise), else there will be a conflict on the palate.

Tell us what you like pairing your champagne with when you're at home.

I absolutely love seafood and

oysters. They go effortlessly well with champagne. I recommend pairing salmon, sushi and sashimi with a nice Rosé champagne.

And for dessert?

My favourite is a red and black fruit salad, marinated entirely in champagne—blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants. Quite obviously, it's absolutely sublime. 🍷

'Remuage'

This breakthrough process in champagne making was invented by the house of Veuve Clicquot in 1816. The upside down bottle is slowly twisted such that all the sediments in the bottle settle down in the bottle's neck. The sediments are then eliminated resulting in crystal clear champagne. This practice has since been adopted by champagne makers all over and is used even today.

