

Champagne à Table: The Gastronomic Position of Champagne throughout History

By Caroline Henry

We all associate champagne as a festive wine; corks are popped to celebrate a special occasion or to celebrate each other's company. But rarely is champagne served with a meal; instead we tend to drink it as an aperitif before the meal or instead of a cocktail.

Champagne has come a long way as originally it was served at dessert. Philippe II, Duke of Orleans, was the first to regularly include champagne in his nightly suppers. Although, champagne, as we know it today, technically, did not exist. Only after the edict passed by King Louis XV on 25 May 1728, could wine legally be transported in bottle in France.

The first official occasions to include champagne were the Christmas Eve feasts hosted by King Louis XV from the early 1730's through the 1750's. These parties were public and were attended both by the French aristocracy and burgeoning Paris bourgeoisie. It is here that champagne became renowned; everybody was eager to try 'the bubbly wine', so loved by the king himself. Champagne was served after the meal, to accompany the dessert, and from 1745 Madame de Pompadour led the way for women to drink champagne as well.

In the nineteenth century, champagne's gastronomic reputation was further developed. It became a social obligation to serve champagne for the upper classes. Even if in some cases champagne flowed freely throughout the meal, it remained more common to serve champagne at the latter part of the meal. Commonly known as 'vin d'entremet' – a wine to be served with the dish which comes after the roast and before the dessert, it was most commonly drunk through to the end of the meal. The glasses were kept on ice and the champagne was served with a spoon to remove most of the bubbles!

The Marquis de Cussy, chief steward of Emperor Napoleon I and author of "Les classiques de la table" created one of champagne's most successful and lasting pairing at the beginning of the nineteenth century: strawberries and cream. The dish remained until recently on the menu of the Relais & Chateau "Royal Champagne" in Champillon as "Fraises à la Cussy".

By 1825, champagne had also become a main ingredient in the most renowned Parisian restaurants; at least half a bottle was used to prepare delicacies such as "Parisian turtle (tortue à la parisienne)" and "French-style Seine fish (poisson de Seine à la française)".

However, in the Code Gourmand published by Horace Raison in 1829, champagne is described as a "*ladies and lovers drink, unsuitable for any fine dining party.*" This is more than likely linked to the excessive champagne consumption in the "cabinets particuliers" by businessmen, artists, poets, actresses and cabaret dancers. The Romantic Bohemians were the first to find pleasure in drinking champagne by itself and most appreciated the bubbles.

When the 'drier' brut champagne became more common, some French followed the English example and started to drink champagne with the soup at the beginning of the meal. It is common belief that when drunk throughout the meal champagne will facilitate the digestion and its flavours can be better enjoyed. This is confirmed by Le Brevaire Gastronomique, in 1870, which stipulated that "*champagne is to be served with the roast, as the sweetness of the dessert tends to override the wine.*"

During the rule of Napoleon III, “meals without fixed hour” became the fashion especially at the end of balls or for hunting party breaks. These meals were particularly suited to champagne which was often served as the only wine to accompany the mixture of dishes.

At the beginning of the 20th century, around 1905, champagne cocktails saw the light and with them the consumption of champagne before the meal. Champagne was still drunk at supper, but also often in night restaurants at Montmartre. The latter served a “sec” or “brut” champagne, which was also the beverage of choice at the famous Maxime restaurant, where champagne was very often served throughout the meal. Whilst drinking champagne during the whole meal was not frowned upon anymore, most people still associated champagne with dessert.

From the twenties onward, it became a custom for the bourgeoisie and aristocracy to also drink champagne in family circles at home on special occasions. Besides the Grandes Marques, a selection of more affordable champagnes, often made by the grape growers themselves, became available for purchase. These wines are often considered to be ordinary or of lesser quality and are best drunk sweet (demi-sec or demi-doux) at the entremets and the dessert.

However, the push for drier wines continued, mainly by famous food writers such as Édouard Alexandre de Pomiane, who proclaimed from 1922 onward “*drink only brut champagne, for these are the most natural wines of the best quality. Sugar has the wonderful ability to mask all of the wine’s imperfections*”. Slowly but surely the drier style champagnes became more popular in France, and by 1945 half of the consumption was “extra-sec” or “sec”, exclusively distributed by the Grandes Marques. Brut wines remained a niche category.

Things changed drastically after the Second World War, when champagne’s true revival took off. It became the beverage which was drunk at any time of the day by everybody who was anybody. At the same time it also became available to the general public. A 1973 study by SOFRES showed that 77% of the French had already drunk champagne and 58% drank it between one and ten times per year. Its position as a celebration drink now became unrivalled and it was poured at most weddings, christenings, confirmations, birthdays, family get-togethers and end of year celebrations.

Another big change was the development of the brut category. The demand for brut had long begun in the UK, where champagne was often poured throughout the whole meal from the nineteenth century onward. In fact, le gout anglais in the nineteenth century referred to dry or brut champagne with a dosage of only 22-66 g/l. After the Second World War the CIVC defined the brut category as champagnes with a dosage of 0-15g, and by 1978 this category had become the leading category by far; 73.4% of the champagnes sold were then brut. However, champagne was still mostly poured at dessert. The 1973 SOFRET study stipulated that 79% of the French had only drunk champagne with dessert. Now that the wine had significantly dried out, this pairing had become less than ideal, and many producers were contesting it.

Henri Gault and Christian Millau forever changed champagne’s position at the table by defining it as being the “*ideal aperitif*” in their September 1979 issue. The impact was immediate and from then onward this was when most champagne was consumed.

Champagne dinners once again became more popular, especially at Maxime’s, where 50% of the meals were accompanied by champagne only. However, the majority of the French seemed reluctant to replace Burgundy or Bordeaux wines, often served with the main dish, by champagne; only 9% of the French population had ever tried champagne dinners according to the 1973 SOFRET study.

Perhaps this is why, in 1993, the CIVC oenology department created the project to further develop and promote the possibilities of pouring champagne throughout a whole meal. General pairing suggestions included blanc de blancs with soup, seafood (especially oysters) and white fish, brut with starters, blanc de noirs with poultry and oily fish. Vintages were recommended with the cheese dish whilst a rosé or a demi-sec worked well with dessert. The project was closed in 2000, and champagne dinners remain still the exception rather than the norm. Instead, we continue to follow the advice of Gault and Millau and let the corks pop at aperitif.

A votre santé!

Caroline Henry

Based in Hautvillers, in the heart of Champagne, Caroline regularly writes champagne related stories for Wine-Searcher, Decanter, Palate Press as well as on her personal blog www.missinwine.com. Further activities include teaching at the local Business School NEOMA and organizing tailor-made Terroir Champagne tastings.

For the last 4 years Caroline has been exploring terroir cuvées in Champagne. She is a staunch believer that a real environmental effort has to be made in the vineyard to make terroir wine. This is why she communicates frequently on sustainable, organic and biodynamic grape growing practices which result in terroir-focused wines. In November she will release a book on the topic titled Terroir Champagne: the luxury of sustainable, organic and biodynamic cuvées. More info on the book can be found on www.terroirchampagne.com.

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Le Dejeuner d'huîtres, Jean François de Troy, 1723 (the first picture of champagne as a gastronomic wine)

Fraises aux Champagnes by Antonin Chatinière (taken from a music sheet by Jules Klein).

Nobles avec Champagne (H Vizetelly) – Courtesy of Comité Champagne

[Champagne and roast chicken photo – no title] – Courtesy of Comité Champagne