



"I do" get
a kick from

C H A M P A G N E

By Ruth Weisberg • Photograph by John Romeo

This age-old vintage heralds
a sparkling legacy of
good cheer and good times

OH, THOSE CURVED, SAUCY SHOULDERS. The sweeping, seductive neck. That distinctive silhouette.

The sight of a bride? Perhaps. The sight of a champagne bottle? Most definitely. Like the qualities that first attracted you to your new spouse, a bottle of bubbly has an appearance and an aura decidedly its own, its effervescence promising a delightful feast for all the senses. For centuries, this spirited, sparkling beverage has been the preferred wine of kings, nobility and lovers of sophistication the world over.

Simply put, there is nothing else on earth quite like champagne. Perhaps it is a fitting metaphor for the wedding couple—magical, sparkling and exclusive. It's no wonder, then, that champagne plays such a significant role at a wedding reception. This once-in-a-lifetime occasion clearly calls for champagne's unparalleled, sparkling presence at the top of the wedding list, and certainly on the celebrant couple's lips.

"There's no other beverage that inspires such positive emotions in people," says Philly Silverstone, hospitality ambassador for the city of Philadelphia, a noted wine authority and author. "Champagne has the power of romance, of celebration." (continued on page 112)

FASHIONABLE FLUTES

Great occasions deserve to be celebrated in grand style. These flutes showcase champagne's jollicious bubbles with flair. From left, long-necked: Glas Flute by Ralph Lauren, \$38; flared by Christof, \$45, both from Bloomingdale's, King of Prussia; Neapolitan by Soreno, \$39; Urban Chateau, Philadelphia, from left, background: Flutes by Williams and Sonnet, \$38; Line by Kenzo Baris, \$40 and Nibel by Kenzo Baris, \$38, all from Bloomingdale's. Turn to page 136 for shopping information.

“I Do” Get a Kick From Champagne

By Ruth Weisberg

Ah, those curved, satiny shoulders. The sweeping, seductive neck! That distinctive silhouette.

The sight of a bride? Perhaps. The sight of a champagne bottle? Most definitely. Like the very qualities that attracted you to your new spouse, a bottle of bubbly has an appearance and an aura decidedly its own, its effervescence promising a delightful feast for all the senses. For centuries, this spirited, sparkling beverage has been the preferred wine of kings, nobility and lovers of sophistication the world over.

Simply put, there is nothing else on earth quite like champagne. Perhaps it is a fitting metaphor for the wedding couple--magical, sparkling, and exclusive. It's no wonder, then, that champagne plays such a significant role at a wedding reception. This once-in-a-lifetime occasion clearly calls for champagne's unparalleled, sparkling presence at the top of the wedding list, and certainly on the tip of the celebrant couple's lips.

“There's no other beverage that inspires such positive emotions in people,” says Phillip Silverstone, hospitality ambassador for the city of Philadelphia, a noted wine authority and author. “Champagne has the power of romance, of celebration, of achievement and of affluence. It launches new ships and new lives, it binds business relationships and hearts, it honors freedom, and it toasts the end of war. Champagne is the traditional toast to the New Year when, for a couple of heady, mesmerizing moments, the world forgets its troubles and is held in a temporary trance.”

Whether it's celebrated at midnight on New Year's Eve or savored during the first few moments of the couple's new life together, that telltale bottle of bubbly will largely figure into the festivities. “Champagne creates an event by its very presence,” says Jean-Louis Carbonnier, director of the Champagne Wines Information Bureau, a New York-based resource center. “Keep in mind, there is only one true bubbly and it's from La Champagne in France,” he says.

Historically, champagne dates back to the 17th century, when it was the wine of choice among French and English nobility. Fueled by the gusto and frequency of aristocratic gatherings, the preference for champagne soon spread throughout Europe. Champagne's only

limitation was a function of the very thing that made it unique—the small geographic area from which it could be produced. To assure its centuries-old conventions of quality and distinction, champagne, as we know and consume it today, is produced only from select grapes that are grown, cultivated and bottled in the precisely delimited vineyards covering about 85,000 acres of La Champagne, located 90 miles northeast of Paris. Spread over 312 villages and comprising less than 3% of all French vineyards, the vineyards of Champagne produce three red grape varieties: pinot noir, pinot meunier and chardonnay.

International law mandates that no wine produced outside this region can claim to be true champagne. “Any other is just a sparkling wine,” says Carbonnier.

The Selection Process

“For those with a little more flexibility in their budget, non-vintage brut level wines from a reputable champagne house offers the best price-to-quality ratio,” says Marnie Old, sommelier at Philadelphia’s famed Striped Bass restaurant. “Since champagnes represent blends on three levels—blends of grapes, blends of regions or blends of different vintages, shopping for a champagne is like shopping for a port or sherry,” she says. “One is generally looking for a champagne from a renowned champagne house such as Moët and Chandon or Bollinger, as opposed to seeking the name of the vineyard owner on the label.”

Aside from regional growing areas, are there really any differences among authentic bottles of French-grown bubbly and any of its other domestically grown, fizzy counterparts? “None, as long as the bottle says the wine was made in the traditional champagne method in the bottle, rather than the cheaper method in a vast tank,” says Silverstone. “Method Champenoise is the only kind to drink. As long as the grapes are chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier, the so-called ‘three tenors’ of fizz, it’s all the same.” Blancs de blanc champagne is made from the chardonnay grape, and as the name suggests, it’s a white wine from a white grape. The bubbles from blancs de noirs are created from black grapes, usually pinot noir.

For those couples looking for Dom Perignon taste on a sparkling-wine budget, there are creative ways to still have a first-rate affair. “You could consider limiting champagne to the head tables, or only having it available for the moment of the toast, since one bottle will serve ten people,” says Jean-Louis Carbonnier..

Susan Pomerantz, a party and wedding planner in Philadelphia, and president of Susan Pomerantz & Company, observes that more couples are taking a larger responsibility for the cost

of their weddings. “I always encourage them to put their money into the areas that are most important to them, whether it’s the music or a fancy dessert. You can pour and serve an excellent sparkling wine for a lot less than a mediocre bottle of champagne,” she says. “However, if the bridal couple decides to serve expensive champagne, make sure that the caterer knows, so they see that the guests are seated when it is poured. That way, everyone can enjoy it while it is deliciously bubbly.”

A Toast to a Lifetime of Happiness

The toast is one of the most memorable gifts a bride and groom will receive. It’s hard to believe that these endearing sentiments evolved from a custom of inedible sediments. Five centuries ago, a piece of stale, scorched bread was typically dropped into a wine vessel to absorb its sediment; whoever drank up last got the “toast”-- and the collective good wishes of the party goers.

How should a toast be prepared? “If you have to read a toast from a cue card, it’s too long,” says Mary Mitchell, a.k.a. “Ms. Demeanor”, a Philadelphia-based syndicated columnist who teaches manners and protocol worldwide through her company Uncommon Courtesies, and has authored four books on the subject.

“A wedding toast should be upbeat and sincere. It should focus on the couple,” she says. And no matter how well you know the bride or groom from their single days, remarks about the couple’s individual pasts are definitely out of bounds. “Even if it’s not their first wedding, forget all references to earlier marriages, such as, ‘Let’s hope this one lasts!’ (even if you’re thinking it) says Mitchell.

Pomerantz agrees. “The toast is a serious expression of best wishes, although light humor used in a loving manner can be charming. The toast is not the time for hilarious ribbing. Save that for the rehearsal dinner. Remember, for every best man who gets up with confidence, there is another who has total stage fright.”

The best tip for making a great toast is that it should be short, sweet, and simple. “Say what you feel and be sincere,” says Terri Vaughn, a Philadelphia-based wedding consultant and the owner of The Pleasure of Your Company.

“If I learn that the best man is nervous, I will immediately schedule the toast at the very beginning of the reception,” says Pomerantz. “That gets it over with, so he doesn’t spend the party in anxiety.”

Legend has it that an 18th century monk, carrying out his duties in the Benedictine abbey where he toiled as a cellarmaster, called out to his fellow monks as he tasted champagne for the first time, “Come quickly, I’m drinking stars!” His name was Dom Perignon.

What a fitting tribute that centuries later, we herald the praises of his heavenly discovery and raise our star-filled glasses to the starry-eyed couple as they begin their new life together. Cheers!