

**If You Drink
No Noir, You
Pinot Noir**

PinotFile

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Dom, dom, dom, dom, dom de dom

The classic introduction to the song *Come Go With Me* by the Dell Vikings seems appropriate for the most classic and notable of all Champagnes, Cuvee Dom Perignon. The easily-recognizable green Dom Perignon bottle is rooted in modern art, film, and culture. In the 1994 movie *Goldfinger*, James Bond tells a gorgeous woman, "My dear girl, there are some things that just aren't done, such as drinking Dom Perignon '53 above the temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit." It would seem that every famous rock group of our time has requested bottles of Dom Perignon for their dressing room.

Dom Pierre Perignon was born in 1640, the son of a clerk to the local judge in the town of Saint-Menehould, near the Champagne region. He entered the Benedictine Order at the Abbey of Saint-Vannes at Verdun at age 19 and in 1668, at the age of 28, became the cellar master at the Abbey of Hautvillers. Besides the role of cellar master, he was the *procureur*, a financial and marketing job that required him to devise ways to generate income for the Abbey from the surrounding vineyards. At the time, the wines of Champagne had a poor reputation. They were pale red, thin, and had a small amount of unwanted spritz due to fermentation. It was the genius of Dom Perignon that eventually brought wealth and fame to Champagne as well as to the Abbey of Hautvillers.

There are several myths about Dom Perignon that have developed over the years. First, he was said to have superior tasting faculties because of blindness. The truth is that he had a serious problem with his vision at one point in his life, but this caused no permanent significant visual loss. Secondly, he is often given credit for inventing Champagne as we know it today. This is only partly true. The first recorded production of bottle fermented sparkling wine occurred a century before Dom Perignon's birth, in 1531, at the Abbey of Saint-Hilaire at Limoux in southern France. Some have conjectured that since this Abbey was also a Benedictine property, he may have received winemaking tips. Dom Perignon actually spent a number of years trying to get rid of the unwanted bubbles in Champagne wines. Finally he changed his approach, at least partly by accident. He found that he could improve the quality of the Abbey's wine by storing it in good bottles instead of barrels to slow the process of oxidation. The cold winters stopped fermentation but with spring, warmer weather sparked fermentation again in the bottle. Champagne bubbles were produced by carbon dioxide gas that formed as a result of

"Then we drank. Slowly. Immediately, I realized this Champagne was something profoundly different like the difference between automobile and Ferrari, between puppy love and the real thing. With my first sip of that indescribably complex, velvety tapestry of taste and aroma, I came to love wine and a new universe of pleasure was open to me."

... ..Robert Goyer,
1964 Dom
Perignon, *Wine
Enthusiast*, Febru-
ary, 2001

secondary fermentation. Legend has it that Dom Perignon uttered “I see stars” upon his first taste of Champagne.

Dom Perignon found that the English could produce bottles strong enough to maintain the pressure of the sparkling wine inside. He discovered cork from a group of Spanish pilgrims and realized that this was a much better closure than the pieces of chestnut wood surrounded by cloth and oil and tied on with string that had been used up to that time. He found that aging bottles allowed sediment to be removed and adding a dosage ignited secondary fermentation. He was the first to make white wine from black grapes (without this discovery, Champagne today might be a red wine). Dom Perignon also utilized his access to hundreds of acres of vineyards to perfect the art of blending to produce a cuvee.

Dom Perignon eventually convinced the other Champenoise to discard centuries-old winemaking practices dating to the times of the Romans to begin production of wine with bubbles. The commercial production of Champagne began about 1700. Wealth and renown were soon to follow for the region of Champagne.

Dom Perignon died in 1716 at the ripe old age of 77. Although I have read that he is buried at the Abbey among the vines, I had the opportunity to visit the museum dedicated to him and the chapel at the Abbey a few years ago, and he is actually buried at the altar, an honor bestowed on only the most prominent holy men of the time.

Moët & Chandon was founded in 1743 by wine merchant Claude Moët. In 1816, about one hundred years after Dom Perignon’s death, Louis XVIII put many properties on the market that had been confiscated during the French revolution. Pierre-Gabriel Chandon purchased the run-down Abbey property and surrounding vineyards. In 1832, Chandon married into the family and the firm remained family-owned until 1987, when it merged with Louis Vuitton to form LVMH. Today Moët & Chandon is the largest of the Champagne houses with 1342 acres of vineyards maintained by 250 winegrowers. Included in these vineyard holdings are 41 Premier Crus and 17 Grands Crus. The firm has seventeen miles of cellars containing twenty million bottles. Cellars are a constant 11 degrees centigrade. Over 25 million bottles of Champagne are produced annually with close to 1 million bottles of Dom Perignon offered in superior vintages (that translates into a profit of \$50-75 million dollars alone for Dom). It is impressive to realize that such a consistently outstanding and savory wine could be produced in such massive quantity. The years for which Moët & Chandon has declared a vintage for Dom Perignon is available at www.wineontheweb.com.

Cuvee Dom Perignon is a relatively recent addition to Moët & Chandon’s portfolio. Sometime in the late 1920s, Dom Perignon’s name was adopted for their prestige cuvee of Champagne. It was initially created for the family’s personal consumption, but was offered to the public in 1936. It was the first prestige Champagne on the market. In most vintages it is an excellent Champagne and in years such as 1990 and 1996, it is exceptional. In fact, if you want to stock up on one vintage, it should be 1996 which is currently in the marketplace. 1996 was a classic year for Champagne with perfect ripening weather in September after a rainy August. Jancis Robinson has praised the 1996 vintage: “What was so extraordinary about 1996 in Champagne was the grapes. Not only were they exceptionally high in flavor and ripeness, but they retained high levels of acidity - the component that gives Champagne its refreshment value and long life. Not since 1955 has there been such high levels of both acidity and grape sugars been recorded in Champagne.”



Dom Perignon is produced in two styles, a Brut and Brut Rose and in two sizes, 750 ml bottles (\$110) and 1.5 l magnums (\$300). The grapes are from older-vine Charonnay and Pinot Noir vineyards rated 100 percent. A few jeroboams were made for the new millennium with grapes from the 1993 vintage. In special vintages, a Dom Perignon Oenotheque Brut is released (\$450 for the 1973 vintage). The Oenotheque is a late release directly from the cellars. John Kapon of Acker Merrill and Vintage Tastings said in March that "it was one of the greatest Champagne experiences of my life... ..incredible, so delicious and incredibly balanced, racy, bready, nutty.

A bronze statue of Dom Perignon graces the entrance to Moët & Chandon on Avenue du Champagne in Epernay. The imposing stone building dates from 1919 (the earlier structure was destroyed in World War II). A short distance away, also in Epernay, a building adjacent to the Abbey's church has been preserved and converted into a museum to honor Dom Perignon's genius. The Abbey was destroyed to some degree eighteen times in history. The chapel at the Abbey is still in use each Sunday for the townsfolk.



Our small group, led by Master Sommelier Rene Chazottes were given a private tour of the church and Dom Perignon's museum at Hautvillers (the church is open to the public, but tours of the famous monk's working place are by appointment only). The museum includes Dom Perignon's living space and work room containing many ancient vineyard tools on display. There is a cave used by Dom Perignon with many bottles (empty) from the 1600s and 1700s.

On my trip to Moët & Chandon, our group was treated to a private dinner in a room where the Queen Mother of England had eaten a few weeks prior. The dinner was unique in that each course was color-coordinated - the food, the plate, the napkins and the color of the Champagne. The wines included 1980 Dom Perignon in magnum served with the *plateau de fromages*. It had me singing.

Malibu Pinot Noir

The Malibu Vineyard is on a steep hillside overlooking Malibu Bay at an average elevation of 750 feet. Two acres of vines were planted in 1988 by owners Michael and Kim McCarty. Michael was one of the pioneering chefs of California cuisine at his namesake restaurant Michael's. Along with Alice Waters at Chez Panisse and Wolfgang Puck at Spago, they were the first chefs to emphasize fresh, regional ingredients prepared in a simple, yet classical manner.

All of the original vineyard plantings came from cuttings from the Mt. Eden Vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Joseph Phelps Vineyard in Napa Valley. The inaugural vintage was 1989 and for several years production was 150 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc, with a small amount of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. From 1989-1992, The Malibu Vineyard wine was made by Steve Dooley of Edna Valley Vineyard (now the owner/winemaker of Stephen Ross Wines). Since the 1993 vintage, Bruno D'Alfonso of Sanford Winery has been the winemaker.

After the 1993 vintage, the main house and the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blocks of the vineyard were destroyed in the Malibu fire. Full recovery of the remaining vines took until 1997. The 1999 and 2001 vintages were not produced due to very cool summers that did not ripen the grapes. 2000 was warmer and more successful.

In 2001 the decision was made to remove the entire vineyard, add another acre and new trellising and replant with Pinot Noir clones 115, 667 and 777 all on rootstock 101-14. The 2002 growing year was very successful and the first vintage will be harvested in 2005. In the meantime, grapes have been purchased from the Ashley Vineyard in the Santa Rita Hills and 100 cases of Pinot Noir are sold under The Malibu Vineyard label. 2005 will be the first "estate" grown Pinot Noir from The Malibu Vineyard. Most of the Pinot Noir goes to McCarty's two restaurants in Santa Monica, California and Midtown, New York. Michael's wife, Kim, is an accomplished artist who shows at Los Angeles' Cherrydelosreyes gallery and provides the interesting artwork the labels. An example of her artwork is pictured right.

"The beauty of Pinot Noir is that it can go with both meat and fish," says chef and restaurateur Michael McCarty. To purchase his Pinot Noir, respond by e-mail on the website at www.michaelsantamonica.com/malibuvineyard.html.



