

Ep 91: The incredible story of Madame Clicquot and the Champagne Region's Grand Crus



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just can not get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine and wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, to all my lovely listeners. So welcome back to another episode. Now, having really enjoyed speaking with inspirational women in the wine industry over the month of March, I felt I wasn't quite ready to throw in the bâton féminin. And really I wanted to dedicate the majority of this episode to a lady who had no business skills, who against all odds ended up being named La Grande Dame of Champagne. And it is fair to say she brought us about a Champagne lifestyle whilst creating a Champagne empire. I am of course, talking about the lady behind the famous orange-yellow labeled Champagne named Veuve Clicquot. So I'm gonna start with the journey and story behind this label. I was gonna talk about some other inspirational women. However, whilst recording this, I felt that Madame Clicquot deserved her own episode. So then I shall glide across to the actual Champagne region where I'm going to break down the five sub-regions and talk about the grand crus and where they are.

Janina Doyle 00:01:50 So I'm sure along your wine journey, many of you have had at least a bottle or two of Veuve Clicquot at some point. Now the name Veuve Clicquot translates to widow Clicquot. And I suppose that's where the story starts for Madame Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot. So I need to take you back to the year 1805. So just imagine with me, this is a time where women were not entitled to their own bank accounts. God forbid choose where to even spend their pennies. Women of status, like they didn't work. They were raised to be good mothers and caretakers of the home. And in fact, a woman was considered a minor under the protection of her father until she was married. And well, I was gonna say fun fact, not fun fact; an educated girl was often seen as sexually unattractive it harder for her to marry. So these are the times we're talking about. So during these very prohibitive and confining times, at the age of 27, her husband passes away and leaves her alone with a six year old child. And, what was at the time of failing wine brokerage business. Now our father-in-law he set about to sell this business as actually from both sides of the family, the textile industry was actually where all their money came from. However, Madame Clicquot, she had other ideas bringing a rather intriguing proposition to his desk. So she asks for more investment from him with the understanding that if it all goes wrong, she will lose her entire inheritance. So Felipe, her father-in-law quite clearly understood that actually his daughter-in-law was astute and he invests in her, but insists that she does an apprenticeship under the highly thought about winemaker Alexandre Fourneaux. Now during her four year apprenticeship, she was unable to turn a profit due to being actually in the midst of a revolution.

This was the Napoleon wars at this time, however, the wars were ending. And so having not actually lost any money, didn't make any, but didn't lose any. She convinced Felipe for a little more money. At this point, it was also worth pointing out that Champagne was actually better known for its still wines than of its sparklings back then. So she knew that Russia was a perfect market for the Champagne that she'd be making. So the style at the time was super sweet. So we are talking nearly 300 grams per liter of residual sugar, which is insanely sweet for a Champagne. The highest sweetness level now is Doux which is from 50 grams per liter of residual sugar. And then of course, upwards. Now she knew that if she got into Russia first, she could create great success. But at this point there was still Naval blockades everywhere. So what she did, she smuggles her wines as far as Amsterdam, as she knew from there, it would be a much quicker route to Russia. It sat there waiting, so that at the moment when the blockades were lifted, her wines were able to leave immediately. And of course they arrived in Russia literally weeks before everyone else's. And so shortly after Tsar Alexander I, announces to the world that this is the only kind of Champagne he will drink. And of course, everybody wants to drink what the Kings and Queens are drinking. So this then became the legendary 1811 vintage. So then this leads her to becoming so popular she is actually not able to keep up with demand.

Janina Doyle 00:05:48 So at this point in time, typical Champagne wine making is really wasteful and very time consuming. So this is due to having to extract the dead yeast from the bottom of the bottle. So to understand why it's there, alcoholic fermentation is the biological process in which yeast converts sugar into alcohol, you know, and a byproduct of that is carbon dioxide, which is where your bubbles come from in traditional method sparkling wines. As during this process, the bottle is sealed, meaning the CO2 can't escape. Now, once all of the sugar has been converted, the yeast dies and it's gonna fall to the bottom of the bottle. So, to extract this yeast or lees as it's often called, what they would do is, would just move the wine from one bottle to another. Not only would they lose a lot of that juice, but they'd also be affecting the bubbles by agitating them. So this can affect the quality. And of course it took ages to do. So, introducing Remuage known in English as Riddling. This is where you slowly, over time, you move the yeast from the bottom of the bottle to the bottleneck, known as sur pointe, by slowly, rotating the bottle and turning it upside down, letting gravity do its job. So this can be done with the assistance of a Pupitre. This is a riddling rack, so that's basically, if you can imagine a wooden frame in the shape of an A. This holds the bottles as you twist and turn them into position, so you can gently move the lees down to the neck. Then when you're ready, you can pop open the top and the sediment will come out as the carbon dioxide below it, effectively will help push it out. Nowadays, we will freeze the neck of that bottle so that when the bottle is open, the sediment will fly out as one plug and the process is super clean. So that is what we call discouragement. Now, back in the early 1800s, this process at the time was a brand new invention. And some think that took other Champagne houses decades to find out about. If you do go to Champagne today, the majority of houses will automate this process. So they will use a machine called a Gyropalette and this machine can hold 500 bottles at a time and it can do the whole process in one week. Whereas to compare, if you do it manually, it's gonna take between four to six weeks and a good Remueur, this is the French name for Bottle turner, can turn up to 40,000 bottles in a day, which is beyond impressive. Now, the fact that she was able to make so many more bottles by using this method, and the quality was even better, it meant that she was able to set her sites on exporting all over the world and then by doing so she in fact, made the product more accessible, meaning it wasn't just a product for the upper class. So for that reason, Barbe-Nicole, we salute you on this one, bringing it down to our levels.

Janina Doyle 00:09:03 It is fair to say that Madame Clicquot was one of the world's first international business women, let alone first in the wine industry. And for this personally, she's forever gonna be my wine hero, motivation and inspiration. So time for me to toast Madame Clicquot, by opening up a bottle of Veuve Clicquot Brut Rosé NV Champagne. Now, whilst pink fizz is now found in every supermarket shelf and all discerning wine list. This style was not the norm in the early 1800s. Now documents have recently surfaced to show that it's actually the Champagne house Ruinart who were producing an Oeil de perdrix, which means Eye of the Partridge, referring to the pale copper color of a recently shot partridges eye. Now, they made this Rosé in 1764, and it's believed to be a Rosé made with skin contact. So that would be where you let the Pinot Noir or the Pinot Meunier or both, which are black skinned grapes, have time to macerate and so they're gonna extract some color from the skins. However, it was Madame Clicquot herself, who indeed invented the process of blending red grapes with white for the first time. So not only did she create the riddling process, but in 1818, she mastered this art of blended Rosé, which is generally now the favored way to make modern day Champagne Rosé.

Janina Doyle 00:10:35 Now Champagne in general is all about the art of blending. So this specific Champagne Rosé is made with about 50%, it changes obviously year on year, 50% Pinot Noir with about 30% Chardonnay and then 20% of Pinot Meunier. Now these three are the main grape varieties that are used in pretty much most Champagnes. However, this of course is an educational podcast. And so where would I be just chatting away, giving you stories without telling you there are actually seven permitted varieties allowed in Champagne. So the other four, which account for about 0.3% of the plantings, hence why you don't tend to hear about them are Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Petit Meslier and Arbane. Now Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris are both mutations of Pinot Noir. Pinot Blanc specifically actually gets confused often with Chardonnay in terms of its berry size and its leaves and does have beautiful acidity. Pinot Gris is much more aromatic and can give you lots of fruitiness. Petit Meslier is all about acidity and Arbane can be a little bit herbaceous. Right, so going back to the blend, obviously, you know, the three main varieties and the percentage they use. That is also very similar with the Brut yellow labels traditional blend as well. They take all this from around 50 to 60 different Crus within Champagne, and they will add anything between 30 to 45% of reserve of wines. So what that means is that up to around 70% is gonna be from the specific vintage and the rest are back vintages. Now these back vintages are great for consistency and for quality. Firstly, they're gonna add more richness, as they're older, roundness to the wine. But also no matter what vintage is like, whether it was a poorer vintage, whether it was a great vintage, they will make sure that the consistency is there. So year on year out, the wine tastes the same because when you have your non vintage, each Champagne house will have their specific style and it needs to be the same year on year out. And then to finish off it's blending time with taking some red still wine and adding it into the final product. And with this Rosé, it's 12% red wine. So I'm expecting something that's gonna be pretty red fruit dominant. So let's see.

Janina Doyle 00:13:07 Whoop. There we go. So it's really rich, intense nose, very fruity. I get lots of like watermelon and fruit salad, but with this really nice strawberry shortbread biscuit note, and actually there's this freshness of kind of a herby uncooked sourdough, all of that on the nose. Palate is really fruity, loads of red berries and quite tart cherries. It's a nice dry style, but without being bone dry or too sharp, it's, it's got a creaminess it's actually quite rounded. It's got this kind of nice tongue coating going on. Now I really like the crunchiness of the red fruits. It's got good acidity. Um, but obviously it's rounded. So it doesn't feel like it has sharp edges, um, fine bubbles, but actually very easy drinking. This is in general, just a really fruity and soft example of non vintage Rosé Champagne. So if you like the

sound of this Rosé, the joys of this being a Grandes Marques means that you can find it in most supermarkets and it's gonna be around £49. However, be clever and wait for the supermarkets to have one of their deals on. So buy six and get 25% off. And if you are listening upon release, I know that Tesco's is doing that exact deal until the 18th of April and Waitrose is doing 25% off on this specific wine until the 19th of April.

Janina Doyle 00:14:49 And now if you're getting this Rosé or other sparkling Rosés, I love it with a little bit of spice. Now think Samosas or Corn Frittatas. Although Rosé Champagne is super versatile with its really high acidity. It's able to cut through anything fatty. And then those crunchy berries or strawberry notes they give the fruitiness that goes with bolder flavors and can handle mushrooms rather well. And all those other earthier tones on your plate. Now other great pairings would be a smoked salmon or a tuna tartar. And if you get a Champagne that's richer, you can start thinking of meats such as Roast Duck.

Janina Doyle 00:15:33 Now going back to the lady of the hour, Madame Clicquot also went on to inspire other women. So towards the end of her own tale, it was Louise Pommery who followed in her footsteps. Recently widowed and determined to take over and grow her own family business. So she went on to invent the Brut style of Champagne, which we so regularly drink as standard. So Brut is from zero to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar. And I've talked about sugar levels before in the past. However, I think it's always a good idea to have a little bit of a recap. So going from zero, if you see on the bottle labeled Brut Nature or anything that says Natural, it's gonna be under three grams per liter of residual sugar. If it says Extra Brut, then it's zero to six grams. If it's Brut, as we've just mentioned, up to 12 grams, then if it says Extra Sec or Extra Dry, this is 12 to 17 grams per liter. If it says Dry or Sec, it's 17 to 32 grams per liter. If it says Demi Sec, it's 32 to 50 grams per liter. And as we've just mentioned earlier on, Doux is all the sweetness from 50 plus grams per liter of residual sugar.

Janina Doyle 00:17:00 Now Madame Clicquot has definitely gone down as a woman of wit, incredibly business mind, but uncompromising in quality. When the juice wasn't good enough, she would actually turn down orders. In fact, the house's longstanding motto is: "only one quality, the finest". And if you yourself are now looking for some advice from Barbe-Nicole herself, a letter was found that was written to her grandchild. And in this letter it said: "The world is in perpetual motion, and we must invent the things of tomorrow. One must go before others, be determined and exacting and let your intelligence direct your life. Act with audacity." Now, if you wanna go and visit this Champagne house, you can find them in Reims. Now it's spelled R E I M S but you don't pronounce the M and of course, seeing as this is an educational podcast, I figure, well, let's touch on the Champagne region just quickly.

Janina Doyle 00:18:11 So if you start in Paris and you go Northeast about 90 miles, you are going to hit Champagne. Now, when you pick a Champagne, you want to imagine lots of small hills and those beautifully chalky white soils. Now it's in the ground, below surface, where they age all their Champagne for so many years. And they call these Crayères, which translates to chalk pits. So these are basically excavated cellars, some of which are complete labyrinths, kilometers and kilometers long, lined with aging bottles. Now there are five regions to know about, and three of them are considered the most premium and are based around the two unofficial capitals of Champagne, Epernay and Reims. So let me try and paint a picture. First of all, we have Reims and about 18 miles south is Epernay. Now literally to the south of Reims, in this kind of U-shape curve, you have the Montagne de Reims, and actually it has all three of the main grape varieties growing there, but the most known and considered most

prestigious is Pinot Noir. Now chalky soils are there, but you will find more limestone and clays toward to the west. And it calls itself a mountain. But, you know, remember I said, think of small hills. At the highest point, we're talking 283 meters above sea level. Now when you get to Epernay, you'll find the Champagne region is split by the River Marne. So from Epernay and towards the west wrapping around the river, you're going to find the Valle de le Marne. Here you find there are more issues with frost, but the slopes tend to be south facing so there's a lot more sun. So Pinot Meunier reigns here. It's a late budding grape variety and ripens early, so its perfect for this region, and typically soil wise, you get a whole mixture of clay, sand and limestone. Now just south of Epernay is the Côte des Blancs. And try to remember that with the word Blanc, white, Chardonnay, chalky soils. So the most chalky soils you're gonna find are in the Côte des Blancs. And these are on East, Southeast facing slopes and you get the brightest, most high acidity, vibrant styles of Chardonnay.

Janina Doyle 00:20:38 Now these are the three major regions, and you're gonna find all of the Grand Crus in these three regions. Now, when we say Grand Cru, this basically translates to best growth. And then you have Premier Crus underneath this. So this all got set up going back to 1919. What was happening, a lot of the growers who were selling their grapes to the Grandes Marques were feeling like things weren't fair and they wanted the prices to be fixed or to have a little bit more consistency. And so the échelle des crus was set in place. This is like the ladder of crus, where all the vineyards were assessed based on their climate, their location, their aspect of the sun, their topography. They were given points between one and a hundred. Although to be honest, no vineyard's got less than 80. So how it works is if you are 90 to 99 points, you are therefore a premier cru. And if you are a hundred points, you are a grand cru. Now there's a lot of arguments. Right now, this system for pricing is not used. The relationships are so much better between the growers and the Champagne houses. And this was set in place in 1919. So climate change has happened, different farming techniques, wine making techniques. So very often someone saying they prefer a grand cru over a premier cru could well be more of a personal preference. However, it is still definitely a symbol of prestige, quality and definitely has historic value. Now, if you are interested in the grand crus, there are 17 of them and there are 44 premier crus.

Janina Doyle 00:22:22 Because 17 is a lower number than 44 I am going to list all 17 grand crus with the best French accent I can muster. But don't forget there's the transcript, so go to my show notes if you want to see all of these grand crus written down. So there are nine in the Montagne de Reims. There is Puisieulx, Sillery, Mailly-Champagne, Verzenay, Verzy, Beaumont-sur-Vesle, then there's Ambonnay, there's Bouzy. Now at this point, we're really getting on the curb. All of these I've started from the north going around and now south facing slopes. So these two really are known for being the richest, most full bodied Pinot Noirs of the lot. And in fact, if you are after a still red, that would be under the category, Coteaux Champenois, that's what they call the still wines of Champagne. And you may well see them coming from these two regions. And then kind of on the Southwestern part. So we've kind of gone all the way down and we are curving round on this one part of the hill you have the last village of Louvois.

Janina Doyle 00:23:36 Now the next two grand crus, you're gonna find officially in the Valle de la Marne, however, effectively, they are an extension of this hill that has curved around on the Montagne de Reims. So first you have Ay, which very much like Bouzy, produces really full bodied reds, but is actually lower down in altitude, making it even more powerful. And then the second one, slightly further to the east is Tours-sur-Marne.

Janina Doyle 00:24:05 Then if we go to the Côte des Blancs, we have the six remaining grand crus. So starting in the north, going south, you have Chouilly, then Cramant which is known to be super chalky. Then you have Oiry, followed by Avize, which has richer soils, some clay content, so you find sometimes more powerful Chardonnays coming from there. Then you have Oger, followed by Le Mesnil-sur-Oger and both of these two really produce mineral wines with super high acidity.

Janina Doyle 00:24:39 Now that's the grand crus, but there are two other sub-regions that are further south from these three. You have the Cote de Sézannes, which is like an extension of the Côte des Blancs, and it starts, it's in the south and it goes to the Southwest. The Chardonnays there tend to have slightly less acid. There's less chalk in the soils, but the reputation is growing a lot for the Champagnes coming out of this region. Now equally, if you go down south, but to the east, you have the Aube region. So it's called the Côte des Bar. This is ironically 40 miles to Chablis and a 100 miles to Epernay. So it's much closer to Chablis than it is to the main regions of Champagne. Equally the soils are actually very different. Instead of them being chalky, there's like a Kimmeridgian Marl and down here Pinot Noir is doing excellent things.

Janina Doyle 00:25:42 Now, if you want to dig deeper into Champagne, go back to Episode 42, which is on Grower Champagne. So we're comparing the Growers to the Grandes Marques, understanding the back of the bottles, so those initials, what does that mean? But get in touch with me if Champagne is a region that you may want to geek out on. My contact details are in the show notes. And now to finish off I have a sweet quote from Coco Chanel who was a French fashion designer and businesswoman. And also of course, the founder of the Chanel brand. She is rather well known to have said:

“I only drink Champagne on two occasions when I am in love and when I am not.”

Well, I think that shows her to be a very well informed woman. Right that is it. I hope you've enjoyed learning about the story of Madame Clicquot and perhaps it inspires you on your own venture or simply just helps you to enjoy bottle of Veve Clicquot next time you get your hands on one. Obviously, if you could treat yourself to a grand cru, why not see if you have a favorite village that does it for you. Thank you as always for listening, make sure you are subscribed, like the podcast and give it a share across your social media platforms. Leave me a comment if your podcast app allows and next week I am bringing you something very different. Do you think cider is wine? Well, I'm talking with Alistair Morell who after decades of experience working in all parts of the wine industry has now set up the business, Cider is wine and is on a mission to get all of ours wine drinkers to realize the quality and potential of cider made from a hundred percent fruit juice. So tune in next week with an open mind and see if Alistair can convince you. Until then, cheers to you.