The taste of champagne in Britain, 1800–1914

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In the nineteenth century, champagne became a mass luxury product - but the product in 1914 was very different from the product in 1800. This paper is about how and why tastes change. Let’s start with 1800.

In 1800, the term ‘champagne’ did not automatically suggest the liquid which we know today. It was a term of origin rather than defined style. Some connoisseurs – in France and in England – preferred their champagne to be red or still (or both). Most English elite consumers would have expected an amber-coloured, still wine with high alcohol levels to be drunk with meals.

By 1914, champagne signified a sparkling, predominantly dry wine with a delicate aroma that was typically drunk with food. Only a few markets such as Russia still demanded sweet champagne. The ‘British’ taste was dominant.

Changes in taste are hard to define and understand and, for the nineteenth century champagne we must depend on written sources: firstly, books written about wines as guides for educated consumers, second, merchants’ price lists and third, the descriptions of wines contained in the letters exchanged between the French Houses and their London agents, which often give specific detail about the wines preferred by their customers and how these preferences varied between London and provincial cities such as Manchester and Liverpool.

Between 1790 and 1817, 56.8 per cent of Moët’s sales in England were of still wines, the most prestigious of which was Sillery. Cyrus Redding described Sillery as ‘white, still, dry; of an amber colour; generally iced for drinking’. By ‘white’, Redding did not imply the pale lemon gold typical of today’s champagne but rather a pale yellow-grey colour that turned ‘dark amber’ with age.

Sillery was strongly alcoholic, usually fortified with brandy, and available as both a still and a sparkling wine. Although the sparkling wines were well-known in England at the beginning of the century, still Sillery was the preferred ‘vin de Champagne’ for most elite consumers.

It was also the highest-priced wine of its time. An 1827 advertisement in The Times asserted Sillery champagne holds the highest rank. It is dry, still, of considerable body, of all Champagnes the best fermented, and ever commands the highest price.

Until the mid-1830s sparkling wines were almost always sweet; probably at least 50 g/litre of sugar – and often up to 200 g/litre - compared to 20 g/litre today. In 1835, Perrier-Jouët’s London agent wrote to Charles Perrier in Reims that ‘[t]he English no longer like very sweet champagnes’ but both Veuve Clicquot and Ruinart produced and sold high-class sweet champagnes which were esteemed right through the nineteenth century, though their popularity steadily dropped after the 1860s.

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1 Waugh, Merchants of Wine (London, 1957) for a somewhat synoptic history of the firm.


4 The Times, 13246, 6 Apr. 1827, p. 4.
A low dosage sparkling wine shows the intrinsic qualities of the wine. If the vintage is bad the wine's high acidity and lack of flavour will be apparent. Sugar was added after the second fermentation to adjust the sweetness of the wine but also to mask taste defects.

At the same time as shift to drier wines, a strong preference for sparkling wines had developed by the late 1850s.

Already by 1845, ‘Fitz-Boodie’ writing on ‘dinners’ in Fraser’s Magazine, said that whilst ‘all gourmands swear and vow that they prefer Sillery a thousand times to sparkling […]’ we all somehow drink it. All who say they like the Sillery will be found drinking the sparkling’.5

The wines of this period were still fairly dark coloured. The ‘pale straw’ colour of the Perrier-Jouët wines was remarked in the 1850s but Moët were still selling wines whose labels described them as ‘brown’ or ‘amber’.6

In this period the sweeter, sparkling wines were typically used for balls and celebrations or when with female companions. Some ‘snobs’ still saw champagne as a wine for ‘gals and children’ and champagne was—at least in its sweeter, sparkling incarnation—regarded as a ladies’ wine. Charles Dickens claimed that feasts were ‘ennobled’ with champagne purely to serve the wishes of the ladies and that champagne’s real place was at a ball where a ‘cavalier’ might offer the wine to his ‘lady danceress’.7

However, champagne remained the only wine to have any tradition of mixed consumption in polite circles. It was also, in essence, a new wine with fewer taboos on female consumption. This conviction was common at least until 1914 and the feminine language of champagne—’delicate’, ‘sparkling’, ‘bubbly’—reinforced this gendering.

Then, on 10 February 1860, William Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer, delivered one of the most important of British reforming budgets. Among many other provisions his fiscal changes ultimately reduced the duty on light (i.e. unfortified) wine to a uniform 1s a gallon. The removal of the long-standing fiscal advantages offered to the more alcoholic fortified wines of Spain and Portugal and South Africa triggered a huge rise in the consumption of French wine. Total wine consumption almost doubled by 1865, peaking in the mid-1870s.8

In these years, sparkling champagne grew faster than other wines. Consumption rose 60 per cent; other wines only 40 per cent. Levels of added sugar were lowered significantly and there was greater concern over adulteration and added brandy. During this period, merchants and drinkers experimented briefly with zero dosage wines before returning to a dosage level of 1-6 per cent.9

Dry wines were not immediately appealing to younger or novice drinkers so a liking for such wines indicated both sophisticated tastes and the financial ability to drink champagne regularly. Their initial foothold was in the burgeoning military-dominated and fashion-conscious clubs of London’s West End, encouraged by the tastes of the elite wine merchants, who moved in similar social circles. As claret—greatly cheapened by Gladstone’s reforms—was adopted by middle-class drinkers, elite taste moved to champagne.10

By the late 1860s, 6 per cent was too sweet for the London Clubs where the ideal champagne was required to be ‘dry enough to wash your hands in’. Adolphe Hubinet (Pommery’s London agent) cited the English preference for ‘un vin […] aussi sec que possible, mais sans raideur’. He insisted to Pommery that this new

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3 Quoted in London Standard, 22 Nov. 1845, p. 2; Archbould, Tableau de l’Angleterre et de l’Italie (Gotha, 1788), p. 126 emphasised the English taste for ‘strong drinks’, with champagne an example of London’s liking for ‘everything that is strong and intoxicating’; Report of Committee on Intemperance, 1878, para. 2815 confirming the long-standing English taste for added alcohol.

4 Archives Départementales, Marne, 16 U 194, Moët & Chandon label 17AA, deposed 1 July 1863.

7 Thackeray, Book of Snobs, p. 160; Disraeli, Vivian Grey (London, 1826), p. 201. Vivian Grey refuses champagne, saying he takes only brandy; Boreall offers Miss Macdonald champagne, saying it ‘is quite the lady’s wine’; Dickens, Household Words, vol. 11, no 265, 17 Feb. 1855, p. 57.

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style of wine would ensure the wine was drunk throughout the meal rather than with dessert and that this would differentiate Pommery in the British market.\textsuperscript{11}

In May 1867, Hubinet reported that: '[t]es vins très secs sont de plus en plus à l'ordre du jour dans les classes supérieures; on me dit que les Dames de l'Aristocratie se piquent de ne boire que les champagnes à 3, 4 ou 5% de liqueur'. The wives of the merchants dining with him that evening preferred zero dosage wine.\textsuperscript{12}

Drier wines gained popularity in the wider market but very dry champagne was not universally accepted. One writer claimed that unsweetened champagne was 'like Sauternes mixed with wormwood'.

Sparkling champagne had, however, completely taken over from still.

The fashion of the 1860s was for high levels of effervescence. Robert Tomes, the American consul in Reims, writing in 1867, complained that '[t]he demand on the part of the public for a noisy and frothy champagne is so urgent, that the

\textsuperscript{11} Floquet, C.C.H., 27 Nov. 1861, pp. 24–5. Un vieux négociant me disait ce matin que le champagne qui répondrait le mieux au goût actuel est celui avec lequel on pourrait se laver les mains sans les sentir collantes ensuite'; Floquet, C.C.H., 28 Nov. 1867, p. 68. 'a wine as dry as possible... but without harshness'.

\textsuperscript{12} Floquet, C.C.H., 11 May 1867, p. 64. 'The very dry wines are more and more the order of the day amongst the upper classes; I’m told that the ladies of the Aristocracy pride themselves on drinking only champagnes with 3, 4 or 5% liqueur.'

manufacturers do their utmost to satisfy it, even if '[t]he champagne which explodes the loudest and flows out the frothiest is [...]by no means the best'.\textsuperscript{13}

By now, colour preference was moving towards 'white'. By the mid-1870s, champagne was established as a dry, white, sparkling wine to be drunk with meals rather than the Continentals' after-dinner 'incubus'.\textsuperscript{14} A series of good vintages – e.g. 1865 and 1868 – enabled the shippers to produce dry wines with the body and bouquet that the English demanded. The vintage of 1874 set the seal on this style.

The 1874 vintage was blessed with near perfect weather. The grapes were very ripe and produced what G H Mumm & Co called ‘a full-bodied excellent Wine, well adapted to the English taste’. The wine was tinged with 'pink', as the consequence of ripening over ripe grapes. It was enormously successful commercially though its full-bodied style passed out of fashion in the 1890s when ‘light’, ‘delicate’, ‘fine’ and ‘fragrant’ were the key words.

Writing in 1881, Ridley's (the largest trade magazine) commented that they had ‘no faith’ in wines 'au naturel'. ‘We once tasted some, totally free from liqueur, and don’t want to try it again. One per cent. is the lowest modicum, and that in a fine vintage’.\textsuperscript{15} Sweeter wines remained fashionable for women and in provincial cities where dosage levels tended to remain in the 6-12 per cent range.\textsuperscript{16}

The success of the 1874 vintage made consumers aware of the added value of 'vintage' wines and price lists increasingly gave vintage dates.


\textsuperscript{14} The Times, 23733, 24 Sept. 1860, p. 9. Letter.

\textsuperscript{15} Ridley’s, no. 417, 12 July 1882, pp. 208–9. The Editor’s preference was for 3 per cent.

Champagne was increasingly a dinner-table drink. The Prince of Wales (whose champagne-only meals were much commented on in the press) set the trend. Consumers, thought Ridley's in 1893, wanted to 'a crack brand of a crack vintage' on their dinner tables; a trend reinforced by the growing tendency to restrict premium champagne drinking to public spaces such as hotels and restaurants.

Prices rose steadily and consumers continued to buy. In 1905, Ridley's noted that it was 'very curious' that 'each increase in price was followed by a corresponding rise in consumption'. They were describing a key characteristic of luxury products.

So, champagne had grown faster than other wines and declined more slowly. And its unit price rose steadily. By value it was still an enormously important market.

By 1914, champagne was again largely an elite drink but the template for champagne created in England from 1860-1914 was to last – almost unaltered – until the present day when consumers of all types prefer drier wines (but not zero dosage) and with a medium level of effervescence. The preference (among those who can afford it) for vintage-dated wines confirms a trend first established in the popular mind in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

So, what does this story tell us about consumers in luxury markets?

1. Champagne sales started to rise before a major change in taxation accelerated growth among middle-class consumers

2. At that point elite consumers started to differentiate their taste by focusing on drier wines which had the benefit of demonstrating their status and wealth

3. The influence of those elite young men (and super-elite personalities such as the Prince of Wales) was key to market development

4. It suggests that exploiting existing habits and trends (meal time drinking, more female drinkers) is vital for marketing success

5. It argues for the value of owning an occasion (beware being a Martini product – any, time, any place can mean no time, no place)

6. Higher prices can drive higher sales

7. Remember that what people say is not what they do

8. Manage and maximise brand image – concentrate your forces.

Graham Harding

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12 Galsworthy, Man of Property, pp. 32 & 97. Everything from sculpture to champagnes was assessed for price and worth.

13 Ridley's, no. 546, 12 Apr. 1893, p. 217; no. 727, 8 May 1908, p. 445; no. 818, 8 Dec. 1914, p. 809.