

Champagne flutes  
in handblown  
crystal, by  
Tiffany & Co.,  
(set of two, \$125)

# the rise and rise of luxury champagnes

THOUGH THE STOCK MARKETS MAY BE SINKING,  
CHAMPAGNE SALES CONTINUE TO SOAR.

BY ELIZABETH FASOLINO

The world economy may be in a precarious position, but you wouldn't know it to visit New York City's top wine retailers or luxury Champagne bars, where the atmosphere remains as effervescent as the bubbles in the wine. Sales in the United States and Britain declined during the recession but began to rebound last year, with Champagne sales growing 7.5 percent in 2010, according to the annual Research and Markets 2011 Champagne Report.

The surging demand has supported the opening of two new Manhattan establishments dedicated to the exclusive sampling of luxury Champagnes by the bottle or the glass: Winston's Champagne Bar at the Gansevoort Park Avenue Hotel and The Champagne Bar at The Plaza Hotel. Nightlife impresarios Brian Gefter and Michael Satsky opened Winston's this September and offer more than 100 Champagnes. "Our guests include people looking to enjoy a grower Champagne in a sophisticated nightlife atmosphere, and Champagne connoisseurs looking to experience a flight of extraordinary *tête de cuvées*," says Gefter.

Winston's carefully selected menu includes bottles from approximately 25 vintners including Egly-Ouriet Blanc de Noirs "Les Crayeres" NV, Billiot Cuvée Laetitia NV, and a 1979 Krug Clos du Mesnil Blanc de Blancs priced at \$16,200. Service by the glass ranges from a Deutz Brut Classic (\$20) to Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Rosé 2004 (\$120). The Champagne Bar at The Plaza is a bit more *ancienne regime*. Think rococo gilding and marble in a space more cathedral than commercial. Prices at The Plaza are in the same range as at Winston's including a '98 Pol Roger Cuvée for \$595, and vintage Brut Rosé Dom Pérignon '96 for \$1,800.

As legend has it, Champagne was accidentally invented in 1675 when monks added sugar to a cask of Épernay. The sugar initiated an unexpectedly powerful fermentation process, and foam bubbled unabated until one brave and thirsty monk tasted the brew and gave thanks to the Almighty Father for the divine miracle of its invention. In the 18th century, vineyards in the Champagne region of France began making white wine from red grapes, with the

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The Champagne Bar at the Plaza

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second fermentation process happening within the bottle. The Champagne region, approximately 100 miles east of Paris, has a unique terroir. There are five geographic distinctions within the region, each imparting unique qualities to the wines they produce, and many consider the Champagnes from Marne-la-Vallée to be the finest. The steep hills and chalky substrata are optimal for growing Pinot Meunier grapes, which along with Pinot Noir and white Chardonnay, produce Champagne. “Certain terroirs are better suited for certain grapes,” says John Kapon, the third-generation CEO of Acker Merrall & Condit, one

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of the world’s leading purveyors of fine and rare Champagne. Champagnes from vintage years are the most prized and expensive, and Acker Merrall & Condit has long been committed to increasing awareness of aged Champagnes. “Bottles dating to 1900 can age as well as red wines,” Kapon says. “They can be stored, and a great vintage can age 100 years. The bubbles diminish and let the rich fruitiness and caramels come through.”

In recent years, aged Champagnes at Acker Merrall & Condit auctions have set world records: In 2008, a 1928 Krug Clos du Mesnil sold for \$21,151; and two bottles of 1959 Rosé Dom Pérignon sold for \$84,700. In June a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, salvaged from a 19th-century shipwreck, sold for \$43,630.

Though the patrons at Winston’s and The Champagne Bar at the Plaza don’t sip Champagnes that are quite so heady as the bottles sold at auction, their patronage attests to the same striking trend: that luxury Champagne, like luxury real estate, still commands fascination—and record sales. The most enduringly charismatic of drinks, Champagne is the perennial toast of the town. *Winston’s*, 420 Park Ave. S., 212-929-9070; *winstonschampagnebar.com*; *The Plaza*, Fifth Ave. at Central Park S., 212-546-5311; *theplaza.com* **G**

## GRAND TASTING

Premier winemakers recommend their finest Champagnes, just waiting to be uncorked.

BY ALLISON POLSTER

### METHUSELAH OF MOËT IMPÉRIAL BY MOËT & CHANDON

A Methuselah of Moët Impérial (\$875) impresses by sheer size: the six-liter bottle of the label’s flagship Champagne can serve 50. In terms of taste, the oversize cuvée delights with its signature fruitiness. *Morrell & Company Wine and Spirits*, 1 Rockefeller Plaza, 212-688-9370; *morrellwine.com*

### BELLE EPOQUE BLANC DE BLANCS 2002 BY PERRIER-JOUËT

Born in the Cramant plots Bourons Leroy and Bourons du Midi, known for their ideal growing conditions, Belle Epoque Blanc de Blancs 2002 (\$350) is the house’s most rare wine. The Champagne is special in its complexity, as it simultaneously expresses both delicate and rich qualities. *Sherry-Lehmann Wine and Spirits*, 505 Park Ave., 212-838-7500; *sherry-lehmann.com*

### LA GRANDE DAME 1990 BY VEUVE CLICQUOT

Originally created in 1972 to commemorate Veuve Clicquot’s bicentennial and named for Madame Clicquot, La Grande Dame (\$1,500) emerged as one of the world’s finest Champagnes. Pop the cork on this wine from eight Grand Crus to experience its notes of white flowers, citrus, white fruit, and after exposure to oxygen, flavors of hazelnut and almond. *Acker Merrall & Condit*, 160 W. 72nd St., 212-787-1700; *ackerwines.com*

### ŒNOTHÈQUE ROSÉ 1990 BY DOM PÉRIGNON

Aged for 20 years before finding its way out of the cellars, the Œnothèque Rosé 1990 (\$750), produced from Pinot Noir grapes, offers an intense flavor and an amber hue, unique for a rosé. An oenologist inspects each bottle before release to ensure its perfection. *Crush Wine & Spirits*, 153 E. 57th St., 212-980-9463; *crushwineco.com*



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