PREVIEW

An authoritative, comprehensive guide to the ever-growing world of fine fizz

Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine (4th Edition)
Tom Stevenson and Essi Avellan MW

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REVIEWED BY
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In the world of fine wine, Bordeaux and Burgundy were the first classic French wine regions to find themselves flattered by imitation, and the Rhône and the Loire were next to become the focus for tribute acts worldwide. From a trickle to a torrent, reproductions became desirable originals, and blind tastings showed us what we already suspected: that it had become possible to make great Cabernet, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Sauvignon Blanc outside France and that terroir no longer had to be reverentially whispered with a French accent. Thanks to the long-established preeminence of Champagne, the challenge to its position as the *nonpareil* of the sparkling-wine world has taken a little longer—but materialize it has.

Sparkling wines from elsewhere used to be regarded as little more than third-rate country cousins attempting, at best, to reproduce Champagne itself. Today's producers of sparkling wines have shed the cultural cringe to become confident exponents of the style. Where once sparkling wine was regarded as a wine of celebration, today it comes in a range of styles in which celebration may play a supporting role but doesn't have to take center stage. A growing global thirst for fizz, abetted by a changing climate and a serious approach to making sparkling wine from quality grapes, has resulted in a reappraisal of the style. Now that fizz can be enjoyed as an apéritif, an ice-breaker, or with food, it has become a wine for all occasions.

Into this brave new world, the fourth edition of *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* has arrived with no little avoirdupois. The enterprise began with a first edition in 1998 by Tom Stevenson, whose seminal book on Champagne was first published in 1986. As the world of fizz expanded, Stevenson was joined in 2013 for the 528-page third edition by Essi Avellan, a Finnish Master of Wine with an insatiable thirst for the bubble. The revised and expanded fourth edition runs to 800 pages. In the 2013 edition, Avellan had just a year to realize a "mission impossible." Working since then on the fastest-expanding category in wine has given her the scope to research in greater depth and cover new ground.

The *Encyclopedia* remains a joint venture by two of the world's leading authorities and most indefatigable tasters, but as in the case of the 2013 edition, Avellan is credited as the author, and she takes responsibility for all the tasting assessments. Stevenson points out, "We have a very similar palate and a very similar notion about quality," so the book is for the most part a seamless joint enterprise. Where sections on reserve wines, pressing, autolysis, the magnum effect, lightstrike, and the glossary have been imported and expanded from previously published work by Stevenson, the two voices are distinct. A rant such as the withering demolition of the Cava DO has Stevenson's stamp all over it, although in fairness, it was written before the new Cava legislation addressed many of the issues.

Truly global

The degree of inclusivity to be expected from a volume such as this depends on the claims for it made by its authors. The clue is in the title. To live up to its billing, a global encyclopedia should seek to cover all the bases. As a reference work, this fourth edition commendably ticks the boxes and can lay justifiable claim to being both wide-ranging and authoritative. The breadth of its scope is its great strength, even if blanket coverage sometimes means having to scrape the bottom of a mediocre stainless-steel vat or oak cask.

The book begins with a brief history setting the scene in Champagne, taking us to the turn of the 20th century and the revolutionary invention, by one Armand Walfart, of disgorgement *à la glace*. Introductory chapters explain the various techniques of the sparkling-wine process lucidly, with an expanded section on assemblage, the construction of the cuvée, and yeast autolysis. Recognizing its importance, there's an important new addition on *dosage*, as well as a note on jetting technology at bottling and (geek alert) a lengthy discourse on corks and closures.

Three detailed sections follow: on quality factors, terroir issues, and sparkling-wine styles. In a section on the evolution of regional average yields, the authors bring any climate-change deniers updated regional averages for a rise in natural alcohol levels from 9.6% ABV for 1970–99, to 10.1% for 2010–17 and a corresponding drop in acidity from 13.4g/l to 12.3g/l. Maps for GST (Growing Season Temperature) zones are usefully enlarged over three pages (up from two). There is coverage of bottle sizes, including "the magnum effect," the right glass, storing and serving, and appreciating sparkling wine, while the topic *du jour* of lightstrike is suitably illuminating.

The authors call it how they see it. Champagne's *brut nature* style, for instance, emerged when consumers "were influenced by wine snobs who [...] thought that Champagnes without any *dosage* must somehow be superior." The snobs are put firmly in their place: "the result [...] would often be better with a little sugar." The authors suggest that the style may better suit a sunnier climate such as Franciacorta. In Germany, Geisenheim is "the funny farm of all funny farms when it comes to creating a multitude of boring grape crosses." On disgorgement-date labeling, the authors are clear: It should be mandatory, as it is in Franciacorta and Clàssic Penedès. Interestingly, the authors say that there is no evidence to suggest that the tank method is an intrinsically inferior method of sparkling-wine production (to the traditional), citing Wegeler-Deinhard's experiments with Bernkasteler Doktor.

The meat of the book lies in its country-by-country producer profiles, each section of which is preceded by a scene-setting introduction. The 220 pages on Champagne (versus 150 in the 2013 edition) make this, effectively, a book within a book, with a lengthy introduction; new and improved maps; and more on the revision plans, environmental issues, and the rise of grower single-vineyard Champagnes. Producer profiles vary in length and style—from four or more pages for Bollinger, Dom Pérignon, Krug, Philipponnat, Roederer, Taittinger, and Veuve Clicquot, to the briefest of thumbnail sketches—according to the importance the authors attach to the producer.

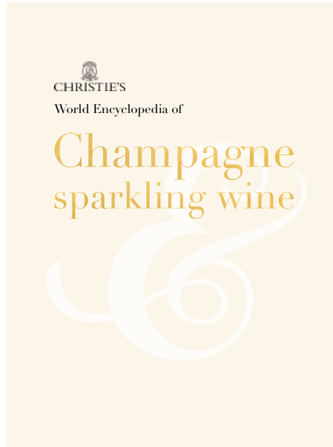
> **The authors call it how they see it. Champagne's *brut nature* style, for instance, emerged when consumers "were influenced by wine snobs who thought that Champagnes without any *dosage* must be superior"**

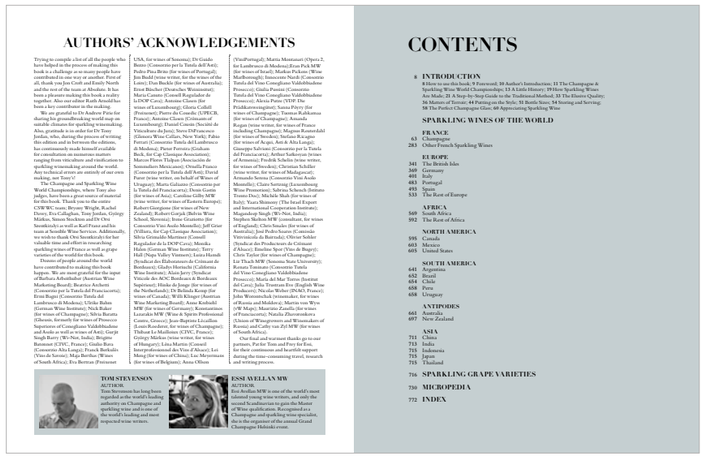
Typically, bigger profiles are broken down into three parts: the history and other relevant information, followed by an assessment of the house style and range, and then star ratings with a brief lowdown of each wine based on tasting. Subjective judgment animates what might otherwise be monotonous. Occasional boxes on, for instance, "Why is Grand Siècle so special?" add oomph. The spotlight on less familiar growers and smaller houses is valuable: Cédric Bouchard, Coessens, Corbon, Doyard, Guibor Fils, Lassaigne, Lassalle, Margaine, Moussé, Prévost, and Suenen, to mention just a handful. Almost all producers have had their scores revised upward from the earlier edition—some, like Bouchard and Collin, by quite a considerable margin.

Which brings us to Selosse. "The style is so challenging for me [...] I still cannot come up with points for it," says Avellan, admitting that while a lot of people love them, the characters of the Selosse style are "quite the opposite of what I appreciate in fine Champagne." Which characters? "Massive concentration, distinctive oxidation, dominant *flor*-yeast characters and prominent oakiness." Much the same applies to David Léclapart: "I would love to love them [but] loving these requires an extremist palate or a palate used to 'natural wines.'" There's the rub. Acknowledging that oxidative styles have developed a cult following, the authors (a) believe that *distinctive oxidation* marked by oxidative aromas—that is, detectable aromas of acetaldehyde—is a fault; and (b) clearly don't like the styles.

Authoritative and comprehensive

Profiles of "other French" sparkling-wine producers occupy nearly 60 further pages before the start of the country-by-country sections beginning with the British Isles. This sees Nyetimber at the top, closely followed by Gusbourne, and while it is largely comprehensive, there is no room for Simpsons or The Grange. Germany is well covered, with Raumland's stock on the up, at 87 from 85—still, in my view, too low. Reflecting its status as "perhaps currently the most dynamic sparkling-wine country," Italy is allocated 82 pages, up from 38, the next-largest chapter after Champagne. This is justified by both the volume of production, even if the bulk of that is Prosecco, and the diversity of its three major quality regions: Franciacorta, Trentino, and Alta Langa. Trentino's





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8 INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Following the introductory section, the encyclopedia is arranged in a country-by-country format. Within each country there are two basic types of text: general introduction, and producer profiles listed in alphabetical order. Also, each country's successful wines at the Champagne and Sparkling Wine World Championships (CSWWC, p.11) 2014–2018 will be presented at the beginning of the section. To locate a particular country, consult the contents. To find a specific producer: (1) If you know the country in question, turn to that chapter and locate it by its alphabetical listing, or (2) if you know the name of the producer, but are not sure of the country, refer to the index.

PRODUCER PROFILES

1 GLOBAL RANKING
A personalised percentile-based ranking that applies globally, thus a producer scoring 80 points anywhere in the world is the equivalent in quality (though different stylistically) to a Champagne producer scoring 80 points.

N/A Where no ranking has been given, (a) because ownership or the winemaker of the property has recently changed, (b) where the author has insufficient experience of the wines or (c) where the producer is new to the market and therefore has no existing track record in terms of overall quality over a number of years.

40 If they are clean, the character of the wines must be dire.

50 Clean, but boring.

60 Probably some potential, but usually cool fermentation has produced an austere style in which individual character is lost.

70 Frankly, this is as good as it gets in some areas. The point at which any sparkling wine other than Champagne starts to become interesting.

80 Any sparkling wine other than Champagne that receives this score is not just interesting, but one that is good enough to grace the table of a self-confessed Champagne addict.

85 Because Champagne has such intrinsic advantages over sparkling wines produced in less favourable zones, this is the level at which an inexpensive BOB or secondary brand becomes interesting.

90 The sort of quality that Champagne has to be to warrant inclusion in my cellar. If a non-Champagne-sparkling-wine producer scores this high, it is of exceptional quality indeed. Serious-quality Champagne or top-quality sparkling-wine producer whose products have every right to demand a significant premium over the rest of the market. Be prepared to give these wines additional cellarage to reveal their true potential.

95 The greatest Champagne producers of all; their wines will often require at least ten years' cellarage.

98 The highest producer rating in this book is given to only one house, Krug, whose attention to detail, quality throughout the range, as well as depth and ageing capacity of the wines, was unmatched by anybody else.

100 Perfection – impossible!

2 VALUE
BY VALUE
3 AYALA
4 CH CHAMPAGNE, VALLÉE DE LA MARNE
5 www.champagne-ayala.fr
6 Group ownership: Société Jacques Bollinger
7 Other label: Montebello
8 700,000 bottles
9 Négociant-Manipulant
10 Only a few years ago Ayala was a Champagne brand on its way to oblivion. After its neighbour Bollinger purchased it in 2005, the brand got a new lease of life. Despite their geographical closeness the two houses could not be more different in style.
11 WINEMAKER Caroline Latrive
12 HOUSE STYLE & RANGE
Ayala's non-vintage Majeur is elegant and fresh. Brut vintage is pleasantly approachable, light and energetic. Ayala has built a good name for its *brut nature*, which used to be known as Zero Dosage. It is indeed a pure, zesty Champagne that does not fail to awaken an appetite.
13 ★ Brut Majeur ★
14 Not vintaged, traditional method: 40% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir, 20% Meunier

15 VALUE
Awarded to producers whose best wines generally stand out within their category. Value may exist at 50 pounds, euro or dollars, just as it does at five pounds, euro or dollars, although the depth of your pocket will decide whether you can afford the value found at the top end of the market.

16 TRADING NAME
17 LOCATION
18 WEBSITE
19 GROUP OWNERSHIP
Either the parent company that owns the winery or, if it is the parent company, any other operations belonging to it.

20 OTHER LABELS
Primarily secondary brands, although in some instances this will include a primary brand when it is different from the trading name under which it is listed.

21 PRODUCTION OR SALES
It is a moot point whether a winery's annual production is the same as its sales, although in the case of a mature venture it often is. This figure relates to a producer's sparkling wines only.

22 COMMERCIAL STATUS
Champagne only: in most cases this indicates whether the producer is a house (*négociant-manipulant*), grower (*récoltant-manipulant*), or cooperative (*coopérative-manipulant*). (For details of other possibilities, see 'Types of producer', p.69)

23 BACKGROUND INFORMATION
A thumbnail sketch of relevant details.

24 WINEMAKER
The person with overall responsibility for making the wines.

25 HOUSE STYLE & RANGE
A general description of the house style; this often includes specific descriptions of individual *cuvées*.

26 STAR RATING
These ratings are not global, but apply to wines that stand out within their own class, style or origin.
★ Wines that are well above average quality.
★★ Extraordinarily exceptional.
★★★ Near perfect vintage to vintage.
½ Half-stars indicate intermediate ratings.

27 NAME OF INDIVIDUAL WINE
28 CUVÉE DETAILS
Whether vintaged or not, method of production, grape varieties and other relevant information. Where it is stated 'varieties not known', these details are either uncertain or have not been forthcoming.
'Bottle-fermented' is used when it has not been possible to discern whether a wine has been made by the traditional method or transfer method. Every possible care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, but we can pass on only what the producers have told us and there have been many occasions when it has been difficult to unravel the ambiguities of the details provided by producers. It should also be noted that varietal proportions are likely to vary from vintage to vintage and over time.

FOREWORD 9

FOREWORD

How quickly the sparkling wine scene has changed. It is hard to imagine, but according to André Simon, 60% of the Champagnes shipped were extremely sweet as recently as 60 years ago, with at least 50 grams of sugar, and half of those had as much as 100 grams! It was only in the 1960s that the *brut* style started to assert itself. When it came to fine-quality sparkling wine, there was only Champagne. Other sparkling wines existed, of course, but the choice was invariably between clean or not clean and the clean fizz was just that, clean fizz, with no complexity, no finesse and rarely even an appropriate structure. This was still the situation 40 years ago.

Champagne was recognised not simply as a classic wine, but as the only *classic* sparkling wine in existence and one of the greatest wines in the world. Yet, unbelievably, there were no Champagne specialists to be found. The UK was and always has been Champagne's best market by miles (less so now, with the ascendance of the USA) and yet when I questioned famous MWs who had attended the Champagne Academy, they struggled to name a dozen Champagne producers beyond the one they represented, they had no idea about cooperative brands or grower Champagne, and knew barely the basics of production. Their knowledge of the chemistry involved was zero. That is why, in 1980, I embarked on a six-year project to research and write *Champagne* (Sotheby's Publications, 1986), which profiled almost 300 houses, 30 cooperatives and more than 300 growers, examining for the very first time topics such as a future expansion, the *sur-lattes* scandal and the *houses à vitiles*.

In the 1990s I was heartened to see a couple of others begin to specialise in Champagne and by the mid-1990s I began to look at other sparkling wines as well. Things were slowly improving. When the first edition of *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* was published in 1998, it was a massive task to taste first from every country in the world, just to find the handful of truly world-class producers that existed outside of Champagne. By 2013, however, this book was on its third edition and the world of bubbles had changed beyond all recognition. With world-class sparkling wines popping up all over the place, the work involved had increased dramatically, but at least the task of tasting beyond the boundaries of Champagne had become far more rewarding. The number of Champagne and/or sparkling-wine specialists had increased, so I asked the best of these, my dear friend and colleague, Eoi Avellan MW, to trudge around the world researching a massively revised *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* (from 352 to 528 pages).

In fact, Eoi is the most naturally gifted Champagne taster I have seen. We also have a very similar palate and a very similar notion about quality. I would imagine that we share an immediate appreciation for perhaps 90% of all the Champagnes and sparkling wines we taste together. Neither of us has an ego problem. We respect each other's experience too much; consequently we are both willing to look objectively at the 10% we disagree about and we are prepared to change our minds. However, despite these shared values, Eoi has her own opinions and I have told her to stick to her guns, even when they diametrically oppose my own.

If the third edition revealed the changes in Champagne (from climate to growers and single-vineyard *cuvées*) and the extraordinary growth and progress of sparkling wine globally, then this even larger, more-expanded fourth edition will be a real eye-opener. With each edition becoming progressively larger and more complex, I am grateful to Eoi for agreeing to be co-author. Since 2013 she has also joined me as one of the three permanent judges for the Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships, which adds even more practical tasting experience of the world's finest sparkling wines to our repertoire.

So where there was once just Champagne and no specialists, there is now an evolving Champagne, with other sparkling wines on the rise, and more fizz specialists than you can shake a magnum at, but these changes are in many ways less important than the changes in perception by consumers.

Forty years ago when only Champagne could claim to be a world-class sparkling wine, other fizz acquired such a bad reputation that the term 'sparkling wine' became synonymous with 'poor quality' and producers felt obliged either to concoct alternative names like Cava or Cap Classique or rip-off the name Champagne. Since then, of course, the quality of sparkling wine outside of Champagne has soared and new generations have become so accustomed to excellent quality that they cannot understand why the term 'sparkling wine' should be regarded any differently than 'red wine' or 'white wine'.

These relatively young generations no longer define sparkling wine as merely a wine of celebration; a wine to pop the cork, have a toast and quickly move on to something more serious. Today's consumers regard sparkling wine itself as a serious wine. They see it as a fine wine in its own right, deserving its place at the table and requiring as much consideration, analysis, argument and different opinions as any other great wine. I hope they enjoy this, the fourth edition of *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine*, as much as Eoi and I enjoyed making it.

Tom Stevenson
2019

Ferrari (which is up from 86 to 91) and Franciacorta's Ca' del Bosco, up just one point, are the highest-rated producers.

Perhaps because Piemonte is a relative latecomer to the party with the Alta Langa Consorzio established only in 2001, the producers of Alta Langa are not as fully represented as those of Trentino and Franciacorta, so Deltetto, Ettore Germano, Ghione Anna, Il Cascinone, Marcalberto, Roberto Garbarino, and Vite Colte don't warrant a look-in. There is no room at the inn either for Cesarini Sforza in Trentino, Paltrinieri in Lambrusco, or Collalto, Mongarda, or Valdellovo in Prosecco. Forty pages are devoted to Spain, where the complexities of style and progress made by an increased focus on terroir through the Corpinnat and Clàssic Penedès groups and Cava de Paraje are explained well. Gramona is top dog, moving up to 90, which is the same score, incidentally, as Nyetimber.

A section on the rest of Europe segues into the New World of South Africa (with Graham Beck and Klein Constantia equal top), followed by Canada, the United States (Roederer Estate is number one here), and South America. Given that serious quality fizz is still thin on the ground in many countries, the authors deserve a pat on the back for putting their noses on the line in the face of a substantial amount of mediocrity. Eventually, heading to Australia and New Zealand brings us back to top sparkling form with seriously good kit from the likes of Arras, which, with California's Roederer Estate, deservedly earns the highest ranking (92) outside Champagne.

The dual rating system follows the same formula as the previous edition. One set of scores rates producers out of 100, with an additional value bonus where appropriate. The second rates wines from one to three stars, with half stars in between. "The aim is not to be critical," says Avellan, "but to separate the best from the rest." It may be unusual in an encyclopedia, but it has the benefit of adding to the authority of the producer profiles. To stay up to date, the authors rate not specific iterations of wines but rather follow brands within the range to see how they develop on a year-by-year basis. A substantial number of profiled producers are not given a rating because ownership or winemaker have changed or the producer is new to the market with no track record. I find a number of ratings on the mean side—for example, Jacquesson and AR Lenoble get only an 88, and Pierre Péters 89, behind Moët & Chandon's 90.

The authors' stylistic preferences and anathema to quirkiness might in part explain why, apart from *en passant* in the section of the *méthode ancestrale* and glossary, pét nat barely registers on the radar, despite, or perhaps because of, its current trendiness. Prosecco's parallel *col fondo* method (known since 2019 as *sui lieviti*) of fermenting on the yeast lees is mentioned, however, with a good press for the style from Malibran and Casa Paolin. But if you're looking for pét nat exponents from Australia, such as Ravensworth, Jauma, or BK Wines, you will have to wait for the next edition.

Introducing each region with the results from Stevenson's own Champagne and Sparkling Wine World Championships, where Avellan is also one of the fixed panel, fits the narrative, but even the latest results, for 2014–18, are already two years old. I would prefer to see the awards in an appendix at the end of the book. The images are an improvement on the third edition, but there's a disconnect between Champagne, for which Michael Boudot is commissioned, and other generic vineyard and barrel pics or PR photos of a strategically placed bottle in a scene of improbable family togetherness. With a book at an RRP of £200, hopefully the publishers will celebrate the opportunity to accompany the full text of the next edition with expressive photos and commission images that such an authoritative and comprehensive work deserves throughout.