

On Merret: the original English method

What other subject could I possibly write about for December 2012, the 350th anniversary of Christopher Merret's historic paper, than the English invention of a scientifically repeatable method to produce the world's first fully sparkling Champagne?

The French claim that the first sparkling Champagne was produced c.1698, but that is based on a document written in 1718 that refers to its popularity having been established "more than 20 years earlier." This is not proof—it is merely hearsay. But even if we accept the claim, it does not explain how Sir George Etherege could write about "sparkling champaign" in *The Man of Mode* in 1678. How can we explain this reference to sparkling Champagne in English literature 20 years before the French invented it?

The answer is, of course, that the French did not invent it. The English did. Sounds simple now, but it was still a conundrum when I wrote *Champagne* (Sotheby's) in 1986, and I did not find the original proof until I was working on *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* (Absolute Press, 1998).

In 1662, wines from the cold northerly region of Champagne were not always fully fermented when shipped to England, and as soon as temperatures rose in the spring, fermentation would recommence. English vintners had been bottling all sorts of wine since at least the late 16th century, so when the corks were tied down with string on English-bottled Champagne, the carbon dioxide produced by refermentation could not escape, emerging as a slight fizz when the string was cut and the cork removed. As the product of small but varying amounts of sugar, left over from incomplete first fermentation, it would have yielded various degrees of relatively light effervescence. When these "brisk" wines became popular, English vintners would have come under pressure to replicate the style and would surely have noticed the



Tom Stevenson

problem of variability, with some bottles having no fizz at all. As they sought to minimize the incidence of failure, they would have noticed that the sweeter the wine, the more successful its effervescence, while the drier the wine, the greater its failure rate. Obviously this would encourage them to add sugar before bottling, but sometimes even the sweetest wines did not referment—and it is at this point that the story moves from the incidental to the intentional, as described by Christopher Merret: "Our wine coopers of later times use vast quantities of sugar & molasses to all sorts of wines to make them drink brisk & sparkling & to give them spirit as also to mend their bad tastes, all of which raisins & cute & stum perform."

Mention of "later times" clearly indicates a recent practice, while reference to "vast quantities of sugar & molasses" confirms that the amount of sugar used far exceeded that used for merely sweetening a wine, amounting to a sufficient quantity for fueling a second fermentation. This process was applied not only to Champagne but to "all sorts of wines," and the stated aim was to make them "drink brisk & sparkling." Historians have searched for the first use of the word "sparkling" in connection with wine, rather than "gay," "brisk," or

"lively," which are thought to infer a degree of effervescence but cannot be conclusively demonstrated to do so. By qualifying "sparkling" with the verb "to drink," Merret can only be referring to a tactile impression. This holy grail usage of "sparkling" was identified by André Simon in 1905, but he had not read Merret's paper. That honor goes to Patrick Forbes, 62 years later; I was merely the guy who dug out and published Merret's paper. It is no coincidence that from 1662 onward, every documented instance of "sparkling Champagne" refers unequivocally to fully sparkling wine—so much so, in fact, that Champagne soon became synonymous with that style of wine. In 17th-century English, "spirits" are the very essence of the wine as they "moveth" during the fermentation, while "spirit" (singular) is alcohol. So, "to give them spirit" must refer to the alcohol given to the wine by its second fermentation. The key to the entire quote is at the end—"all of which raisins & cute & stum perform"—since raisins are the source of yeast and provide even more sugar to be converted into carbonic gas. English vintners knew of fermentation in the 17th century, but they did not know about the role of yeast, a discovery that was not made for another 200 years. They did, however, know that raisins would ignite a new fermentation and that "cute" was one of the easiest-to-ferment forms of sugar in those days. Cute is 17th-century English for concentrated must, which Merret himself defined as "wine boild to the consumption of 1/2." Merret also wrote, "A little stum put to wine decaid makes it ferment afresh." And so, while everyone's attention has been on the word "sparkling," the smoking gun could actually be found at the end of Merret's quote, where "stum" should read "second fermentation." In a crude yet complete sense, this is the first definition of the *méthode champenoise* or, as it should be known, the original English method. ■