



Try the tulip
In a nod to their complexity, Kher insisted on serving the Blanc de Blancs NV and the vintage 2008 Blanc de Blancs in wider-bowled tulips rather than the more commonplace flutes, a routine practice in Champagne which allows the drinker to savour the delicate aromas better.

:: RUMA SINGH

The setting was stunning. Liveried service staff with epaulettes sporting the French national colours, polished silverware, damask tablecloths, embossed place cards, personalised menus – the elegant long table had everything, including good food and great conversation. The host: the Ambassador of France in India, Alexandre Zeigler. The heroes of the even-

Champagne's 'exclusive' push

Wine lovers worldwide are disdaining discount labels and moving towards prestige cuvées and single vineyard bubbly. And India is catching up

ing: Champagnes served course-wise; single vineyard Blanc de Blancs from the Grand Cru Le Mesnil-sur-Oger vineyards situated in the famous chalk-covered soils of Côte des Blancs, in France. The wines were from the fifth-oldest Champagne house in the world, Champagne Delamotte, the sister concern of the iconic vintage Champagne house, Champagne Salon. While Salon produces vintages only in exceptional years – only 37 declared in the last 100 years – the same grapes are used for Delamotte in the years when Salon does not declare a vintage.

All cuvées great and small

The story of Champagne in the 20th century is dominated by a handful of houses, big brand names or *grandes marques*, the bulwarks of the Champagne industry. Most of them buy their juice, grapes or finished bubbly from the 16,000-plus growers in the designated Champagne region. The biggest seller in their portfolio is the blend that made Champagne famous – the archetypal non-vintage (NV), which combines grapes, vineyards and vintages in unique proportion to reflect their house style. Smaller in

number are the *récoltant manipulateurs* (RM), producers who make their Champagne from grapes grown themselves. While many of them are small and lesser known, there are iconic names here – Agrapart & Fils, Chartogne-Taillet and Pierre Péters, among others. Then there are the historic boutique producers, making rare wines in tiny batches. Among them, Champagne Salon and its sister house, Champagne Delamotte.

Curated by *bon vivant* and Delhi-based wine aficionado Rajiv Kher, the evening unfolded and as each wine was poured, its heritage and provenance was discussed. The Champagne Delamotte Blanc de Blancs non-vintage was poured from magnum to accompany the *crème brûlée au foie gras*. With the *langouste thermidor* was the Delamotte Blanc de Blancs 2008, an unctuously smooth wine of great complexity. Finally with dessert, a rich cream and berry confection, came the Delamotte rosé NV, a rich strawberry-scented pink made in the *saignée* method.

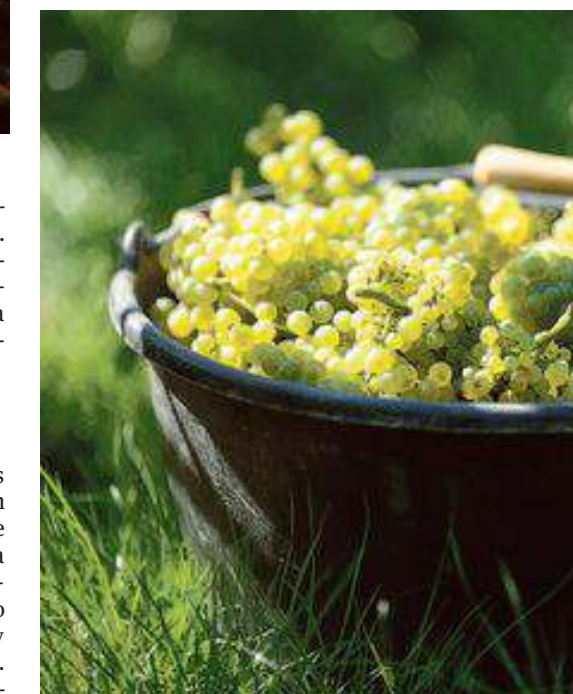
For Kher, a successful businessman who has transformed his deep passion for rare, high-end wines into a second business venture, an entire dinner paired with Champagne was one way to add an extra dimension to a special repast. "Champagne is more than an aperitif or dessert wine," he explained, "With great Champagnes, the flavour profile is elevated, much more complex - it is a wine that deserves its own place at the table."

A premium tale

Recent reports from around the globe have pinpointed an interesting fact: 2018 saw a first-time dip in Champagne sales worldwide. But this is far from the complete story. While volume-driven Champagnes have dipped in sales, there has been a concurrent trend of premiumisation and a rise in the demand for prestige cuvées and single vineyard



The cellars at Champagne Delamotte, and scenes from the dinner • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Champagnes from producers big and small. Established markets like the US, UK and Japan are disdaining discount labels and showing a preference for the unique – Champagnes made by boutique houses strongly associated with exclusivity.

"Premiumisation is the future of Champagne," avers Mathieu Pouchan, export director of Champagne Delamotte, echoing research consultant Wine Intelligence's Global Compass 2018-19 report which states that consumers are generally swapping quantity for quality. The steady valorisation of the segment has been assisted by a well-orchestrated campaign by Champagne's administering trade body, the CIVC (Comité Interprofessionnel du vin de Champagne), which has been propagating the dictum that Champagne should be for more than just birthday and wedding celebrations. "It has the variety and complexity to be enjoyed with any dish and many moments in life," adds Pouchan.

This has resulted in rapid growth beyond the traditional markets for Champagne: the UK and the EU. In CIVC reports of 2017, USA shows a growing appetite for prestige cuvées, while Japan is the third largest market for premium Champagne, and China and Hong Kong have grown by 12% and 14% respectively over the previous year.

So where does that leave India?

India: a niche new awakening

With its heavy taxes which make premium wines nearly unaffordable, India struggles to keep up with the rest of Asia in terms of volumes, but within the upper echelons of wine lovers, there is growing a newly-developed yen for the exclusive. Kher recounted a story to me about his initial reluctance to place his Champagne in local retail stores. They were too expensive, there was too little awareness. Ergo, they were unlikely to sell. "My marketing man-

ager persuaded me to place a single bottle in a shop, and it was the most expensive wine there by a mile. To my surprise, it sold almost immediately and the person who bought it enjoyed it so much that he returned soon after, demanding a second bottle. He wasn't a connoisseur but able to discern the difference. This is the most telling thing about the Indian wine market. I believe most people have the palate to discern the mediocre from the excellent. And in a country this size, there are enough people to understand and enjoy premium Champagne."

Pouchan is diplomatic, but echoes the thought. "India should be a country to look out

By the bottle

- Champagne Delamotte Blanc de Blancs NV, from ₹12,990, available at Rajiv Kher Selections LLP, Delhi
- Krug Grande Cuvée Brut will be available in Delhi, from ₹26,210, and in Mumbai, for ₹21,888, from May
- Champagne Agrapart & Fils Mineral Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007, from ₹17,990, and Agrapart & Fils Terroir Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Extra Brut NV, from ₹15,272, from Sonarys Co-brands, Mumbai
- Champagne Chartogne-Taillet Millesime 2008, from ₹9,488, from Sonarys Co-brands, Mumbai. (Prices quoted are duty paid.)

for. It is demographically important, of course, but there are also many great Indian collectors everywhere in the world who are ambassadors of our wine and a fine dining culture that is developing quickly."

And developing it is. Luxury giant LVMH has recently announced it will launch Krug Grande Cuvée Brut in Mumbai and Delhi in May. Rarer cuvées might follow, depending on consumer response. Sanjay Menon, whose Sonarys Co-brands has been importing premium wines for years, says he listed 10 boutique Champagne producers five years ago, among them the boutique organic producer Agrapart & Fils. The world of boutique Champagne houses is a rarefied one, he says, and because products are far from standardised, they are appreciated by only seekers of the unique. It is still a tough sell in India. While discerning buyers exist, the majority of Indians "still drink labels. But these unique Champagnes are for the true connoisseur. This is a small category which must take time to grow". Menon has hosted two top grower Champagne dinners in Mumbai in the last few years and believes the premium consumer has a natural human yen for the unattainable. "The moment something is widely available and accessible, it loses its uniqueness."

With more choices coming in soon (Kher is already planning his next shipment of Delamotte vintage Blancs de Blancs and Salon), the luxury-seeking epicurean has much to raise a toast to.