

RARE INSIGHTS

Beguiling on its own, Champagne is also a surprisingly versatile pairing with cuisine from around the world. Bollinger Rosé and dim sum, anyone?

AN ECLECTIC MATCH

BY SERENA SUTCLIFFE



Leafing through some Champagne notes the other day, fizzing glass in hand, of course, I was struck by a very comprehensive tasting some years ago where the main aim was to identify what food would go best with each Champers. The tasting was done blind, for reasons I cannot quite comprehend, and the vintages, when relevant, would have since moved on, but the huge range of dishes and the ideas created by focusing on this aspect of Champagne consumption were really interesting.

I had always maintained (a maddening habit!) that Bollinger, for instance, with its marine, salty character, was the perfect match for oysters, but its Special Cuvée was also terrific with buffalo mozzarella drizzled with some old balsamico, as was the biscuity Gosset vintage. Krug Grande Cuvée and Clicquot's La Grande Dame did the trick too

Jacques Selosse, was irresistible with creamy scrambled eggs. I have never subscribed to the 'eggs do not go with wine' theory, but this really was something else.

Tactile Sensation

The rosés, naturally, had a ball with smoked duck breast and I even found myself wondering if vintage Roederer Rosé might be just the thing with a mild curry, but I had to leave that to the imagination, which tends to run riot during tastings. Vintage Bollinger Rosé is made for dim sum, while vintage Moët Rosé has the 'meatiness' to be right on with cold roast beef or feathered game. Billecart-Salmon's vintage rosé is pretty blissful with both Thai crab cakes and lamb tagine, just loving the fruit in the latter. Dom Pérignon with some age goes with roast chicken but,

This was certainly the case recently when presented with Perrier-Jouët's Belle Epoque 2007, which was astonishingly good, all fresh mint and lemon balm, vinosity and vivacity, harmony and elegance, finishing on a note of almond paste. I swear I could drink a bottle of this on my own but, alas, they took it away before I could try. Cellar master Hervé Deschamps is doing a great job here and, incidentally, calls this brilliant 2007 "an epicurean wine".

Fascinating Marriage

Dom Pérignon is always experimenting with its vintages and food, both Asian and Western. In London this spring, the house showed its new baby, the 2005, in all its breadly, zesty glory, with crab and shaved raw wild asparagus, borage flowers and samphire – it slipped down in very silky fashion. The P2 1998 was paired with guinea fowl, morels, broad beans and peas. There was tarragon in there too, sometimes a tricky companion, but here it was a fascinating marriage. Then came the P3 1971, hazelnutty and hoppy, very brut and mineral, and sensational with the brown butter and rye shortbread that backed up the gariguettes strawberries.

The most show-stopping Champagne of the past few days was not consumed with any food, as it happens, but it is total nourishment in itself – Dom Pérignon 1985. Dreamlike in its complexity, all lavender and acacia, balance and eternal length, this is truly breathtaking. The team at DP likes to talk about "construction of Champagne through maturation" and I readily concede that they have a point. Mind you, drinking this, I would concede almost anything – it should be used to redeem the world.

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with the divine molluscs (although the spicy sausage that the bordelais serve with oysters did not). Vintage Moët demanded Dover sole, while delicious Alfred Gratien vintage needed scallops or turbot, with no frills.

There were some daring combinations that worked to great effect, none more so than Baltic herring with Laurent Perrier Ultra Brut, with the Champagne's acidity working well with the sweet/sour of the cured fish. Vintage Louis Roederer obviously coped magnificently with smoked salmon, but it did the same with smoked eel. A total surprise was Taittinger's Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs with duck confit and cabbage, while another blanc de blancs, this time from

then, everything goes with roast chicken, provided the bird has real flavour.

I even forced myself to imbibe a few demi-sec Champagnes, which have their uses with Christmas pudding and tiramisu, though the winner was Clicquot's offering with tarte tatin.

All this is splendid fun but I have to admit that when faced with a potentially exciting Champagne, I often prefer to have a first sniff and gulp with no food at all. There is something about that initial, clean, fresh glide onto the palate that is simply not worth missing. There is the tactile sensation of the bubbles, too, that should be experienced with no competition. Then, I think, the greatest effects and discoveries are more likely to hit the spot.