

Food & drink industry

The rise of undersea champagne: 'I have never tasted such a wine in my life'

Discovery of intact bottles on 1852 shipwreck sparks development of underwater ageing process



📷 A man pours from a bottle of Veuve Clicquot that was found on a shipwreck near Finland's Åland archipelago. Photograph: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP/Getty Images

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You might think that 1,500 years after the first bottle was drunk there wasn't much more innovation left to be had in the rarefied world of champagne. You would be wrong. The next big thing in the £6bn-a-year industry is: undersea ageing.

Like so many of the world's best innovations, it began by accident. In 2010, a group of divers in Finland's Åland archipelago came across the wreck of a ship that sank in 1852 and **were surprised to find 145 bottles of champagne 160ft below the surface**. Even more surprisingly, the bottles were still full and tasted - in the words of a professor of food biochemistry - "incredible - I have never tasted such a wine in my life".

All of the labels had washed off but wine detectives examined the interior surface of the corks and found branding images that enabled them to identify their origin. Many were from the Juglar maison, which disappeared in 1829 when its vineyard was taken over by a competitor, and there were 47 bottles of Veuve Clicquot.

Two years after the discovery, **11 of the bottles were auctioned off for a total of \$156,000** at a sale in Mariehamn, in the Åland archipelago between Finland and Sweden where the Föglö shipwreck was found. One of the Veuve Clicquot bottles was the top lot, selling for €15,000.

That was before the contents of the bottles had been analysed - and tasted - by experts. Now the value of the bottles has reached as high as \$190,000.

Philippe Jeandet, a professor of food biochemistry at the University of Reims, in the heart of France's champagne region, was given small samples from three of the bottles to conduct "chemical and sensory analysis" of the wine. His report, published in the **Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences**

journal, said that “after 170 years of deep-sea ageing in close-to-perfect conditions, these sleeping Champagne bottles awoke to tell us a chapter of the story of winemaking”.

A series of “expert tasters” initially described the wines “using terms such as ‘animal notes’, ‘wet hair’, ‘reduction’ and sometimes ‘cheesy’”, the report said. But after allowing the wine to sit in the glass and oxygenate, it released more pleasant aromas, described as “spicy”, “smoky” and “leathery”. Dominique Demarville, the then chef de caves at Veuve Clicquot, tasted the champagne three times, detecting ripe fruits, truffles and honey, and declared it to be among the world’s best champagnes.

Jeandet was allowed to taste “just one droplet squirted from a microsyringe”. His verdict, as reported in [Smithsonian Magazine](#): “I have never tasted such a wine in my life. The aroma stayed in my mouth for three or four hours after tasting it.”


Veuve Clicquot, which is part of the [LVMH luxury goods conglomerate](#) of the French billionaire Bernard Arnault, was so taken with the rediscovery of its wine that it is attempting to recreate the same conditions by sinking dozens of bottles in the same spot in the Åland archipelago. Some of the bottles will be left there for 40 years.

The champagne house thinks the deep sea could be the perfect environment to “rest” champagne, which is traditionally left to mature in a network of *crayères* (old chalk cellars) under Reims. “With its low salinity (20 times lower than that of the Atlantic Ocean) and its constant temperature of 4°C, the Baltic Sea offers an optimal ageing environment,” Veuve said.

The taste is all in the bubbles, apparently. “Whereas no bubbles were observed upon pouring, a slight tingling effect was felt upon tasting,” the scientific paper said of the ancient champagne.

Jean-Marc Gallot, the chief executive of Veuve Clicquot, said: “This extraordinary project dedicated to the art of ageing reflects the spirit of innovation and audacity that has always characterised Maison Veuve Clicquot. We like to push the boundaries, just as Madame Clicquot did in her time.”

It’s not just Veuve experimenting with deep sea champagne. Lucy Edwards, a champagne expert and founder of the [industry magazine Champagne Everyday](#), said undersea storage “is the fastest growing development area in champagne, with most of the big producers and even small houses trying it”.

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While Veuve is dropping bottles in the Baltic, Edwards said most of the undersea storage industry was off the coast of Brittany.

Demand has grown so rapidly that a French offshore exploration company that previously worked on projects for the oil and gas industry has launched a new division, Amphoris, dedicated to undersea wine storage. It says on its website: “Our job consists [of] providing a reliable and secure service for the immersion of bottles on sites that have been carefully chosen for their unique characteristics thus offering the best conditions to run a perfect

underwater cellar: full darkness, constant temperature, total safety.”

Producers worried about their expensive wine being stolen by divers are reassured that its “underwater sites are located at depths beyond limits of human free diving”.

Edwards said: “You need pristine conditions to age the best champagne. They thought that was in the tunnels under Reims, but now they think undersea is even more pristine. There you have total darkness, a cooler constant temperature, and most importantly, under water the pressure is closer to that inside the bottle - which makes the best bubbles.

“A lot of people think it is just a marketing gimmick, but I have to say I have tried some and there is a difference, however slight.”

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