

GENTRY

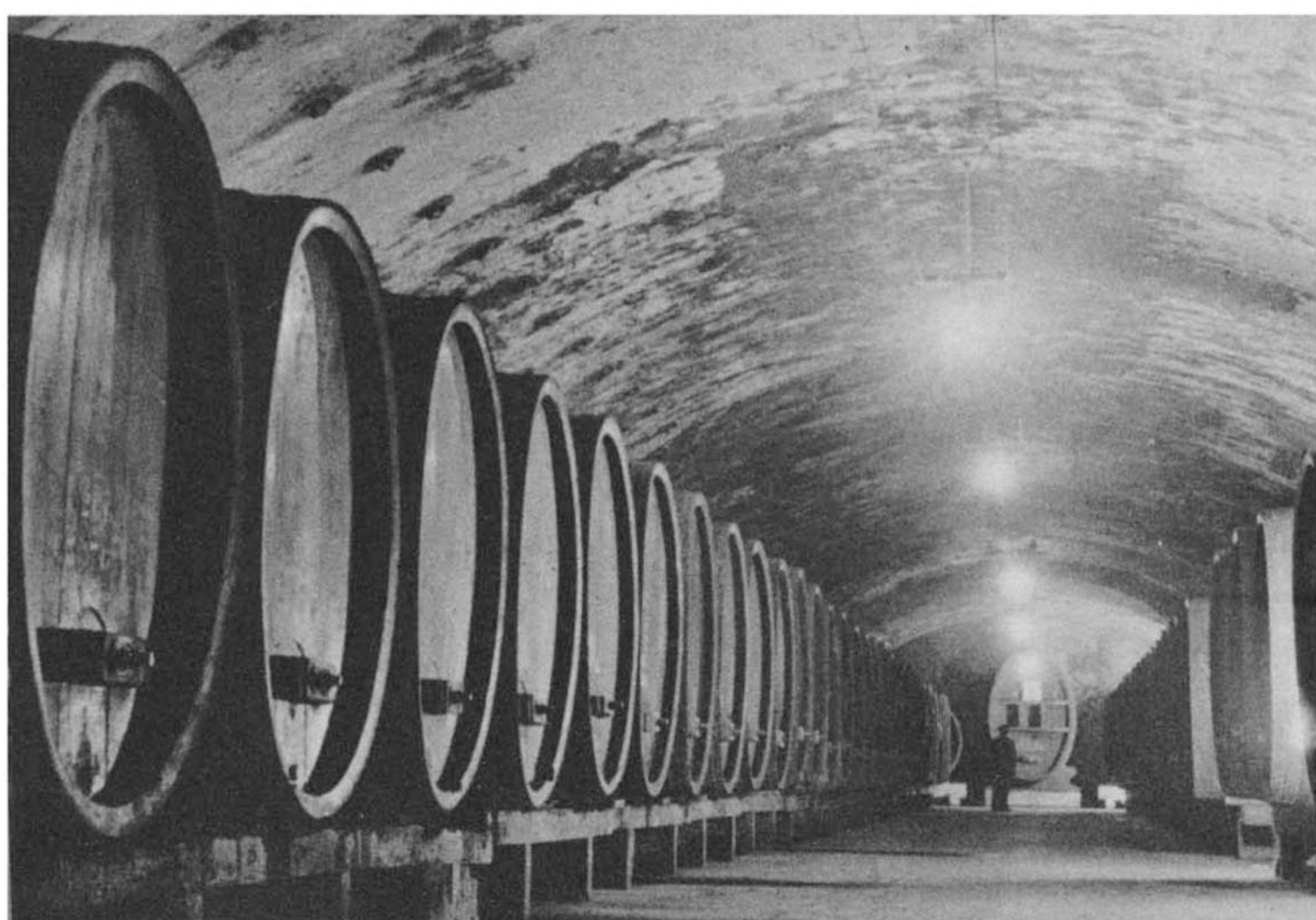
number sixteen fall 1955

JAMES BEARD

discourses on

CHAMPAGNE

the wine of elegance



The degrees of gracious living are debatable. One may argue that the Cadillac is a finer motorcar than the Rolls-Royce, that mink is more distinguished than sables, or diamonds smarter than emeralds, or paté de foie gras more elegant than caviar. But no one argues much about Champagne. No one will seriously contend that it has peers among wines. French wines are the greatest of all wines, and Champagne is the greatest of the greatest . . . The Wine of Elegance.

Its symbolism is a curious mixture of ritual and romance. It is the ceremonial drink at coronations and state banquets, the traditional beverage at betrothals, weddings, christenings and anniversaries. It launches ships. It is stylish at bon voyage parties. Its connotations are luxury, high living, love, happiness, gaiety, good luck. It is expensive. Among wines and spirits, only those that appeal mainly to connoisseurs are costlier, such as fine old Cognac, a few scarce Scotches and whiskies, and the last remaining bottles of very great vintages of still wines.

Despite its price and status, Champagne is democratic. Over two million bottles of it now come into this country annually, and not all of these could possibly be drunk just in privileged homes or better restaurants. At least a trickle of Champagne finds its way into commonplace restaurants and homes in ordinary America. On occasion I have searched the menus in Midwestern steak houses for an everyday bottle of Bordeaux—in vain—and then have been mildly startled to notice Pol Roger or Mumm's listed under *Sparkling Wines—Imported*.

Champagne is also democratic in its affinities

(continued on page 71)

with food. It goes with practically everything from appetizers through dessert, enhancing dishes that are as unlike as Nova Scotia salmon, rare filet mignon and baked Alaska. It knows no seasons, being as delicious on snowy Christmas in New England as on a humid Fourth of July in Alabama. It ignores the time of day. Unlike the French, few Americans crave still white wine for breakfast, but who among us turns down Champagne for brunch?

Like many good things, Champagne is a product of adversity. The district from which it comes lies a hundred or so miles east of Paris and includes the valley of the River Marne, a broad plain from which an unimposing plateau arises. The soil is pitifully thin, and under it is a massive deposit of chalk, the same chalk that appears across the Channel in the cliffs of Dover. It is not a notably sunny region, and the winters are sometimes cold. If one were starting afresh to plant a vineyard, the chalky plateau of Champagne might seem to have little promise. Yet this thin soil, the chalk, the way the sun falls on the slopes and the vines combine—aided by centuries of experience—to produce a unique wine. The only real Champagne comes from here, for no where else in the world are weather, soil and man's effort combined in the same formula.

Grapes grew on the plateau, and wine was pressed from the grapes, when Roman legions first marched across Gaul. In the city of Rheims, in the heart of the area, the Frankish Emperor Clovis was converted and baptized by Saint Rémy, and then for 1300 unbroken years French kings were crowned in this holy city—and the wine of the ceremony was the wine of Cham-

GENTRY

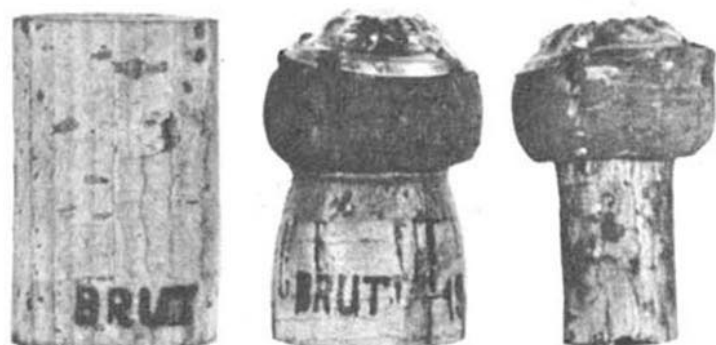
number sixteen

fall 1955

CHAMPAGNE . . . continued

pagne. Indeed, the French royal family managed to acquire control of some of the finest vineyards—those near the town of Ay—and French kings proudly added *Sire of Ay* to their long list of distinguished titles.

The Champagne of those days was darker than it is today, and ordinarily it lacked bubbles. But in some years bottles stored in the caves would explode, and frothy wine would spill out. The local people had various theories to explain this



phenomenon. Some said the wine was bedeviled; others said it was brought about by misbehavior of the stars or moon; others, coming closer to scientific fact, said the coming of spring caused the wine to "work" a second time. All conceded that the results were rather special.

Not until around 1670 was a way discovered to imprison those tantalizing bubbles in every bottle, and to keep the bottle from exploding. Credit for inventing sparkling Champagne is attributed, inaccurately perhaps but by common consent, to a Benedictine monk named Dom Perignon, cellarer of the Hautvilliers monastery. Legends about the good Dom are numerous. It is said that as an old, blind man, Dom Perignon could sniff a glass of Champagne, sip it, swish it about in his mouth, and then unfailingly say from what hillside the grapes had come, from whose property, and what sort of weather had occurred during their growth.

The French court during the height of its splendor at Versailles popularized Champagne among the European nobility. In an endorsement that became a social mandate, Louis XV's mistress and hostess, Madame de Pompadour, declared: "Champagne is the sole drink a woman who is careful of her beauty can drink. It makes you glow with no ugly flush. You can drink it all evening and still be beautiful when you awake the next morning."

The Victorian era, and especially the Gay Nineties, broadened the popularity of Champagne. In the United States a new class of prosperous industrialists and merchants became the fascinated observers and patrons of Champagne salesmen who came here from France with immense expense accounts and extravagant gestures. One dandified salesman established himself in a great house on Fifth Avenue and drove a magnificent carriage with liveried footmen. His advertising technique was to buy Champagne for everyone present whenever he entered Sherry's,

It was the bon vivant, Edward VII of England, who promoted Champagne's affinity with all foods by introducing the now generally accepted custom of serving it as an aperitif and then throughout the meal. During his flamboyant era, still more people could afford Champagne, and some could afford unbelievable amounts of it. In 1906, midpoint of Edwardian grandeur, the

wealthy Gustav Krupp held a gala party in London's Savoy Hotel, during which the Majolica fountain in the courtyard gushed Champagne. In that same year, the Champagne magnate, George Kessler, arranged to have the same Savoy courtyard flooded so he could serve his guests in a gondola. He served, of course, Champagne.

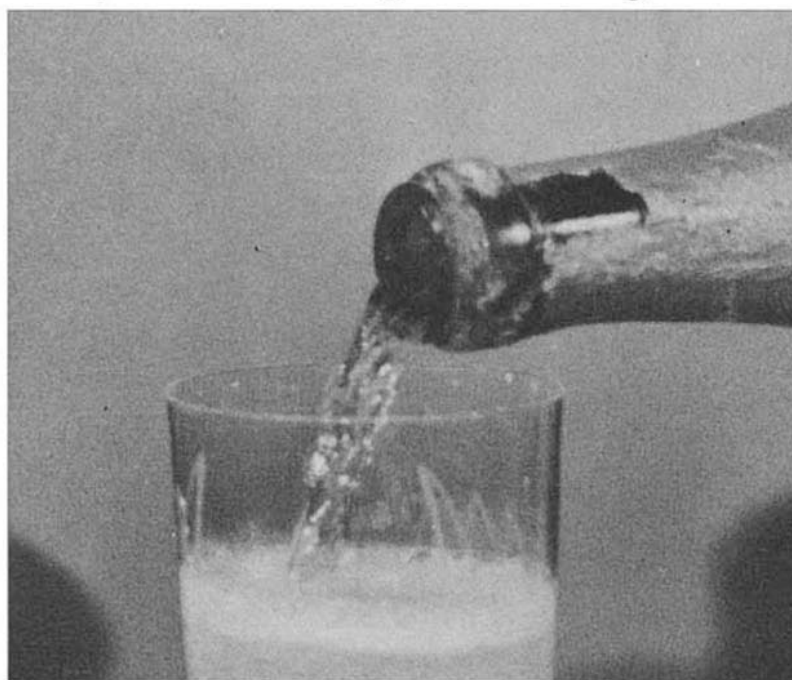
MODERN APPRECIATION of Champagne is more direct and practical. "Come to a Champagne Party" is an irresistible invitation, and such a party is a most charming way to entertain simply but elegantly. An ample supply of the delicate wine (Brut, of course, the driest of dry) and bowls of caviar with chopped onion, chopped egg, sour cream and toast—this is all that is needed. Or perhaps, in place of the caviar, an outstanding French paté, or a foie gras au naturel.

There are some excellent Champagnes available in this country. The wines of the 1947 vintage are remarkable for their velvety smoothness and their flowery delicacy—qualities which they share with great Champagnes of the past. Some 1949s are on the market, too, and though totally different they have their own special charm and elegance. Non-vintage Champagnes are always available, and should not be scorned. Being a blend of the wines of various years, the non-vintage is a true test of the producer's art, and a fine Champagne firm will often create one that is amazingly good.

With luck, the traveler abroad can still find some of the magnificent old vintage Champagnes in France, for though it should be drunk rather young, gentle care will sometimes preserve the wine for years longer. On a recent visit to Paris I thoroughly enjoyed tasting some of the fabulous Champagne of 1911, some of the famous 1928 vintage, and several of the great 1934s. They still were outstanding.

' ' '

Probably Champagne will always be costlier than other wines, but not because of scarcity. It is true that only a limited amount can be produced, since only a limited amount of grapes can grow in this especially blessed region. You pay, in fine Champagne, for endless personalized attention. Each bottle is handled hundreds of times—twisted, turned, constantly inspected. As André Simon said: "Champagne has always been, still is, and will ever be an extravagant wine, the most charming and fascinating wine."



Serve Champagne cool, not iced, in slender crystals that are deep but not bell-shaped, in order to facilitate and concentrate the aroma.