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More Sustainable Champagne? These Women Are Answering the Call

EMILY MONACO · DEC 3, 2020

When people visit the Champagne houses of France, they're often told the stories of famed widows throughout history who championed the famous bubbly: the Veuve Clicquot, or Lily Bollinger, or Jeanne-Alexandrine Pommery. But despite such examples, in reality, women have long been on the outskirts of Champagne.

"The many lives a woman must live are sometimes complicated for people to accept in an industry that is still so male-dominated."

Land in Champagne is nearly impossible to buy, and so Champagne is a family affair, with houses often passed from father to son. The famed widows inherited their lot when there was no one else – no son, no brother – to turn to. And this remained the case well into the modern age.

In the early 90s, after years of working in marketing for brands such as L'Oreal, Anne Malassagne faced a difficult decision. With the Gulf War crisis looming, Malassagne's father told his three children that without help, he would likely be forced to sell off the generations-old [AR Lenoble](#). Malassagne took the leap, seeking to balance motherhood and work in an industry that wasn't particularly welcoming to women to begin with.

"The many lives a woman must live are sometimes complicated for people to accept in an industry that is still so male-dominated," she says.

That wasn't quite twenty years ago, but in that short time, the industry has begun to evolve. Women today are – slowly but surely – becoming powerhouses in Champagne, representing their family domains by choice. And in many ways, they're also at the forefront of necessary changes, revolutionizing the industry.

Women Winemakers Unite

Women have spearheaded this change, first and foremost, by ensuring that the industry becomes more welcoming to the next generation. Delphine Brulez of [Champagne Louise Brison](#) is one of seven women in the group Les Fa'bulleuses (a play on the French for fabulous, *fabuleuse*, and bubble, *bulle*), founded in 2014. Brulez, who joined the group in 2017, notes that this group of like-minded women share everything from techniques to balancing family life.

"We're more than just colleagues, now."

"All subjects are fair game," she says. "Without becoming dogmatically feminist, we're a feminine association, and we end up facing issues like how to find your place, either within the family, or within our microcosm of Champagne, or in the world of wine at large."

Charlotte De Sousa of [Champagne De Sousa](#), another member of the group, notes that Les Fa'bulleuses have undertaken group projects to magnify one another's voices: a [seven-bottle box set](#), for example, or even a joint *cuvée* dubbed [Isos](#).

"It's a breath of fresh air," says De Sousa. "We've become so close. We're more than just colleagues, now."

Malassagne, too, is part of a group of women helping one another in Champagne, this one called La Transmission.

"We're a group of women, but that's not all," says Malassagne. "The idea was to be a group that could be a voice of Champagne, representing all regions, all generations, and all actors from the industry, from the small grower to the international brand."

La Transmission has wide-reaching goals: sharing, enrichment, support. But also revitalizing the image of the famous bubbly wine.

“The image of Champagne, especially among Millennials, is a bit dusty, kind of old-fashioned,” says Malassagne. “It’s pretentious, or even arrogant. It’s very inaccessible. And we say, no, behind these bottles, there are men and women, there are amazing stories.”

Fanny Heucq, a fourth-generation Champagne maker of [Champagne André Heucq](#) and owner of [Dilettantes](#), Paris’ premier grower champagne shop and bar, says that she makes a point of “over-representing” women in her selection of 25 grower-producers (Dilettantes ships to the U.S. – order [here](#) with code XMAS2020 for 10 percent off). She hopes that in sharing their stories, she can help people understand the amazing feats these women have undertaken.

One such woman is Elise Lejeune, who, while born into Champagne, faced the family expectation that their land would go to her brother. But Lejeune wanted to take up the family tradition as well. Because legally her family could not disinherit her, Lejeune was able to demand her part of the pie – but with no support from her family.

“When she wanted to go organic, it was a whole drama,” says Heucq. “She had to do it all her self, from A to Z, because no one in her family wanted to support her.”

In doing so, Lejeune not only forged a path for herself and for women like her – she also took an essential step for the future of Champagne as we know it.

Champions of Sustainable Champagne

Today, Champagne, much like many other wine regions, is facing the incontestable effects of [climate change](#). But Lejeune’s steps towards organic Champagne are an exception, rather than a rule.

[“You really need to work on the strength of the plant itself.”](#)

For years, Champagne producers have rested on their laurels regarding organic certification – first and perhaps foremost, because organic is not an easy certification to gain in the region. The cold, rainy region makes vines susceptible to mildew, and with [copper sulfate](#) the only organic recourse, many Champagne houses opted instead for non-organic alternatives. And unlike other regions, they could get away with it.

“It’s more difficult to make organic wine in Champagne than in the South of France... but it’s no more difficult than in the Loire Valley,” says Heucq, whose Champagne began organic conversion in 2014. “And in the Loire Valley, organic is everywhere. Why? Because we have the word Champagne written on our bottles.”

For Brulez, the issue is linked in part to the way that Champagne is grown and produced. Unlike other regions, in Champagne, grower-winemakers make up just one-third of all growers. The remaining two-thirds sell their grapes to big houses and, according to Brulez, “don’t really care what they produce,” so long as people buy it.

Grower-winemakers, on the contrary, are “translators of their terroir” and thus have a vested interest in ensuring that things are done as cleanly as possible.

“They’re surfing on the word Champagne,” says Brulez. “But that’s ending now. Thankfully.”

Female winemakers have often proven to be at the forefront of moves towards more sustainable winemaking. It was an essential element of Malassagne's vision when she arrived at the family house in 1993, noting that, as opposed to previous generations plagued by lack – in wartime, through harsh winters – she could afford to produce quality over quantity. Alongside her brother, who later joined her at the family domaine, Malassagne developed a philosophy that would put her local terroir in the limelight: healthy grapes raised in biodiverse soil that didn't need to be heavily treated. As a result of her efforts, AR Lenoble became the second Champagne house after Bollinger to achieve the highest level of certification for *Haute Valeur Environnementale* – High Environmental Value.

Brulez's philosophy, meanwhile, led her to pursue an organic certification due to thinking that had "always been anchored in our practices."

"You really need to work on the strength of the plant itself," she says, noting that with hard work, they were able to remain in organic even in a terribly rainy year like 2016.

"Our vines do the work," she says.

De Sousa, whose domain has been certified for ten years, says that labels like organic are "the future." She notes an evolution towards organic and sustainable winemaking is truly taking hold in the industry – and not a moment too soon.

"More and more, and above all by young generations," she says. "But unfortunately, there's still a lot of work to be done."

The Future of Women in Champagne

The women of Champagne have come a long way since the *veuves* of yore.

"My great-grandmother, Louise Brison, saw both wars," says Brulez. "She found herself alone in 1932, in the middle of nowhere, with a hectare of vines."

It's an important part of local history, she says, and yet it's far from the full story.

Today's female winemakers are strong, revolutionary, and dedicated. And while Heucq cautions against "reductive" logic that would focus too much on their femininity as a characteristic of their winemaking, it is perhaps this element of their identity that has made them the indomitable force they are today.

"Women need, in this industry, to be more attentive, more rigorous, do more," says Heucq. "Because they need to prove themselves. Because they don't feel legitimate."

"My first ten years were extremely complicated," admits Malassagne, and despite things perhaps growing easier with time, "there's still this guilt that we assign to women."

But that is changing. Says Brulez, "I never had any problems relating to my gender. I'm passionate, I'm conscious of my work, I'm conscious of what I can do, and what I still need to do. I'm not perfect, but technically... I don't think I'm any different from anyone else."

Perhaps more than anything else, modern women stand out from the widows of yore by their self-actualized nature.

"The widows were widows," says Heucq. "They took over their domains by obligation." Now, on the contrary, "it's a decision. It's a desire, on the part of these women, to make Champagne. To highlight Champagne."

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