

“WHAT IF?”
Counterfactual History
CHAMPAGNE

by Cecil Munsey

In France the original Abbey of Hautvillers was built by Benedictine monks in the middle of the seventh century. Dom Pierre Perignon arrived in 1668. The rest is history.

This monastery, which has been destroyed and rebuilt seven times, is the birthplace of champagne, the wine. Dom Perignon, who was cellarer of Hautvillers until his death in 1715, was father of the wine.

What if Dom Perignon had not gone to the abbey in 1668? That's a simple what if? There might not be “champagne” (sparkling wine) as we know it today.

[Do you see how simple “Counterfactual History” is? We can enter history at any point and speculate what if?]

Continuing this history: Dom Perignon brought wealth and renown to the region of Champagne, a place with a history of wine production that dates to the time of the Romans. But the wine of Champagne prior to Dom Perignon was not the same champagne that today is recognized the world over.

Early champagne was a pale, thin red wine made from black grapes. [All grapes are white on the inside.] The northerly climate was too cold to produce outstanding red wine, and the wines of that era from Champagne had little quality conferring prestige (cachet).

Perignon happened upon sparkling champagne purely by accident. He thought he could improve the quality of the abbey's wine by storing it in bottles instead of barrels to slow the process of oxidation. During the cold winters, fermentation of the grape sugars into alcohol usually stopped.

When spring brought warmer weather, the fermentation started again in the bottle. Dom Perignon's first champagne bubbles were produced by carbon dioxide gas that formed as a result of the second fermentation.

Dom Perignon didn't understand the underlying science, but he knew his wines

It has been said “what if?” (or the counterfactual) is the historian's favorite secret question. What ifs have a genuine value. They can be a tool to enhance the understanding of history, to make it come alive.

History is properly the literature of what did happen; but that should not diminish the importance of the counterfactual. What if can lead us to question long-held assumptions.

What ifs can define turning points. They can show that small accidents or decisions are as likely to have major repercussions as large ones.

What ifs have a further important function: They can eliminate what has been called “hindsight bias.”

“The road not taken belongs on the map.” –Robert Cowley

were better than his neighbors' wines. The sparkling champagne of the Abbey of Hautvillers quickly became the most popular wine of the region and enabled Perignon to sell his wine for twice the price of rival wines.

But Perignon was not merely an accidental genius. He was the first to make a white wine from black grapes.

What if Dom Perignon had not discovered how to make white wine from black grapes? Champagne might be a red wine today. There, another simple what if. [In case you're curious, by separating the juice of freshly crushed dark-colored grapes quickly from their skins the juice from the white interior of the grapes remains white.]

And Perignon perfected the art of blending a cuvee from many lots of wine provided by growers throughout the region of Champagne. That is the essence of winemaking in Champagne today. Blending is, indeed, an important part of wine making throughout the world.

Although it is widely held that Perignon invented sparkling wine, that belief is more myth than fact. Sparkling wine existed elsewhere before Dom Perignon happened upon it in Champagne. But he did invent what the world knows today as “champagne.”

Such was Perignon's influence at the time that he was able to persuade other Champenoise to abandon centuries-old practices—and stable revenues—to begin production of wine with bubbles.

The switch was not without financial risk, for the bottles of the day were not very strong, and as many as half of any year's production would explode from the pressure inside the glass—a phenomena not unlike when people make home-brewed (root)beer.

So, what if champagne had not been invented? For one thing, there would have been no need for stronger glass bottles to contain the pressurized wine. Another thing, there would have been no development of the champagne bottle shape which

is a standard throughout the industry today.

NOW, for the big bottle collecting what if? What if champagne bottles had not been developed so long ago that they didn't and don't feature embossments but were and still are mostly product-identified by paper labels? Champagne bottles would be a very collectible category. It becomes very clear when a collector compares champagne and other wine bottles with historical/pictorial whiskey flasks, bitters bottles, and so many of bottles in the more popular categories. They have less of the characteristics that collectors demand of the most valued bottles: e.g., scarcity; color; embossments. Interestingly, champagne bottles do have other characteristics associated with collecting value: e.g., age; shape; manufacture; glass (as opposed to ceramic); condition.

Counterfactual History as a legitimate concept has, hopefully, been illustrated with this short offering. Not only is the form a reasonable way to study history but it is fun. Yes, fun! Historians have used the counterfactual method for years. In certain circles, bottle collecting included, it is a serious party or club-meeting activity (game). At bottle clubs it is especially popular with discussions of local bottles because most club members know quite a bit about local history and are quick to enter into discussion of what if?



If any bottle collectors would like to publish some Counterfactual History in this publication, they are encouraged to develop their best ‘what ifs’ and submit them for consideration.