



A CHAMPAGNE LIKE NO OTHER

A potent symbol of pleasure, romance and celebration, champagne is once again enjoying enormous popularity. And along with ever expanding markets, today's drinkers are altogether more discerning. By JAMES TULLEY

It would seem that 'happy days are here again' and not surprisingly, champagne corks are popping once more. Apart from having developed a slightly more cost conscious clientele, the champagne market seems to have developed a greater appreciation for something a little different.

Faced with a plethora of household names, drinkers are slowly seeking champagnes which offer a more distinctive style. Once such trend emerging is the growing interest in 'non-dosage' champagnes which have no sugar or sweetening added in the final product. Though a niche market, one champagne house that has consistently produced some of the finest examples is Penet-Chardonnet.

My only regret in life is that I did not drink more Champagne – JM Keynes

Stretching along the towns of Verzy and Verzenay, at a Grand Cru area in the "Montagne de Reims", the vineyards of Penet-Chardonnet occupies a modest 6 hectares. Helmed by Alexandre Penet, the family business has spanned several generations. Many of his enduring childhood memories are strongly associated with the production of champagne. "When I was a kid, I used to help my father and grandfather at many stages of the champagne making process; for example "disgorgement" or bottling, all of which is done manually. The harvest has always been my favourite time of the year, with its hard working yet nice and friendly atmosphere."

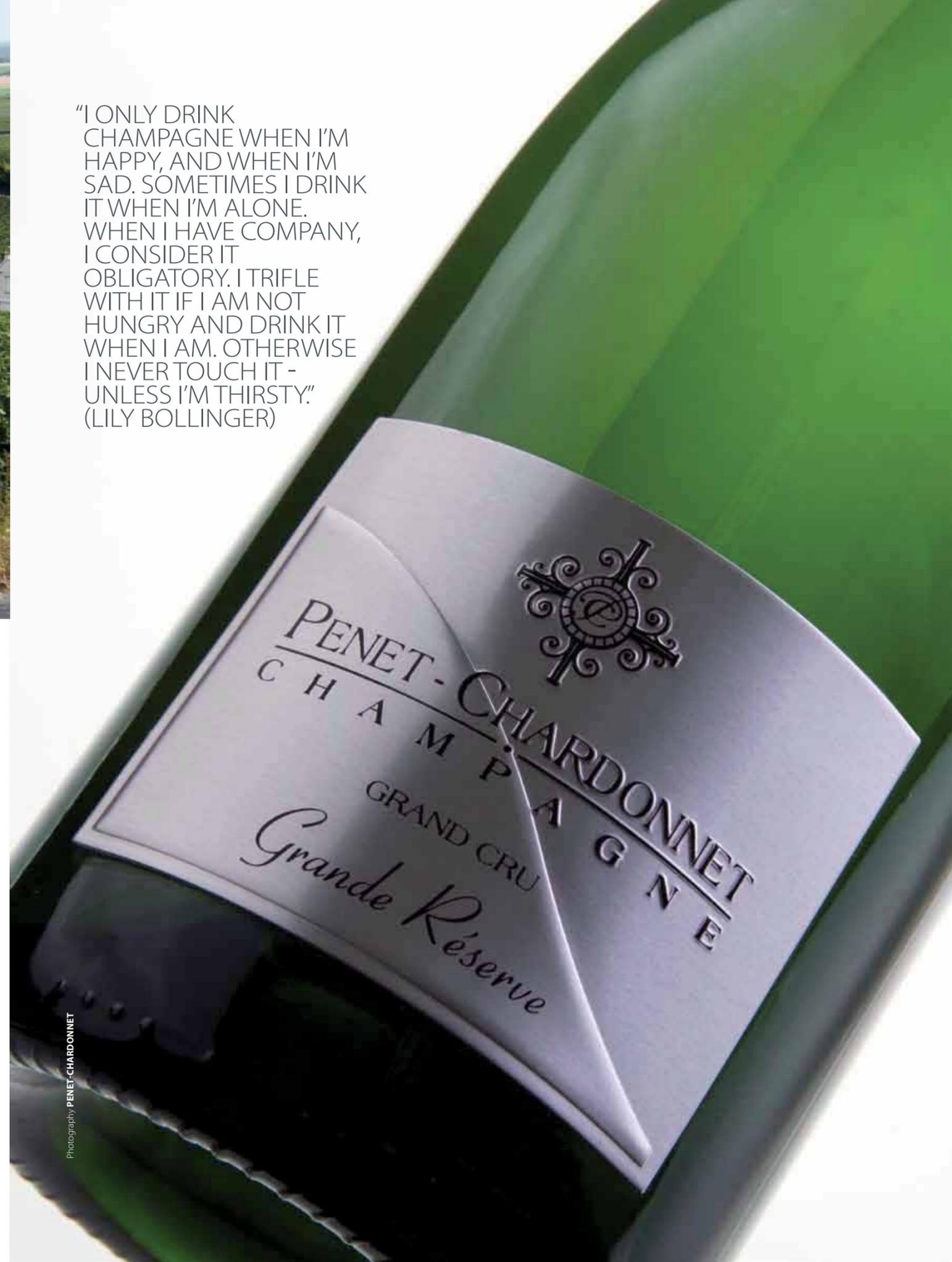
Having grown up steeped in the tradition of champagne, he is now harnessing that skill to cater to a new breed of drinker. "It is a great honour to be the new generation in charge of

with such a wonderful historical heritage and expertise", he says.

Being blessed with excellent soil or the so called 'terroir', or land, upon which the grapes are grown certainly helps. But as Penet points out, the unique style of his champagnes are also dependent on "a fermentation process without malolactic and a long ageing on lees. These play a big role in our unique taste in addition to our technical expertise and rigor at every stage." Ultimately, what sets Penet-Chardonnet apart from the rest is "the zero or very low dosage approach throughout the range," which he adds "positions us the specialist of "sugar free" champagnes and unique in the market."

In victory we deserve it, in defeat we need it - Winston Churchill

"I ONLY DRINK CHAMPAGNE WHEN I'M HAPPY, AND WHEN I'M SAD. SOMETIMES I DRINK IT WHEN I'M ALONE. WHEN I HAVE COMPANY, I CONSIDER IT OBLIGATORY. I TRIFLE WITH IT IF I AM NOT HUNGRY AND DRINK IT WHEN I AM. OTHERWISE I NEVER TOUCH IT - UNLESS I'M THIRSTY!"
(LILY BOLLINGER)



Photography PENET-CHARDONNET



know the family's champagne business as well. It was this personal connection that led to his decision to dedicate time to build awareness for the champagne in Asia. They were, in his view, "a hidden gem." His belief in the work that his friend Penet was doing, his passion, and determination as well as the champagnes themselves all helped weave a story that he wanted to share with others.

However, telling that story for a niche champagne business like Penet-Chardonnet, was not an easy task. As Zhuchkov explains, "It takes time to tell our story to customers in Asia and it takes time for them to start enjoying our champagnes. Some of our most loyal customers now were skeptical of our product in the beginning; persuading them to try the product was sometimes a challenge." Eschewing grand marketing or advertising campaigns, Penet and Zhuchkov decided to take a focused approach and above all, let the champagne speak for itself.

A first step was engaging influencers and opinion makers in the world of fine wines and champagnes. "Our participation at the Singapore World Gourmet Summit paid off handsomely. We were able to tell our story to very experienced wine lovers and experts," notes Zhuchkov. This in turn has led to "recognition by a number of well respected critics", which resulted in "extremely favourable reviews from a number of regional publications." He adds that "we have a strong interest at the moment for our brands in Singapore and we are starting to see traction in Asia."

Of course, winning over select connoisseurs is one thing but broadening the audience is an altogether more challenging task. "For a niche brand with a particular style, consumer education is key in many markets, not just Asia," observes Penet. "I must say I was surprised to see that a number of consumers in Singapore are quite knowledgeable about wines and champagne, which means the market is becoming more and more sophisticated - good news for brands like ours."

And as consumers and drinkers have learnt to appreciate the refined qualities of Penet-Chardonnet, it is not surprising that it has been associated with several high-end events. A shared interest in a long esteemed history and sense of craftsmanship has proven Penet-Chardonnet's natural positioning alongside international luxury brands and even royalty.

Champagne offers a minimum of alcohol and a maximum of companionship - David Niven

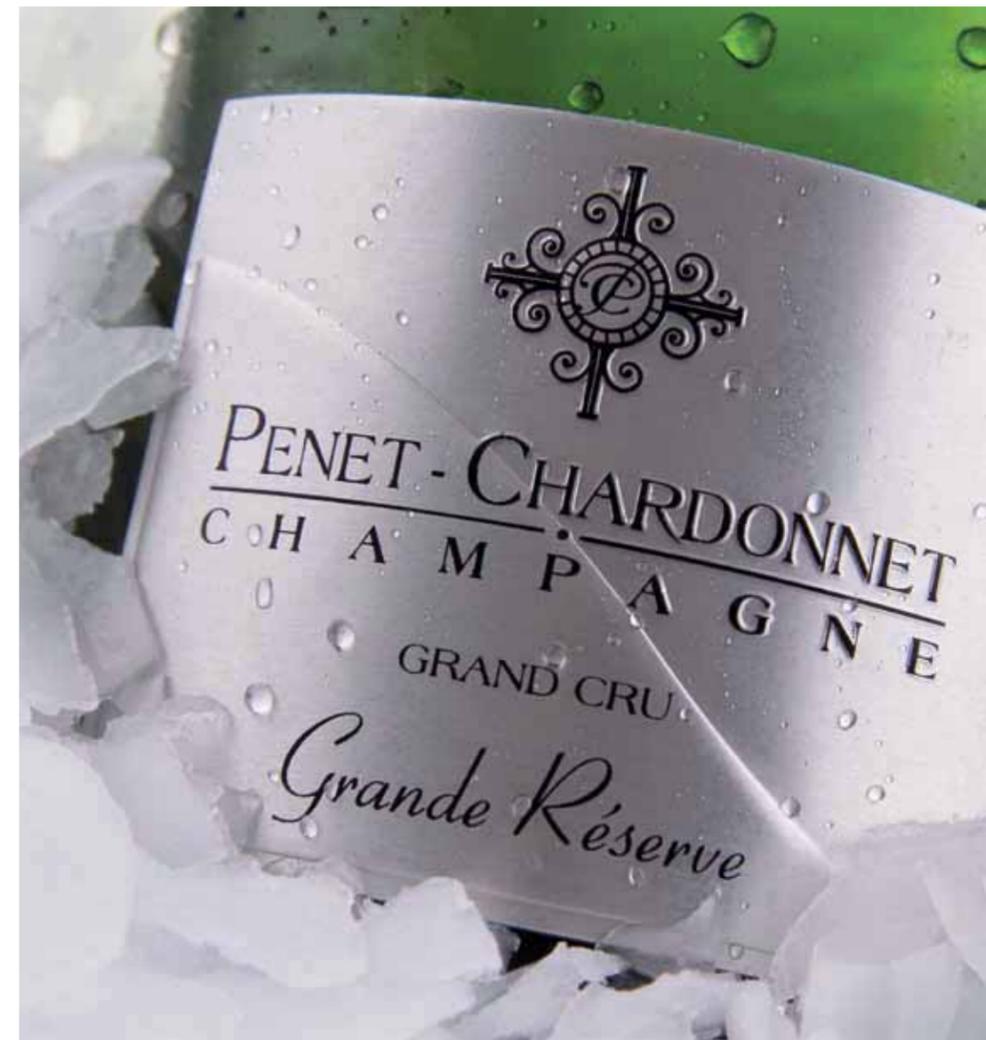
However, far from being the preserve of exclusive events, Penet-Chardonnet is available to be enjoyed at leading distributors The Strait Wine Company through their many 'Denise The Wine Shop' outlets in Singapore. This is certainly good news, given that 'no sugar' champagne is both a popular choice and perfect accompaniment to any cuisine, particular Asian dishes. As Penet observes, "It pairs very well with it, in a very different and

interesting way, compared to traditional French food! In particular, our "zero dosage" approach truly enhances the flavours of certain dishes." Zhuchkov agrees: "I have a strong passion for our zero-dosage Rose, which is a great champagne to enjoy with Asian cuisine."

Not surprisingly, the champagne's low sugar levels and refined style have caught the attention of those seeking something different. Perhaps, the most notable voice to be listened to is that of Robert Parker the internationally acclaimed wine critic. After a recent review of Penet's champagnes, he commented "I found the evolution of his impressively different, newly released range to be worth sharing with fellow Champagne lovers." For Parker, "the grower Champagne revolution has been welcome news for Champagne connoisseurs in recent years. Perhaps even more exciting is that an increasing number like Alexandre Penet have been focusing on producing Champagnes with a real sense of place and, better still, they're actively looking to distribute globally."

Beyond such supportive words, Parker awarded nothing less than 90 points for each of the Penet-Chardonnet champagnes and an impressive 93 for their Cuvée Diane Claire. A label name that pays tribute to family members, Parker's tasting notes of "intense aromas of spiced apple slices, lightly buttered toast, fennel seeds, roasted nuts and a whiff of earthy black truffles", make the mouth water. That it is 'zero dosage' makes it even more appealing. Not surprisingly, there is never a bad time to drink champagne; a sentiment Penet supports "I drink Champagne several times a week, for work and for my own pleasure."

In a perfect world, everyone would have a glass of Champagne every evening - Willie Gluckstern



For the uninitiated, getting the fizz in champagne and indeed keeping it there, is no mean feat. The méthode Champenoise is the culmination of centuries of expertise, love and care. The still wine is made from one of or some combination of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and possibly but very rarely Pinot Blanc and the obscure Arbane and Petit Meslier. The producer may well blend wines from older vintages with the new wines before bottling, so as to create a consistent result. The blended still wine, or the assemblage, is bottled with yeast and sugar and a second fermentation occurs inside the bottle.

The carbon dioxide produced as a by-product of fermentation is trapped by the thick glass bottle and is absorbed into the wine - the 'fizz'. The dead yeast cells, or lees, are not absorbed - they are still there in the bottle and must be removed. Through a time consuming and somewhat complex and complicated process, bottles are gently turned through the art of Remuage, the French term for the process of gradual (daily) adjusting the bottle, moving it over time from an upright to an upside down position so that the lees settle in the neck of the bottle. Some clever and nifty handiwork removes the yeast sediment through a process called disgorgement.

It is at this point, that the production of champagne and in particular the non dosage champagnes such as Penet-Chardonnet become much more interesting. For most champagne houses will add a mixture of wine and a sweetener, usually sugar but it can be concentrated grape must - or 'dosage'. Once the cork goes in, the bottle rests in the cellar for at least 15 months (3 years for vintage Champagne) and depending on the producer and the type of wine, for much longer.

However, houses such as Penet-Chardonnet and a select few, do not add any further sugar creating a 'non dosage' champagne that is exceptionally dry and arguably best represents the true flavours and style of the wines within.

While non dosage might be seen as a niche, the Penet-Chardonnet champagnes are not. They are accessible, highly drinkable and is an obvious choice for anyone seeking something a little different from the usual run-of-the-mill names. As Zhuchkov notes, "It is important for Penet-Chardonnet to continue to reach out to customers who enjoy their champagnes and can enjoy a top-end 'zero dosage' product which we deliver to them." They are, after all, "champagnes with authenticity and a strong personality - modern, classy and sensual at the same time" shares Penet.

So the next time you consider buying champagne, think of Penet-Chardonnet. As Zhuchkov is aware, "it takes time for some consumers to develop themselves from courageous first timers to loyal followers." However, once you do experience the sublime sophistication of these non dosage champagnes you are likely to be one of those loyal supporters. Were the champagne a person, it would, observes Penet "be a person with a strong and enthusiastic personality, appealing yet refined, with generosity and an image that lasts long in people's minds."

THE PERFECT BUBBLY

By LIN WENJIAN

Exclusively producing Champagne in the ultra premium, 100 per cent Grand Cru range, Penet-Chardonnet is a traditional estate espousing the values of authenticity and excellence





Backed by 400 years of experience, Penet-Chardonnet has perfected the art of producing truly exceptional Champagnes, which are classified as Grand Cru, an honour bestowed to less than 13 per cent of the vineyards in the Champagne region.

The family-owned six-hectare vineyard stretches along the towns of Verzy and Verzenay, a Grand Cru area in the "Montagne de Reims," where the family first started growing vines in the 17th century.

Today, the business continues to thrive in the good hands of Alexandre Penet, a member of the family's fifth generation.

THE FINE PRODUCE

Cherished the world over for their handcrafted excellence, the fruity, complex and full-bodied taste of the Champagnes makes them a desired companion at all events, social or personal.

Take the Reserve Brut Grand Cru for example. The wine's shimmering golden hue and fruitiness leaves a rounded taste on the palate. It is also characterised by its balance and drinkability that makes it an ideal aperitif.

One will also do well to consider pairing one of Penet-Chardonnet's exceptional wines with food. The Rose Brut Grand Cru, for one, goes perfectly with white or red meat. The nice, red tint indicates an intense fruity aroma, while the density gives a very long finish.

The Grande Reserve Extra Brut Grand Cru is yet another complex, and full bodied Champagne produced by the Penet family. Elegant, and clean on the palate, its qualities complement the fine cuisine, especially grilled fish or salmon mousse, you'll find in leading restaurants.

If you are in a mood to indulge, then the amber-coloured Cuvee Speciale "Diane Claire" Grand Cru is what you want. Available in very limited quantities, this Champagne is acclaimed by wine critics the world over. Boasting intense flavours and complexity, its concentrated nose, delicate bubbles and smooth texture on the palate marks this out as a must-have on truly special occasions. **!**