



KELLY'S CORNER

by Jan Kelly

You may think many people are worried about the millennium, but consider Y2K, aging, a too-scary new century, starting something you can't finish, changing too many calendars, clocks, checkbooks, all the record books, the number itself—2000! From one who has never owned a clock or watch, whose only calendar is a tide calendar, drop all those thoughts. Have fun and play with the number, after all, neither you nor anybody else is sure of when this will come to pass, precisely. Worry more about the fun, the anticipation and the **champagne.**

Decide which type and whether to serve it skinny or with caviar or with ladies' fingers. Revelers have been hoarding for two or more years. Don't worry there is plenty out there now, but maybe not by December 31st at noon. You may want to practice. Yes, that's it. Champagne provides such a preferable libation... instant feeling... easy going. Abide by the Golden Rule, of course—moderation in all things—until midnight on Dec. 31st, 1999. Be your own guide as to choice and amount, but this sublime beverage should happily be part of everybody's life. If not, the next best drink is water.

The vineyards of Champagne, an area of north-eastern France, supply the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes which are blended to create the uniqueness of champagne. Any sparkling white wine, not from the Champagne region is just that, sparkling white wine. It

may be called sec, secco, sekt or still wine, but it is not the true champagne unless it originated in that small section of the Champagne vineyards. Compare it to Havana cigars. Cuban seed, filler or wrapper grown outside that small area of Cuba does not constitute a Havana cigar.

Champagne was perfected by Dom Perignon, the 17th century monk who was a cellarer and manager of finance at the Benedictine Abbey of Haut-Villers near Epernay in the Champagne region. Controversy still exists as to whether the dedicated monk "invented" champagne or the cork. Let us just rest with the fact that he raised the wines of Champagne to the present-day quality we all enjoy so much.

The Pinot Noir grape is black outside and red inside, but the juice is white. The Chardonnay is a white grape and its juice is either blended with Pinot Noir or made into blanc de blancs, white of whites. The first flow pressed from these grapes is the *cuvee* which produces the best champagnes.

You will find vintage and non-vintage champagnes. In vin-



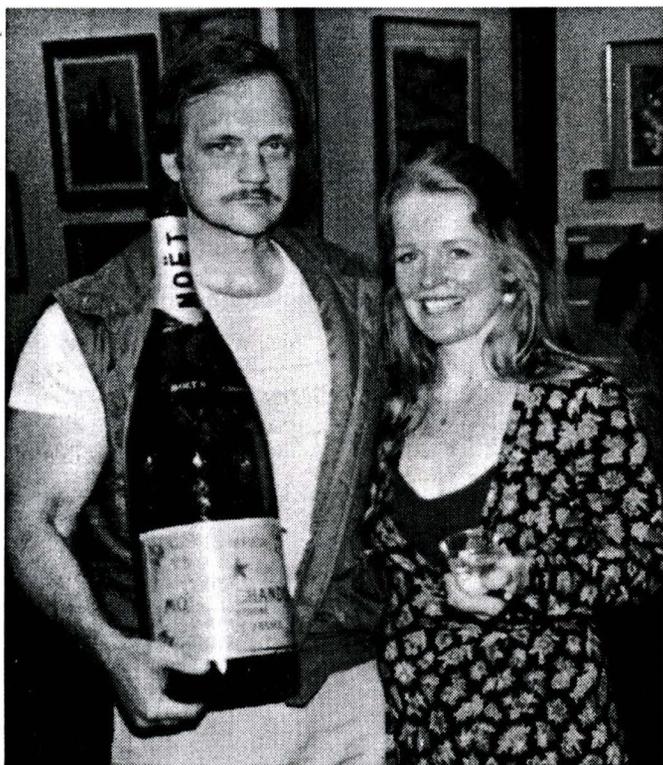
The Story of Champagne

tage bottles all the grapes come from the same Champagne vineyard in the same year. They bear the date on their labels and on their corks. Lesser years and poorer cuvees may be artfully blended with better, more robust years. These are not vintage and will have no date. A vintage wine, considered superior, has more personality and is called a "self-wine."

After the pressing of the cuvee, the wine is kept in casks through the winter and bottled in the spring. Champagne is corked twice. When first bottled, it is placed in a "pupitre" a tilted board with holes to receive the bottle so the necks of the bottles slope down. Each day, each bottle is given a sharp twist in order that the sediment may slide down the neck of the bottle. The daily twist, the "remuage", turns the bottle until it has gone full circle. Now all the sediment is resting on the cork. The neck of the bottle is frozen quickly, and, with great skill the first cork is removed with the sediment. This process, called "dégorgement," assures a clear sparkling wine. Then the doseur adds a small amount of a mixture of sugar, still champagne and brandy to sweeten the wine and to stop fermentation. This mixture is called Liqueur D'Expédition. There are five degrees of sweetness achieved in this step which produces five classifications:

- 1/2% - brut
- 1% - extra sec
- 3% - sec
- 5% - demisec
- 10% - doux

Jan & friend with a Salmanzar of Moët-Chandon Champagne



The demisec is the preferred degree of dry, sweet blending.

Then a "mushroom" cork, the Bouchon D'Expédition, is forced, at one-half it's normal size, into the neck of the bot-

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tle. The neck is thicker than an ordinary wine bottle, an insurance against breakage from the pressure of lively gas-propelled bubbles. Wire keeps the cork firmly in place, though originally string, covered with pewter kept the rats from chewing the cork. After wire was introduced, pewter gave way to foil and the foil developed into collarettes, lending a festive look to a showpiece bottle.

Most champagne bottles hold 750 milliliters, or 26 ounces. One may also purchase an imperial pint which holds three-quarters of a champagne bottle, 568ml, because connoisseurs considered one bottle too much for one person, but a half bottle was not nearly enough—a victorian point of view. Other bottle sizes include:

- Magnum—2 bottles
- Jeroboam—4 bottles
- Rehoboam—6 bottles
- Methuselah—8 bottles
- Salmanzar—12 bottles
- Balthazar—16 bottles
- Nebuchadnezzar—20 bottles of bubbles.

The last 2 sizes are rarely seen outside France. All the larger bottles are for special occasions when several people gather. I have an empty Salmanzar, drained at Howard Mithcham's great opening of foils and woodcuts and book signing of his many cookbooks and fables. We were all in awe of the huge bottle of bubbly. When it came time to open the hefty jug, we were set wondering. But Henry Lewczak, who brought the bottle had arms about the size of the Salmanazar and adroitly yet carefully opened the bottle. And it was more festive and impressive. Everybody caught the excitement of opening and enjoying such a bottle. Times were always lively when Mitcham was around and if you were ever going to enjoy the contents of a mighty bottle, a Mitcham opening would be a natural. That or some coronation of a potentate which would be much less fun.

So, get your bottles cooling for the millennium. people have been hoarding for 5 years or more according to market analysts but I'd be willing to bet just what you want is waiting for you very nearby. Go get it now and chill it down. You have less than a hundred days left!