



# Moët & Champagne w/ Food

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I recently took part in a tasting of Moët & Chandon's Imperial and Grand Vintage range Champagnes. Moët Winemaker Mark Brevot conducted the tasting. As the audience tasted the wines, he talked about Moët & Chandon and what it means to step into the role of winemaker for a company that has been in business for over 250 years, and the pillars on which fine Champagne is made. He talked

about a lot of things – most of them interesting – that have to do with making Champagne but he really never focused in on the wines we were tasting.

Over the last few years, Moët has refined or even reinvented their line-up. “Moët Imperial” has replaced what used to be called “White Star”. The Imperial range is completed with an Imperial Rose and an Imperial Nectar Demi-Sec. The vintage range, which used to be known as “Brut Imperial Vintage” is now labeled Grand Vintage Brut and Grand Vintage Rose. Dropping the name “White Star” could be seen as either a bold or foolish move as Moët White Star was the number-one selling Champagne in the US. A comparable move would be if Kendall Jackson were to drop the “Vintner’s Reserve” designation on their number-one selling Chardonnay. Yet Moët has done it and in the process reduced the sweetness level of the wine – and consumers have embraced the new product. All in all, I’d say that their reinvention has been a success as they are offering better wines more suited for today’s wine environment and those wines have been accepted and adopted by their loyal customer base.

We tasted the Imperial first, followed by the Imperial Rose, the Grand Vintage, and the Grand Vintage Rose with the Nectar Imperial Demi Sec (because it is noticeably sweeter) at the end. As I had previously tasted all the wines, I started the evening more focused on listening to Mark than on tasting the wines. Since he was talking more about the company than the wines, my mind wandered (not that it takes much to get my mind wandering) and I began thinking about when these wines would be best to drink which led me to think about pairing these wines - and Champagne in general - with food. As time passed – and as I got hungrier – I began jotting down “drink” or “keep” as well as possible food pairings for each of the wines on my tasting mat. Each of the wines was unique and it seemed to me that each of these five wines invited a unique range of foods. As I really like Champagne as wine (rather than as a beverage solely reserved for celebrations) and I like wine with food, it only makes sense that I would pair Champagne with food. (I also subscribe to the theory that a quiet Thursday evening home alone on the sofa with my wife is worth celebrating as a special occasion.)

With maybe a bit more organization than “as-it-happened”, here is what I was thinking while Mark was talking that night.

The **Moët Imperial** is a bit drier than White Star used to be. And a bit sweeter than what used to be called “Brut Imperial” was. So is it Extra Dry? Or is it Brut? The label doesn’t indicate. It may be best to think of it as bridge between Brut and Extra Dry. It has just enough sweetness to handle a little spice but not so much that it is really noticeable. I marked it as a “drink” on the “Drink-or-Save” spectrum. When I started thinking about food with the new Imperial, simple (but not-too-spicy) sushi, sashimi, and crudo (Italian raw fish with olive oil and sometimes some citrus and other seasonings) came immediately to mind. Then I thought of oysters (raw or fried), other simple fried foods (calamari, tempura, etc.), and potato chips (I love salty potato chips and champagne), even popcorn. The keys here are the ability to handle the richness of raw fish and the residual fat from frying as well as the tang of spice and the bite of salt. This not-quite-Brut, not-quite-Extra-Dry fits the bill.

The **Moët Imperial Rose** (drink) offers a slightly drier (than Imperial) version of (Brut) Rosé with toasty-biscuity citrus and some richer red fruit notes. It is fresh but with some richness. It got me thinking of Salmon Tartare, Beef or Tuna Carpaccio, and simple pasta dishes (pasta with olive oil, salt, pepper, and maybe a dusting of freshly grated Parmesan cheese). It too can handle some basic appetizery fried foods. The key to these matches is the extra depth, earthier tones, and red fruit notes provided by the red wine that adds the rosé color. The same biscuity freshness of the white Imperial is there but the extra notes make matches with some bigger, more flavorful foods possible. The Rosé Imperial seems a bit drier so spicy foods are less likely to work. For really decadent fun, try drinking Rose Champagne with popcorn popped in truffle oil and dusted with porcini salt. YUM!

The **Moët Grand Vintage 2002** (keep, up to 15 years) is classic. It offers riper fruit and more development in a drier, almost luxury style. It immediately made me want to taste it again in five and again in a least 10 years, and again in 15 years. I love this combination of balance and richness and I love the potential for development. It brought to mind many of the classic foods I think of with Champagne: oysters-on-the-half-shell, caviar, oysters covered with caviar, Prosciutto or Serrano ham dishes, and parmesan cheese (along with other dry, salty, aged cheeses such as 12-month-aged Manchego, and old Goudas, Jacks, and Mimolettes). Also simple white fish dishes, crab, and seafood risotto. The uncooked hams (Prosciutto, Serrano, Iberico, Bayonne, Black Forest) are particular favorites with great Champagne, especially after the wine has developed with a bit of age. The Grand Vintage is classic Champagne and so the classic matches will all work. Because it is the vintage, there is extra richness and even a bit of creaminess in the mouth. That allows the seafood dishes beyond oysters. It also makes this a fine picnic Champagne. Vintage Brut Champagne of this sort is also a personal favorite to wash down a fried-egg-sandwich (sourdough toast, Aioli, mesclun, two fried eggs, etc.).

Like the Imperial Rosé, the **Moët Grand Vintage Rosé 2002** (keep, for up to 7, maybe up to 10 years) is richer, lower in acidity, and even more food friendly than its white counterpart. It made me think of richer foods and maybe of serving it all the way through the meal - or at least with a main course. Mushroom risotto came to mind as did both smoked salmon and beef tartare. Mushroom dishes (even a mushroom bruschetta) love the richness of the vintage Rosé. To go with an entrée, try it with grilled or seared salmon over pasta, sautéed veggies, or salad. Or with one of those cheffy salads that include lots of fun ingredients (grilled asparagus, Serrano ham, cheese, duck debris, a quail egg (boiled, poached, or fried), confit, lardoons (OK, bacon), etc. As to beef (or tuna or venison or lamb) tartare, especially if topped with a dollop of crème fraiche and a bit of caviar, Rosé Champagne, with its richer flavors and creamier texture, is the bomb.



The **Moët Nectar Imperial Demi Sec** (drink) is, by definition, the sweetest of the wines we tasted. In the Champagne pecking order, Natural is the driest. Then comes Brut (still very dry), then Extra Dry (actually a hint of sweetness), then Sec (which means “dry” but is actually – at least by today’s standards – a bit sweet), and then Demi-Sec (literally “semi-dry” but with a noticeable level of sweetness. Doux (literally “sweet”) is the sweetest style of Champagne. For many years Demi-Sec Champagne has had a poor reputation (almost no matter who made it) because the wines were unbalanced with not enough acidity to balance the sugar. In the last few years, some Champagne producers have focused on making better Demi-Sec by making wines with enough acidity to balance the sweetness. Moët is riding this wave so the Nectar Imperial is balanced and works as Champagne as well as it works as a medium sweet wine. While old school thinking on Champagne would hold that this is a “dessert Champagne”, as I tasted, I immediately saw food possibilities: Melon and Prosciutto, Melon Soup, spicy ceviche, spicier Asian dishes (including the spicier styles of California Sushi), Foie Gras (especially one of my favorites: Foie Gras potstickers). The melon dishes work because the Champagne, even though balanced by acidity, is sweeter than the melon. Pairing with the spicier foods works because heat from spice in foods requires at least some sugar in the wine to offset. Foie Gras works with Demi-Sec Champagne because sweet and rich go well together and the Champagne has enough acidity to keep the combination fresh. With my foie gras potstickers, the pairing works because of the Demi-Sec Champagne’s affinities for both spice and richness.

All this speculating on food and Champagne is making me hungry. I think I’ll pop me up some truffle popcorn, pour a glass of Rose Champagne, and watch Blazing Saddles for the 7,123rd time. “I get no kick from Champagne ...” ✨

