

by Duncan J. D. Smith

For the last hundred years, only sparkling wine made in the French Champagne region has been permitted to carry that region's name. Producers elsewhere have not been allowed to profit from one of the world's strongest brands. For the Vienna-based company Schlumberger, however, this has not been a handicap, and its sparkling wines are as popular as ever.

### From Champagne to Vienna

Robert Alwin Schlumberger (1814–1879) was the first producer of sparkling *Sekt* in Austria. Born in Stuttgart, he was forced to give up his studies following the early death of his father. He then became a merchant, a job that took him to Reims in France. It was there that he found a job in the oldest champagne cellar in France.

In 1841, during a pleasure cruise along the Rhine, Schlumberger met and fell in love with Sophie Kirchner, the daughter of a wealthy Viennese factory owner. Marriage was soon in the air, but Sophie's mother firmly opposed her daughter moving to France. Instead Schlumberger relinquished his job in Reims and relocated to Vienna. The following year the pair moved to nearby Vöslau, where with his wife's financial support, Schlumberger rented several vineyards in the area that he had identified as ideal for the production of sparkling wine.

### A Sparkling Success

Schlumberger's dream was to produce his own sparkling wine from Austrian grapes according to the French Champagne tradition (*Méthode champenoise*). Such was his success that by the early 1860s, Schlumberger Champagne was not only the preferred toast of Viennese society but also a favourite at the table of the Queen of England. For his efforts Schlumberger was ennobled by Emperor Franz Joseph

## STONES OF VIENNA

*Deep beneath Döbling, a hidden labyrinth of cellars has long been used to create some of Vienna's oldest and finest Sekt*

# A Story of Love and Bubbles

I, and as a purveyor to the Habsburg court, the company was eventually permitted to use the prestigious appointment of a *k.u.k.-Hoflieferant* – an Imperial and Royal Supplier to the Court.

The First World War changed everything. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was dissolved and its economy left in tatters. Under the punitive terms of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Lye (1919), the new Republic of Austria was forbidden to use the name champagne. Despite this setback Schlumberger survived, as it did through the Second World War as well. Indeed, since being acquired by the German family-owned company Underberg in 1973, Schlumberger has continued producing some of the highest quality sparkling wines in all of Europe.

### Adding the Bubbles

After 1919, Schlumberger were still allowed to advertise their wines as being made by the *Méthode champenoise*. Since 1995, however, Austria's accession to the European Union prompted a further restriction, and now Schlumberger's bottles (adorned with the company's familiar fairy logo) can only lay claim to the *Méthode traditionnelle*. Whatever the name, the technique is the same: An in-bottle secondary fermentation is used to carbonate the wine.

This signature process was first discovered around 1700 by the French Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon. After harvesting his grapes, he placed their slightly fermented juice (German: *Most*) into barrels containing yeast to continue the process. Fermentation was suspended due to the cold winter temperatures, only for it to recommence in the spring, resulting in the bubbles. From the late 17th century, the wine was put directly into glass bottles, allowing better control of the fermentation process, as well as easier transportation.

For their basic wine, Schlumberger today uses a *cuvée* of different grape varieties from the



***Sekt-making sticks to traditional processes to create its signature taste*** Photo: Duncan Smith

Weinviertel and Burgenland. Once the yeast and a little sugar (*dosage*) are added, the bottles are stored 18 to 36 months in dark, cool cellars. Then they are placed upside down in wooden racks and turned an eighth of a revolution 32 times. (The cellar mark on the bottom of each bottle gives an accurate measure of the bottle's position at any given time.) Known as riddling, the process encourages the dead yeast cells to congregate in the neck of the bottle, where it is shock-frozen, and the icy plug containing the yeast is disgorged by the pressure accumulated during fermentation. The bottle is then topped up, corked and wired to prevent it from popping prematurely.

### Visiting the Cellars

Schlumberger's wine cellars have long been located in Döbling, close to the Danube Canal along which the wine was originally shipped. Two and a half kilometres of brick-lined tunnels provide the constant temperature (13°C) necessary to guarantee fermentation – and storage for the 1.7 million bottles produced each year. A masterpiece of engineering, the tunnels were designed by Carl Ritter von Ghega, the architect behind the Semmering railway. Each cellar is named after one of the twelve disciples – all except Judas, who might give away the secret formula.

Twice-weekly cellar tours are available, and visitors are treated to a perfect glass of Schlumberger *Sekt*. Now that's worth toasting! ♦

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