

Should you decant your Champagne this Christmas ?

By Dave March CWM

Sound strange to you? Well, the idea of pouring a Sparkling Wine, MCC or Champagne into a decanter before serving is not so ridiculous.

The idea has been circulating the on-trade, especially in France, for many years. In 2008 Parisian sommeliers were decanting demi-sec Champagne for customers so wines would seem sweeter and not too fizzy. Germain Lehodey, Sommelier at Mosaic Restaurant says, 'It was a great practice 50 years ago'.

Many believe that the reason we might decant still wines – to open up the wine and allow it to release more aromatics – is exactly why many believe it works with sparkling wines. Is this a concept South African MCC's will adopt?

The debate is quite split. On one hand are those who do not support the idea, based on the likelihood of losing a delicate mousse on the wine. "Surely we want to conserve and enjoy the bead and the mousse?" says Ginette de Fleuriot CWM, who has close connections to MCC in SA and via Vinimark markets French Champagne brands like Gosset and Bollinger. Olivier Krug of the eponymous luxury brand goes further, saying 'We do not decant Krug....it doesn't need to be artificially changed'. Not sure how decanting is an artificial change, but winemaker at Villiera, Jeff Grier CWM, sums up the worry, 'It makes little sense to me, as the whole idea of bubbly is to experience a perfectly performing, fine bubble. Decanting will just diminish the experience in my opinion'.

Jeff's concern is supported by Elunda Basson of The House of JC Leroux, 'I don't disagree with this, although I don't believe that it is necessary for everyday consumers to decant their bubbles. This can only serve a purpose when you really want to technically evaluate the base wine behind the bubbles! I believe the biggest enjoyment behind Champagne is the effervescence of it'.

On the other hand are those who think decanting can be effective and for those who worry the mousse might be lost, François Billecart recommends his vintage Champagne be decanted 45 minutes (!) before serving. Champagne House Charles Heidsieck, sells its prestige cuvée, 'Blanc des Millénaires' packaged *with* a Riedel decanter in the shape of a lyre. The 1995 of that wine had spent 17 years in bottle (!) and cellarmaster Thierry Roset believes that decanting, 'helps to liberate it'; he is quoted saying, 'Its breadth, its texture, its silky effervescence are revealed in an even more enthralling fashion, further accentuating the wine's refinement'. Michael Crossley, importer of Riedel in SA, and who with 'Reciprocal' in Johannesburg imports Louis Roederer, says he hasn't noticed this trend here yet, but firmly believes in the merits of decanting. He always decants 'Crystal' for guests into a tall, narrow decanter (flatter styles would have too large a surface area) and says it

makes, “an extra-ordinary difference”. Another flavour liberator is Elunda Basson, who qualifies her doubts earlier with, ‘I have experienced a few older special vintages of wines that are still so tight and racy, that a bit of a breathing by decanting can just help it open up and show all its layers of complexity’.

Johan Malan at Simonsig is another who thinks, ‘it would be helpful on very old Champagnes and Cap Classiques. These are also the wines that will have less mousse and pressure after a very long time on the cork. Maybe the wine can also aerate and open up in the glass’.

Elunda and Johan both think the effects might be valuable with younger Champagnes. Johan writes, ‘when it come to a young and vibrant Cap Classique (with stronger mousse) that has not spent a long time on the lees or cork it might be a good way to open up the fruit aroma and give it more expression’ and Elunda, ‘In older more mature sparkling’s the bubbles are naturally softer and smoother and less upfront, and thus it might be needed more in the case of newer vintages. Wine writer Tom Stevenson is also a convert to decanting young Champagnes and he is supported by the cellar master at Bollinger, Gilles Descôtes who told me, “when the mousse is a bit aggressive, young champagne with big bubbles, decanting can be useful but it will not change a bad or an average champagne into a good one”. Gilles stressed that when the mousse is correct, though (as his is (sic), there is no need to decant, but he disagreed with decanting older sparkling wines; “please do not decant old vintages: the bubble is tiny and it's a very small protection against oxidation”.

A more scientific approach comes from Germain Lehody; ‘It is recommended only with very young bubbly. Of course there is a loss of CO₂. However, the wine must be ice cold. In this case less loss of the gas. The main idea is to oxidise the wine to open the wine. In the old days, sometimes, the degorgement was not done 100% and the acidity in Champagne was higher. With global warming the fruits are better ripened (sic)’. Albert Ahrens, GM&Ahrens winemaker behind my top tippel, believes it would make changes to the taste of the wine, ‘The purpose of decanting a champagne would possibly be to decrease the CO₂ level in order to achieve a better balance between the bubble and the wine behind the bubble...but if the dosage was on the higher side this would result in the bubbly tasting sweeter and that would not be desired...however if it was a Vintage or Zero dosage bubbly with a CO₂ level of about 6bar it could be interesting to decant...’

Interestingly, proponents for decanting sum-up their argument with a very unscientific ‘try it’ approach, ‘**put the decanter in the deep freeze or fridge to preserve the bubbles when you decant**’, **says Johan Malan, and** ‘try a bottle at +/- 5 degrees C and a bottle at normal temperature without decanting and see the result’ suggests Germain. Testing it on two opened bottles sounds like a good plan I think.

Combine decanting an MCC with an initial *sabrage* (slicing the top off) with the carving knife over the heads of your guests and you could have the perfect Christmas party piece.