



Written by

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19 Oct 2012

Truly, madly DP: eight degrees of separation

DON'T QUOTE ME CHAMPAGNE TEMPERATURE SERVING WINE

The temperature, we were told, was set at precisely 20 °C, but it felt peculiarly cooler than that as our party walked into the shadowy dining hall of an immaculate château in Reims. As we found our places around a grand table laid for supper, a chill feeling prickled across the skin, raising goosebumps, in anticipation of what awaited us.

The heavy furnishings, the flickering chandeliers, the dark October sky, the wise old stone walls - everything evoked the spirit of a Gothic horror. Or perhaps I shouldn't have been reading *The Turn of the Screw* on my way there. In any case, the spell was soon broken by the incongruously modern devices set behind our cutlery: black and white perspex boxes with their front and top sides removed to enthrone four glowing glass goblets, each lit from below by a bright white light. On the glasses were imprinted Roman numerals, from I to VIII.

Upon closer inspection, the perspex glistened with frost. It was revealed that ice packs were encased within these creations, so that the glasses sat within a precise microclimate, designed to slow the warming effect of ambient temperature.

Indeed, temperature was the evening's entire *raison d'être*. We were to taste **Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1996 Champagne** at intervals of one degree Celsius, from eight to 15. It had been calculated that each consecutive degree took 15 minutes to reach in these controlled conditions - apparently half the natural speed. Over two hours, eight bespoke courses would be served at these precise intervals, with the service of each being our cue to move onto the next glass.

Each course was crafted not only to match precisely this particular cuvée and vintage, but the different temperatures at which it would be experienced. Duly, an entire bottle of Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1996 was poured equally between the four glasses before each of us, and almost immediately the first course was served.

Such a very particular concept demands scrutiny. It was put together by Richard Geoffroy, Dom Pérignon's winemaker, and three colleagues from the two-Michelin-starred Les Crayères: managing director Hervé Fort, head sommelier Philippe Jamesse and head chef Philippe Mille. The idea took 18 months to evolve and has been executed only twice, both times at Les Crayères.

Official literature explains the concept: 'to slow down the effect of temperature and suspend the wine in its various expressive states for as long as possible'. It is described as 'an enchanted journey to the limits of the supernatural'. Each of the eight stages is likened to a phase of the moon - 'rising from the depths of the ocean, penetrating the earth's rocky crust to soar to the lunar zenith'.

At 8 °C it is the new moon, 'clear and bright, its biting sea-air harmonies like brisk, breaking waves'. As I read this, a frown began to furrow my brow. 'The Waxing Crescent (9 °C)', it goes on, 'unveils cool mineral accords with accents of chlorophyll'. The frown deepened. 'In the Waxing Gibbous (11 °C), accents of salted butter, lemon and brown sugar tell of a stroll through an orchard grove. The robe deepens in a burst of warmth', it said.

By now, the frown had reached my chin, preventing me from reading any further. Such purple prose risks severely undermining any hope of taking this kind of experiment seriously - although I do like the phrase 'waxing gibbous'. It sounds like someone getting so angry they fall insane. 'By the time he finished reading this nonsense he was fairly waxing gibbous.'

I needn't heed the propaganda, though, since I was about to partake in the experiment itself, and make up my own mind. However, I shall make one more quote - perhaps an unfortunate translation - which concludes one of the sections. It describes the event as 'a stunt of staggering proportions'.

Back in the dining room, we begin. My first impression of tasting Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1996 is that it is unquestionably a tremendous champagne. At 8 °C it is rich and vibrant with a lovely toasted brioche flavour and some iodine character. Though it is very expressive, it does seem colder than you might wish. Paired with a tartare of oysters, the flavours meld nicely - and although raw oysters and chilled champagne is hardly a stop-press idea, this is an expertly rendered rendition.

Fifteen minutes later, a plate of lightly cooked scampi marinated in mint arrives, and we can taste the second glass, now supposedly at 9 °C. It seems fuller in body, with a nutty character that I hadn't noticed before. As the accompanying notes point out, it has also had 15 minutes' breathing time. So, there was a palpable difference between the first two glasses at least, and the temperature had changed, albeit almost imperceptibly.

Numbers three, four and five seem broader and richer again, with more spice, cream and butter notes emerging. This was no red herring, then - each glass seemed different in subtle but certain increments. But was temperature really the reason?

At this stage, roughly an hour into the dinner, I jotted down all the other possible factors I could spontaneously think of that could also influence your perception.

Time in the glass
The power of suggestion
Other scents in the room
Food
Fallibility
Biodynamics?

There is a final word which is so scrawled as to be barely legible. It might say 'inebriation'.

The courses continued, and - whether due to temperature, aeration, moon, stars or sky - the champagne matched (almost) every course very well. It had the fullness to match lamb tajine and prime rib, the creaminess to parry mussel soup and the texture to get on famously with cheese. The one that got away was the final match of a glass at 15 °C and tarte tatin. Even though it was not an overly sweet dessert, it still clashed irredeemably with the dryness of the champagne, to my mind.

Richard Geoffroy observed that Oenothèque 1996 has the necessary 'amplitude' to display such flexibility and complexity, therefore ably matching different foods at different temperatures. I don't mind repeating that it is an excellent champagne, and that experiments like this help to further our understanding of how wine works.

What I do mind is the spin that surrounded the event. Whereas the process itself raised some valid and interesting points, the marketing served only to obscure that message. Tasting notes in the printed material such as 'iodised floral, noble plants, lime and full-bodied tannins' are awkwardly convoluted.

Such ornate language is doubtless there to add value by shrouding the product in mystery and exclusivity. Dom Pérignon is unashamedly deluxe, after all, and the parent company LVMH are masters of marketing. The problem is that such highfalutin' verbosity smacks of smoke and mirrors, a suspicious distraction technique from what is most important: inherent quality.

To return to the heart of the matter, then: the palpable changes this champagne underwent throughout the experiment were intriguing. The paraphernalia and pretension that accompanied it were less so. Attributing the changes primarily to temperature is not entirely convincing - there are too many other factors to be considered which impact on perception.

So, the great temperature experiment worked - to a degree.

