

Cecile Bonnefond and Jennifer Simonetti-Bryan sip Piper-Heidsieck Rare Millésimé 2002. RIGHT, FROM TOP: Scallops with chestnut and truffle espuma; a bottle of Rare chills by the table.



PIED PIPER

WHAT:

A decadent lunch of French food and Champagne tastings

WHERE:

Ladurée, 398 West Broadway, 646-392-7868; laduree.com

Tête-à-Tête

CECILE BONNEFOND, ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT WOMEN IN THE CHAMPAGNE INDUSTRY, SITS DOWN WITH WINE EXPERT **JENNIFER SIMONETTI-BRYAN** TO TALK VINTAGES, VARIETALS, AND FEMALE ADVANCEMENT IN A FIELD LONG RUN BY MEN. **BY JENNIFER DEMERITT PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG YOUNG**

“A day without Champagne is a lost day,” says Cecile Bonnefond, CEO of Piper-Heidsieck Champagne, one of the few Champagne houses currently run by a woman. Bonnefond has long been a pioneer in the field—prior to joining Piper-Heidsieck, she was president of Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin for nine years, although she likes to point out that women have always had important roles in the Champagne world. She proved her point over lunch with Jennifer Simonetti-Bryan, one of just four women in the US to be recognized with the elite certification Master of Wine. At the French restaurant and bakery Ladurée in Soho, they chatted about drinking customs in France and the US, the art of blending cuvées, and the women behind some of the most famous Champagne houses in history.

[The waiter pours Piper-Heidsieck Brut]

Jennifer Simonetti-Bryan: Why did you choose Ladurée for lunch?

Cecile Bonnefond: Everything here in Ladurée is very Marie Antoinette. Piper-Heidsieck is one of the few Champagne houses that date from before the French Revolution, and it was brought to Marie Antoinette at Versailles. Ladurée is today one of the most successful French pastry companies, and we are associated with them everywhere in the world.

[The next pour is Piper-Heidsieck Rosé Sauvage]

JSB: I love the Rosé Sauvage because of the concentration, the depth you get from it. It’s also a very gorgeous color pink. When it goes through a room, people kind of go, “Oh, wow!”

CB: It’s not a rosé that is benign. It is a rosé that is *ooh*. *[The waiter then pours Rare Millésimé 2002]*

JSB: Remind me again about the 2002 vintage. It’s a bit richer than the 2004?

CB: Yes. It’s very generous, very exuberant.

JSB: But it still has that nice round acidity. I like the fact we have the Rare in wine glasses. It’s more akin to tasting like a white Burgundy than a Champagne.

[They raise their glasses in a toast]

JSB: Do you remember the first time we spoke?

CB: A long time ago.

JSB: I received a card from you after I passed the Master of Wine exam. You were the first person in the industry to recognize me as a Master of Wine. It spoke to me about women in the industry. There aren’t that many women executives.

CB: No, and frankly in the wine industry, a lot of ladies in those companies were the daughters of, the wives of. In Champagne, the well-known

women were all widows.

JSB: They did it because they had to.

CB: And because they chose to, but after drama. Madame Clicquot—widow when she was 27. Madame Bollinger—widow. Madame Perrier from Laurent-Perrier—widow. That’s a pretty sad way of becoming the boss. In France, until the start of the 20th century, a woman could not have access to a bank account. You could not pay suppliers or employees because having anything to do with money as a woman was really, the kind of woman you didn’t want to be, except if you were in charge of your children.

JSB: So you were either a prostitute or you were a widow; no in between.

CB: Exactly. When you put widow on the label—“veuve” means widow—that meant, “I’m in charge of my children, so I can deal with money.” I always wondered why, when you’re in the happiness business, would you say widow?

[Appetizers are served: mimosa egg with tourteau crab for Cecile, and smoked salmon with Carolina lemon cream for Jennifer]

JSB: I like the Rare better than the Brut with the cream. Without the cream, I actually prefer the Brut. It’s the freshness and fruitiness—the Brut is richer, it’s weightier.

CB: The Pinot gives it the structure that you like with salmon. The crab is really interesting here with the eggs and with the way it’s—not Benedict, but with hollandaise. It is really complementing the fizzy side of the Champagne.

JSB: I think in this country, it’s not a true celebra-

tion unless you’re celebrating with Champagne.

CB: That’s where we get the motto for our company: Let life be grand. France today still accounts for half the consumption of Champagne in the world. The average consumption of Champagne per person in France, including kids and old people, is three bottles a year.

JSB: In this country, it’s only half a liter—less than one bottle per year. That means we’re generally only drinking it on New Year’s.

CB: In France we have Champagne every time we can.

JSB: Every day is a celebration.

[Main courses are served: pan-fried scallops with Jerusalem artichokes, chestnuts, and truffle espuma for Cecile; organic chicken breast “vol-au-vent” with wild mushrooms and cream sauce for Jennifer]

CB: Vol-au-vent means to fly in the wind.

Vol-au-vent, that pastry there, the fact that it’s puffy means there is air in it, and therefore, it’s like [being able to] vol-au-vent.

JSB: This is so beautiful. Wow. You’re going to have to taste this. A bit of the pastry with the mushroom actually brings out the raspberry in the Rosé Sauvage.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: An appetizer of mimosa egg with tourteau crab; Cecile Bonnefond and Jennifer Simonetti-Bryan take home treats from Ladurée; a display of the bakery’s famous desserts.

“THE ART OF
CHAMPAGNE IS
ABOUT THE ART OF
BLENDING. THAT’S
WHAT HAVING
DIFFERENT CUVÉES
ALLOWS US TO DO.”

— CECILE BONNEFOND

CB: And the scallops with mine.

JSB: And I like the minerality that you get from it.

CB: Because most of our red wines come from the Aube, near the Burgundy region, they have that structure. La Chasse is the largest cru, or village, that we have in Champagne. We have almost 30 hectares there. That really gives us a presence.

JSB: What do you think is the benefit of owning or not owning some of your own vineyards?

CB: The benefit is that you understand the life of the vineyard better. The benefit of not owning 100 percent of your vineyards is that you can pick and choose what grapes you want for each Champagne. The fact that we can pick in 100 different villages gives us the ability to really blend parts of the Champagne’s DNA.

JSB: So you get the best of both worlds?

CB: Absolutely.

JSB: Because there’s this thing about grower Champagnes.

CB: Grower Champagnes are great in great years; but the art of Champagne is about the art of blending. That’s what having a lot of different cuvées allows you to do.

JSB: People get confused between the Heidsiecks—Piper-Heidsieck and Charles Heidsieck. I always loved the story that Piper, as part of Piper-Heidsieck, was kind of a schmoozer, the guy who married into the family.

CB: Christian Heidsieck owned the company in the 1820s, and he hired Piper as what we would call today the sales guy, who became his partner. Then Christian Heidsieck died. A long time after, Piper married Heidsieck’s widow, and that’s how the hyphen came about. It’s funny to know that, behind the hyphen, there is a woman’s story. **G**

