The marketing of Moët & Chandon champagne, 1850-1936
Graham HARDING
Oxford University
graham.harding@stx.ox.ac.uk

In 1850 champagne was a wine of the British elite. Sales grew steadily during the decade 1850-59 before accelerating dramatically after William Gladstone’s reduction in duties on ‘natural’ (i.e. unfortified) wine in 1860. Champagne sales volumes more than trebled in the fifteen years from 1860 to 1875; a period of intense advertising-led competition as new brands fought for share, widespread counterfeiting of brand names and dramatic changes in retail availability. Although wine consumption per head peaked in 1875 and thereafter fell slowly to 1914, champagne generally continued to flourish. Sales fell away in the years immediately before World War One and, despite a brief revival in the heady post-war years, sales volumes fell into the 1930s. By the mid-1930s, champagne was again a wine of the elite. The swings in volume and consumption – particularly in the period 1860-1910 – forced the champagne producers operating in the British market to deal with a consistent strategic tension between volume sales and premium positioning.

This tension was particularly acute for the old-established house of Moët and Chandon. Dominant in the first half of the century, Moët and Chandon’s market position was increasingly challenged in the 1860s and early 1870s. New competitors such as Pommery, Clicqout and Roederer took share at the premium end of the market, whilst low-priced producers such as Roper Frères focused on the volume sector of the market. This paper focuses on Moët & Chandon’s responses to this strategic pincer movement. Taking a chronological approach, it deals with four periods of markedly different market dynamics: the years of rapid market growth between 1860 and 1875, the consolidation and re-premiumisation of the market between 1876 and 1897 (the year of Victoria’s Jubilee), an accelerating decline in the period 1898 to 1918 and finally the period 1919 to 1936 when champagne, after a brief revival in 1919 and 1920, became once again a drink of a shrinking wealthy elite.

Through detailed analysis of Moët and Chandon’s advertising in the British provincial and national press and their self-standing publicity material this paper will show how a strategy of portfolio consolidation, product and brand development and an increasingly ‘British turn’ enabled the company to regain its threatened control of the market and re-establish its position as the dominant champagne brand in the British market.

The fifteen years from 1860 to 1875 were challenging for Moët and Chandon. The rush of new consumers into the market sucked in inexperienced new retailers who competed aggressively for share. In an environment of cut-throat competition and counterfeit brands, consumers sought the reassurance of known brands. As the best-known brand in the market, Moët and Chandon were also the most frequently counterfeited. The generic descriptors used in the first half of the century – terms such as ‘First Quality White Sparkling Champagne’ – were inadequate in a marketplace of eager but inexperienced consumers. In this period, Moët’s strategy focused on brand protection and differentiation. Legal action in the British courts targeted those selling wine with fake Moët and Chandon branding. Furthermore, from 1865, they began to promote ‘White Dry Sillery’, a term that from the late 1860s was frequently abbreviated to ‘WDS’. Only Roederer’s adoption of ‘Carte Blanche’ branding antedated Moët and Chandon’s initiative.
During the period 1876-1897, the major shift in the trade was the introduction of vintage-dated wines at premium prices. These played an important role in driving up the average price of champagne and establishing a set of premium brands which commanded a 15-20% price premium in the marketplace. Moët and Chandon were not, initially, in this group. Their price lagged and though they sustained volume sales their long-established premium positioning in the market was at risk. The firm addressed this by the successful introduction in 1879 of a new vintage-dated premium product brand – ‘Brut Imperial’. The French ‘Brut Imperial’ name was changed in 1888 to ‘Dry Imperial’, under which name it remained the house’s flagship brand. By 1890, Moët and Chandon had finalised their portfolio strategy, selling only three lines: Dry Imperial as the premium wine, Premiere Cuvée (first advertised in 1889) as a medium-priced dry wine and WDS (or White Dry Sillery) as a volume wine for balls, race-meetings and public dinners.

The shift of nomenclature from Brut Impérial to Dry Imperial in in 1888 was the first overt sign of the ‘British turn’ which marked Moët’s strategy in the period 1897-1914. Their marketing in this period, culminating in a highly publicised ‘pavilion’ at the 1907 Franco-British Exhibition at Earls Court, focused on three themes. The first, chronologically, was the assertion of their link to the vineyards of Champagne with the consistently repeated claim that they owned not only more vineyards than any other producer but that these holdings included the original vineyards developed by Dom Pérongn. This appropriation of the supposed ‘inventor’ of champagne was reinforced in their pavilion at Earls Court through striking paintings and tableaux vivants. The Earls Court pavilion was also the culmination of a fifteen-year campaign to link Moët and Chandon to the British market. The house very publicly supported dinners for returning soldiers; equally ostentatiously, they declined to pass on the extra tax on champagne imposed by the government in 1888. A widely distributed publicity booklet written by a ‘Member of The Times Advertising Staff’ in 1905 claimed that the house’s wine was ‘specially designed for the English taste’ and suggested that rowers in Oxford and Cambridge ‘Eights’ took Moët and Chandon champagne after a ‘hard pull’. The final theme – encapsulated in advertisements in the British press – stressed the social cachet of drinking Moet and Chandon wines by linking them to notable British and European celebrities.

This focus on the links between Britain and Moët and Chandon’s wines was further strengthened in the post-war period. A brief flurry of consumption in 1919 and 1920 was succeeded by the slow decline of French wine in Britain as consumers switched to the cheaper Australian wines. Champagne retreated to a small wealthy elite during the years of depression. Moët and Chandon continued to advertise but in the socialite weekly press rather than daily newspapers. These advertisements bore the British flag and the royal warrant and claimed that Moët and Chandon ‘export to this country a greater quantity than any other House’. The continuing importance of the British market was further stressed when the first super-premium ‘prestige cuvée’ was developed with their British agency in 1921 under the name ‘Dom Pérongn’ – a further assertion of their link to champagne’s central foundational myth. Launched in 1935-6 this became and still remains the flagship wine of the house. And the House has remained the number one brand in the British market – a success built on decades of product and marketing development from the 1860s onwards.