

# First lady of champagne: The extraordinary woman behind Veuve Clicquot

 [cnn.com/travel/article/veuve-clicquot/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/veuve-clicquot/index.html)

Chris Dwyer, CNN

November 16, 2018



(CNN) – Veuve Clicquot's famous yellow label may be immediately recognizable around the world, but the remarkable woman behind the brand? Less so.

The French champagne house takes its name (which translates as "Widow Clicquot") from an extraordinary, pioneering lady who overcame unimaginable hurdles to transform Veuve Clicquot into one of the world's most sought-after fine wines.

2018 marks 200 years since Madame Barbe-Nicole Clicquot invented a revolutionary technique for producing rosé champagne – blending red grapes and white grapes together. Up until then white wine had been colored with berries to give it its unique pink hues.

This alone would prove to be an impressive legacy, but it almost pales into comparison with her other achievements, most of which were marked by a desire to go against every norm, and certainly against what early 19th century French society expected of women.

In October 1805, Madame Clicquot's husband died of fever at the age of 30. She was just 27 years old at the time, mother to a six-year-old daughter.

## Champagne innovator

---



Madame Clicquot came up with a revolutionary technique for producing rosé champagne.

Veuve Clicquot

As a wealthy, aristocratic French widow, she would have been expected to devote her life to raising her child. The idea of a woman of her status working would have been completely unthinkable, so her decision to take over her husband's business was a stunning move.

This was a period when women were legally considered as minors. They were under the responsibility of their father until they were married, when they then became the responsibility of their husband.

Women weren't even allowed to hold bank accounts, let alone make personal decisions about money.

Her father-in-law, Veuve Clicquot founder Philippe Clicquot was devastated at his son's passing and set about selling the company.

Madame Clicquot therefore had to prove that not only that she could take on the business, but that he should invest to help her do so.

The timing could not have been worse as her husband's death came days before the Battle of Trafalgar, a decisive naval battle that led to both France and Britain putting embargoes and blockades on trade.

Unfortunately for Madame Clicquot, the majority of champagne clients were international. With ports closed, trade routes were devastated and her markets disappeared.

It was only after the end of Napoleon and the French Empire that she was truly able to move the business forward.

She did so with a brilliant commercial and marketing move, namely by ensuring that hers was the first champagne to enter the lucrative Russian market once the blockade had lifted.

Amid great secrecy, she prepared a massive shipment to St. Petersburg and ensured that it was in place at the border for delivery.

It reached Russian aristocrats and the royal family, proving such a tremendous success that in time the Russian name for Clicquot became a general term for champagne.

Alexander I of Russia declared that the 1811 vintage was the "only thing he would drink," while folklore even had it that "sabering" -- opening a bottle of champagne by removing the neck with a sword -- started with Russian army officers.

Related content

[World's 50 most delicious drinks](#)

"La Grande Dame"



The ground-breaking business woman would refuse orders if she felt the champagne wasn't up to standard.

Veuve Clicquot / Leif Carlsson

The marketing masterstroke and subsequent growth bought such acclaim that Madame Clicquot was "La Grande Dame of Champagne" while her personal motto -- and that of the company -- became "only one quality: the finest."

From bottles to corks and, of course, grapes, she insisted that everything was of the highest quality.

That also meant that prices were never, ever cut. Even during times of crisis and great commercial challenges, Madame Clicquot always refused.

She developed such strong, confident connections with her customers that, even if they sometimes ordered 100 bottles and only received 50, they were happy to wait a year to get the other 50.

Madame Clicquot would turn down orders if the champagne didn't meet her standards, because she understood that if you cheated or deceived customers in any way, you'd lose them.

In 1818, she broke with tradition and convention by reimagining rosé champagne through blending white grapes with red wine grapes from parcels of land in the brilliantly named area of Bouzy in the Champagne region, to create a more complex and characterful champagne.

She was also ahead of her time when it came to public relations and product placement, preferring that advertisements come from somebody separate from the company.

Madame Clicquot would refuse to buy an ad in a newspaper, instead asking for a reporter to write an article explaining that during an official dinner of a King or Lord, Veuve Clicquot champagne was served.

Related content

[Coahuila, Mexico: The best wine country you don't know about](#)

## Lasting legacy

---



Veuve Clicquot remains one of the most prestigious champagne houses in the world.

Nicholas Hunt/Getty Images for Hublot

Her outlook was also global in scope. Incredibly, Veuve Clicquot had been shipping internationally since the late 18th century, to customers in the United States, South America and beyond.

She expanded these markets and organized the first shipments to China and even Australia in 1847. In doing so, she found agents to meet customers, organize tastings and expand the business.

Madame Clicquot also planned her succession a full quarter of a century before she eventually died.

She had originally hired her heir apparent as an apprentice when he was just 20, deciding that he was the right person for the job because he had good business sense and was also adept at wine tasting.

Madame Clicquot ensured he learned everything about wine production and within 10 years he became her associate. She appointed him her official successor another 10 years later.

When she died at the age of 89 in 1866, the transition was seamless.

Despite the passing of a woman who defined a luxury product like few others since, the business simply carried on as it had always had done.

The Veuve Clicquot brand went from strength to strength and became the bubbles of choice for a remarkable array of people, real and fictional.

Britain's Queen Victoria, iconic secret agent James Bond, Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) from the movie "Casablanca" and the inhabitants of "Downton Abbey" in the popular British TV series all included it amongst their tipples of choice.

Ultimately, the most remarkable part of her legacy was the fact that her entrepreneurial spirit was centuries ahead of its time, with a vision that could come straight from the pages of a 2018 business book – except that she wrote it in the 1860's in a letter to one of great-grandchildren.

"The world is in perpetual motion, and we must invent the things of tomorrow," she wrote. "One must go before others, be determined and exacting, and let your intelligence direct your life. Act with audacity."