

ANNIVERSARY MOËT & CHANDON

Imperial bubbles

If you absolutely need a reason to drink champagne, a 150th birthday at a renovated château is a good one, writes **Jane Cornwell**.



A warm evening in Chouilly in the historic French wine region of Champagne, and from the terrace of Château de Saran, the sunset is changing from pale gold to blush pink. Viewed over landscaped gardens and rolling vineyards, it's a vista that, on any other occasion, would command rapt attention. But tonight, at this intimate soirée celebrating the 150th year of Moët Imperial, the signature non-vintage champagne of Moët & Chandon, one's gaze is continually diverted.

There, elegant in sleeveless white lace, is Natalie Portman, and next to her, Uma Thurman, wearing an off-the-shoulder black gown. Both Hollywood goddesses are chatting to Bernard Arnault, chief executive of the luxury goods giant LVMH, Moët's parent company.

Tennis icon and Moët brand ambassador Roger Federer – one of the evening's hosts – is oozing charisma over by the string quartet. British model Kate Moss is posing for photos by some topiary, while her compatriot, actor Douglas Booth, is in conversation with His Imperial Highness Prince Jean-Christophe Napoléon Bonaparte, a London-based financier and an heir of Napoléon Bonaparte.

"Champagne! In victory one deserves it, in defeat one needs it," declared that Napoléon, a childhood friend of Jean-Rémy Moët, grandson of wine merchant Claude Moët, who founded the champagne house in 1743 in Épernay. (The self-proclaimed capital of Champagne is a sleepy, dignified town a short drive away.)

Moët & Chandon is now the largest producer of champagne in the world, available in 154 markets, with 30 million bottles sold every year.

Napoléon would apparently drop by Moët HQ to stock up on cases of champagne – infinitely sweeter varieties than now



Above: celebratory fireworks. Left: brand ambassador and host Roger Federer with (from left) Kate Moss, Uma Thurman and Natalie Portman.



Above: the bicorne hat Napoléon Bonaparte left to his favourite champagne house. Left: Château de Saran has had a five-year renovation.

– before each military campaign (excluding, presumably, the Battle of Waterloo).

In the 1860s, having sensed a shift in preference towards a modern drink with a lower sugar dosage, Moët increased production of brut varieties. The Moët Impérial (then called "Brut Impérial") was created in Napoléon's honour in 1869, the centenary of the late Emperor's birth.

The first shipment of Impérial left Épernay that same year, laying the foundation for a product now synonymous with heritage, elegance and *savoir faire*. Qualities that are – unsurprisingly – embodied by Château de Saran, a former hunting lodge high on a hill in a property fringed by the Saran Woods. It was purchased by Jean-Rémy Moët in 1801.

Turned into a manor house in the mid 1800s, the château was given its 18th-century façade in the 1920s when it became the main residence of the Moët family until just after World War II. Following a brief stint as a wing of the Hospital of Épernay, since the 1960s it has functioned as an elite guesthouse for a veritable roll call of celebrities, politicians, persons of influence and friends of the maison.

Which brings us to now, and the magnificent restoration involving five years of work by Parisian architects Atelier Cos and interior designer Yves de Marsaille. Its unveiling is the other vital reason Moët has transported 100 guests from Paris to Épernay aboard the Orient Express, a car of which was customised with Moët memorabilia including a giant magnum and the last of Napoleon's trademark bicorne hats, bequeathed to the company by the man himself.

In the same way that the legendary train seemed to steam us back in time, so too does the glorious *château de famille* offer a remembrance of things past.



Behind the fizz with Moët's chief executive

Stéphane Baschiera is demonstrating the correct way to open a bottle of champagne. "You put your left hand over the cork, like this," he says, sitting in a period-style armchair and holding an imaginary magnum of, quite probably, Moët Impérial over one grey-trousered knee. "Then you twist the bottom of the bottle, like this. *Et voilà!*"

As the president and chief executive of Moët & Chandon, Baschiera's life has been soundtracked by the popping of corks and fizzing of bubbles. "Fifty years ago champagne was about celebration," says this charming, silver-haired Frenchman, who had his first sip of champagne at a wedding, aged 13.

"Now it is much more friendly, especially in countries like Australia where you have the warm, relaxed climate, and so many cool people who can decide to enjoy a bottle of Moët & Chandon every day."

Increasingly, consumers want to feel culturally enlightened by their purchases, he says. "We have always understood the importance of offering extreme quality experiences and building loyalty beyond the product. At Moët & Chandon we encourage people to dream their ultimate dreams."

He flashes a smile. "So you

invite him or her to enter your universe, which in our case has 276 years of history spanning wars and revolutions, major sporting events and the Golden Globes, and includes figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Queen Victoria, Scarlet Johansson and now Roger Federer, who as global brand ambassador since 2012 embodies our values of success and style."

At the centre of the Moët galaxy is the Château de Saran,

restored and refurbished to the splendid *château de famille* it was. A 21st-century marvel ready to open its doors to "honoured friends of the house from all over the world".

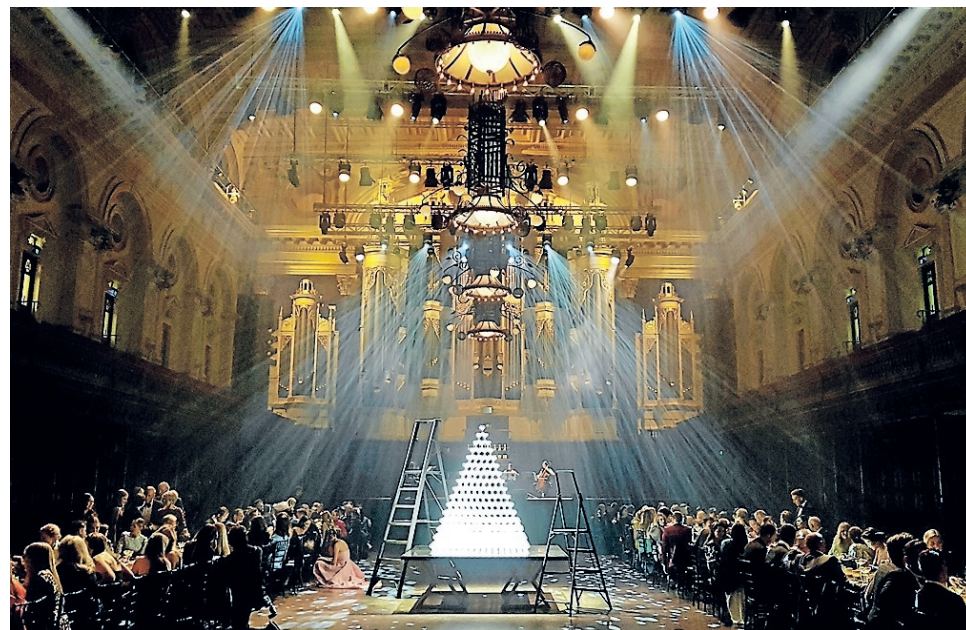
Lifelong impressions await these select guests, who will be variously treated to the traditional handpicking of grapes at harvest time; a raft of tastings courtesy of cellar master Benoît Gouez; and sumptuous dinners prepared by Italian-born executive chef

Marco Fadiga. Not to mention the privilege of staying in a residence that very few, even the residents of Champagne, will ever visit.

How, then, to receive such a top-drawer invitation? "Ah, you will have to be in the know. You will perhaps have shown interest in Moët & Chandon and the champagne business in general." A Gallic shrug. "And of course, you will be prepared to forget about everything that is worrying you." **L&L**



Above: Stéphane Baschiera. Right: the 150th anniversary celebrations at the Sydney Town Hall. PHOTO: CHARIS PERKINS



Around the world

■ If you're unlikely to make the cut to stay at Château de Saran, never fear. Moët & Chandon is bringing its Moët Impérial anniversary celebrations to you.

On June 22, the house will celebrate its 150-year-old bubbly with brunches, gourmet dinners and Studio 1869 parties on Moët Grand Day, an annual rendezvous that debuted in 2016.

In Sydney on June 4, Moët

CEO Stéphane Baschiera and ambassador Jesinta Franklin hosted a black-tie dinner for 150 guests at the Sydney Town Hall, with a dramatically lit tower of coupe glasses 16 tiers high and a menu prepared by Guillaume Brahimi. That was paired with Moët Impérial from its new limited-edition anniversary bottles. Australia is no stranger to the signature bubbly: the house's British agent Alfred Simon shipped the first bottle to Australia in 1889.

In London last week, the house hosted Moët Summer House, a three-day pop-up of fashion, film, music and food at Carlton House Terrace, a listed Georgian townhouse in the heart of Westminster. Better yet, guests didn't need to wait for an invite but could apply for "complimentary membership". **L&L**

See moet.com/en-gb/news/moet-grand-day

