The Territorial Brand of Champagne and Cultural Omnivorousness

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Abstract
The paper examines the role of place in the territorial brand of Champagne, in the context of the desire for authenticity amongst high income, highly educated ‘cultural omnivore’ consumers. Comparing the perspectives of producers with those of specialist wine writers (exemplary cultural omnivores), the findings highlight the co-presence of two different sets of meanings of product and place: a myth of exclusivity, associated with regional or brand history (for larger-scale producers), and a myth of authenticity, associated with site-specific terroir (for smaller-scale producers and the wine media). The discussion notes how these myths offer competitive advantage for the global territorial brand of Champagne, and how the relationship between terroir and provenance may suggest directions for the extension of the territorial brand for cultural omnivore consumers.

Key words
authenticity, cultural omnivorousness, exclusivity, territorial brand, terroir

Introduction:
The confluence of several factors in recent times have posed challenges to champagne, not in terms of sales (which overall remain strong) but in terms of meaning. Supermarket discounting and product line extensions have diluted champagne’s taken-for-granted identity as a positional good, while the global economic crisis raises doubts about the desirability of overt status displays. At the same time, patterns of taste and cultural credibility are shifting in an era of ‘cultural omnivorousness’ (e.g. Peterson 2005), in which the democratization of formerly elite cultural goods and practices has been accompanied by the rise of new criteria for distinction: what now counts as ‘good taste’ is both expanding and being subjected to ever more detailed forms of discrimination. For cultural omnivores, bigger isn’t necessarily better; coupled with concerns about environmental sustainability that call into question the appeal of global brands, omnivores are as likely (or more so) to prefer the authentic and artisanal over established, large brands (e.g. Johnston & Baumann 2007). In the case of champagne, this means cultural omnivores are turning their attention to smaller-scale and ‘local’ alternatives, including grower champagne, English sparkling wine and prosecco. The tastes and ideals of such consumers are to be taken seriously: cultural omnivores represent a highly desirable market, possessing on average higher levels of education, cultural capital and economic capital (e.g. Katz-Gerro & Sullivan 2010).

For the territorial brand of Champagne and its proprietary brands, the valorisation and legal protection of the uniqueness of the region is central to champagne’s position in the wine market. However, the meaning of place—as appellation and terroir—varies between different producers (Lewis 2012; Smith Maguire & Charters 2011), and between different consumers: for high status, omnivore consumers, appellation may be a necessary but not sufficient quality signal for champagne, while terroir may be a powerful marker of authenticity and desirability. The question thus arises: what role does place have in building the territorial brand of Champagne in an era of cultural omnivorousness?
Research Design:
The research objective was to identify the dominant meanings of champagne as product and Champagne as place, from the point of view of producers and specialist wine writers (‘professional’ cultural omnivores and cultural intermediaries; Warde et al 2007). The thematic analysis of data focused on definitions of and frames for product and place.

Semi-structured interviews with 8 representatives of large-, medium- and small-scale champagne brands focused on how the product was framed (with regard to brand identity, scale of production, intended market) and the role of place within those product meanings (the significance of terroir and/or region in definitions of their product and champagne more generally). Respondents were all involved in the representation and communication of their champagne brand (e.g. roles in public relations or export), with their career in the industry ranging from 6 to 30 years (average, 17 years). Respondents were distributed across three scales of production, outlined below, and—for purposes of anonymity—are identified by their employer:

- Large (>5 million bottles/year): House A1, A2; House B; House C
- Medium (0.5-2 million bottles/year): Co-operative (Co-op); House D
- Small (<300,000 bottles/year): House E; Grower

This data was treated interpretively: responses were taken as reflections of respondents’ situated perspectives and roles as spokespeople for their brands.

The interview data was complemented through a purposive sample of specialist wine writing focused on champagne: all champagne feature articles in Decanter magazine from 2008 and 2010 and contemporaneous champagne articles aimed at a similar readership. Written by and for cultural omnivores, such texts provide an ideal source of data regarding cultural omnivorosity, serving as ‘legitimating institutions with the cultural authority to bestow symbolic capital’ and codify new criteria of omnivorous good taste (Johnston & Baumann 2007: 170).

Findings:
The meanings of product and place were approached from three different points of view: those of medium-to-large scale producers, small-to-medium scale producers, and specialist wine media. Thus, the focus was on some of the cultural intermediaries (Smith Maguire 2010) shaping the meaning of the product as it is brought to the marketplace: brand representatives (which, in the case of the small scale grower, was the winemaker) and wine writers.

Medium-to-large scale perspective:
Brand representatives were asked to talk about the meaning of their brand. The responses from the perspective of the large-scale producers shared the common element of something out-of-the-ordinary, confirming the dominant association of champagne with luxury and celebration (e.g. Lockshin 2012). For example:

- It’s not just the name, it’s the label, it’s the packaging, it’s everything. ... If you give somebody a ... champagne from a petit vigneron, it might be as good, if you like, but they’re not going to know it, they’re not going to have that myth behind it, the fabulousness of it. (House A1)
- There’s an expression, a ‘champagne moment’, generally for a celebration but every time I have a glass one does feel this has been deserved somehow and I look for the moment when I deserve it, and I will enjoy that glass. (House B)
- People will see that champagne is to celebrate, but you can find a celebration every day. You have a new hair style, a new pair of shoes… If you want to have a big celebration of something, we have special cuvée for that. (House C)
When asked about the role of place in their brands, most of the references from the large-scale point of view, and from the medium-scale Co-op, referred to the region’s AOC status and its history, and the brands’ heritage stories (confirming related research on the staging of authenticity by champagne houses; Kniazeva & Charters 2011). For example:

- [For tours for the public] you talk more about the history to give more of an aura. ...You never show them the production area...you don’t talk about how many bottles we make...So we try to keep that myth, that aura, in a different way. (House A1)
- Behind the wine there is a whole history, there is so much behind it, you have to talk about it. ...We’ve been growing grapes for the past two thousand years, so the know-how, I think we have it now. (House C)

Region plays a central part of the territorial brand from this point of view, particularly with regard to the legal protection of the appellation and heritage (of the region, and/or the brand). What was not part of this myth was site-specific terroir, as the representative of the medium-sized Co-op remarked:

- It’s a funny thing, the terroir, because as we are using so many, we’re using 40 different crus...we have premier crus wines, that we use in our blends. I personally don’t play up the terroir thing. (Co-op)

Small-to-medium scale perspective:
From the perspective of the small and medium-scale producers, the meaning of the product was framed quite differently, with respondents focusing on champagne as a wine (including the Co-op). For example:

- We do see ourselves as wine producers from Champagne. We don’t see ourselves as champagne producers in the sense of something yellow, bubbly, and sparkling. We see ourselves as wine lovers, who make wine in Champagne, and it so happens that wine in Champagne has bubbles. (House D)
- It’s champagne but it’s also treated as a wine, it’s not driven by big marketing budgets...We have definitely more in common with the vigneron than the négociant. (Co-op)
- I think, when you sell a bottle of champagne at 60 or 70 euros, people need to really have a dream in order to justify 60 euros, or 120 or 200 euros. ... When you sell champagne at a normal price, like we do...the myth is important but you’ve got to sell a product with a style, with a difference, which comes not from the fact that you have five kilometres of chalk cellars because people see across that. (House E)
- Champagne is a wine. It’s got a lot to it. When you drink it, you can taste it as well. You’ve got, like any other wine, aromas, balance, length...it’s a wine. (Grower)

Unlike the larger-scale perspective, smaller-scale producers had a much greater degree of geographic specificity in response to questions about the role of place in the meaning of their product. For example:

- Anybody in the wine circles says, ‘[dismisively] Ah, champagne...’ They don’t want to see the terroir aspect of it. [For us], it’s clearly pinot noir, southward facing pinot noir. (House D)
- We produce our grapes from the vineyards that are three kilometres away from here... And we just buy grapes from our neighbours who have their vines next door to ours. It’s...a conscious decision, because we recognize the fact that the grapes that we produce, produce a wine with a particular character and style which is unique, which hasn’t been exploited very much before, or very little. And...because every champagne house has to have a story. (House E)
• We pretty much let [the terroir] express itself really...and we’ll see differences between the blocks. One vintage to the next vintage can be completely different. That’s why terroir is very important. (Grower)

Specialist wine media perspective:
The specialist wine media sample also reflected different meanings of champagne as a product. However, the larger-scale producer perspective on champagne as a drink of celebration was found in only one instance, in a report of a blind panel tasting of non-vintage champagne:
• [The judge] wanted a ‘treat’ wine, drinkable now with the ability to age. “Something with enough concentration and complexity to feel you’re having a drink that’s a little bit of a luxury”, she said.¹

Much more typical was a generalized critique of large champagne brands. For example, a Decanter article complained that ‘vintage Champagne suddenly didn’t seem so special any more. It’s just one option in a huge Champenois pick ‘n’ mix.’² Another Decanter writer, wondering if Champagne hadn’t ‘gone flat,’ goes in search of ‘New World sparklers’:
• For years, the name Champagne on the label has been enough; well not for me, at least, no longer. The wine must perform in the flute. I have decided to look elsewhere.³

Such comments are in keeping with two common elements in much of the specialist wine media reports: a debunking of the scarcity myth of champagne (e.g., reporting the total sales of bottles per year), followed by a focus on smaller-scale grower champagnes, in which product and place meanings are intertwined. For example:
• At a time of backlash against many things big—big banks, big government, big wine—these [grower] Champagnes seem satisfyingly small. They align neatly with consumers’ growing demand for traceability and transparency in the goods they buy. At their best, they are among the most fascinating Champagnes.⁴
• But things are changing in Champagne. Partly as a reaction against marketing hype and the perceived industrialisation of Champagne, a small group of growers who are passionate about their terroir, are starting to do their own thing.⁵
• [quoting a grower] “Négociants…tend to think about villages rather than parcels, because of the volumes they have to handle each vintage. Working parcel by parcel would be a nightmare for them. That’s what growers like me have to offer in our Champagnes—a reflection of the parcels of origin. … What the big houses aim for is consistency.”⁶
• Terroir doesn’t really feature for the big houses: they get their wines from all over the place (with a few single-vineyard exceptions). Terroir is a preoccupation of the growers.⁷

However, the juxtaposition with big brands does not imply a rigid dichotomy of growers and houses. Rather, the point of differentiation relates more closely to scale of production—be that in terms of privileging smaller-scale producers (e.g. growers and small and medium-scale houses), or smaller-scale products (e.g. single-site or vintage house champagnes). For example, writing that ‘Champagne is collectively concentrating on a change in attitude,’ a

recent wine article quoted several producers as representative of a move from ‘bling’ to heritage:

- “Bling is dead, the flashy stuff has gone which is no bad thing, now the bling people will have to reevaluate,” Terence Kenny, export director at Champagne Pannier, emphatically states. At Champagne Jacquart, managing director Laurent Reinteau agrees: “People are less ostentatious and instead of looking at the luxury segment, people are promoting new values. It’s now about authenticity.” …Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger asserts: “I want to kill this theory that the most expensive Champagne is the best.”

Interestingly, while Pannier and Jacquart are medium-sized co-ops, Taittinger is a large producer (approximately 4.5 million bottles per year); however, its family-ownership differentiates it from the big brands owned my multinational companies, such as Moët et Chandon, which is owned by LVMH.

Discussion and Implications:

What can we learn from these different perspectives? First, let us consider the producer representatives’ perspectives. All four large-scale respondents described champagne in terms that set it apart from the ordinary. This is in keeping with their higher price points, and reflects the dominant perception of champagne as luxury (Lockshin 2012). In comparison, all four medium- and small-scale respondents referred to champagne as ‘a wine’ (emphasizing the tangible aspects of the product) and defined their product as distinctly different from that of big brands. With regard to the meaning of place: all respondents articulated an intrinsic link between their brand and the Champagne region; as an AOC product protected by law, this is unsurprising and, indeed, essential to their place in the market. Nevertheless, the point of emphasis differed with regard to the degree of geographic or biographic specificity, reflecting the objective differences in their brands’ scales and modes of production. In crafting an exclusive brand identity for champagne, the large-scale respondents and the medium-scale co-op construct place through regional and brand heritage—referencing, for example, long-standing relationships with growers in specific grand crus and premier crus villages, brands’ founding figures, and the preservation of production traditions such as ancient cellars and hand-turning bottles (the tedious of which offered no mystique for the grower), whilst down-playing the highly industrial nature of production for the vast majority of their champagne. In marked contrast, for the small-scale respondents and the medium-scale house, place was articulated through an emphasis on the concrete specifics of production, such as the terroir of individual vineyards (reinforcing their preferred meaning of the product in terms of the tangible qualities of the wine).

From the interviews with producer representatives, we can thus see two emergent ‘myths’ of champagne, which are closely related to scale of production. On the one hand, there is a myth of exclusivity for the larger-scale producers, with exclusivity claimed for the product (used to celebrate), for the producer (possessing exceptional attributes, such as spectacular cellars) and for the region (via the unique Champenois history and the exclusive appellation). On the other hand, there is a myth of authenticity for smaller-scale producers, with authenticity claimed for the product (as a wine with transparent origins that should be judged on objective properties, not for its branding), for the producer (possessing real and sincere links to the origins of the product in the vineyard) and for the region (in terms of site-specific terroir).

Second, let us consider how these myths compare with the ‘cultural omnivore’ media discussions of champagne. While the larger-scale producers’ myth of exclusivity is almost

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absent in the wine media, the myth of authenticity is dominant. In their choices of champagnes to write about and the framing of those discussions, wine writers privilege products that offer geographic and biographic specificity—reflecting the dominance of authenticity as a discourse in food and wine writing more generally (Johnston & Baumann 2007; Smith Maguire 2012). For professional cultural omnivores such as wine writers, the authenticity myth is explicitly valued above and beyond big brands and, by implicit extension, the myth of exclusivity espoused by the big brand houses. However, what wine writers reject is not exclusivity per se, but the way in which it has been framed. Cultural omnivores are no less status seeking than their predecessors: authenticity rather than luxury is the operating criteria for establishing exclusivity and cultural legitimacy. Or, to put it another way: for cultural omnivores, authenticity is the new luxury.

Finally, let us consider the role of place and these two myths within the territorial brand of Champagne. We can think of the territorial brand as an overarching category, within which exist proprietary brands (Charters 2012): 340 houses, 136 co-ops, 4,751 growers in 2010 (CIVC 2011), all of which have a stake in the territorial brand by virtue of the AOC. All territorial brand products are also, simultaneously, provenance products: goods for which origins (where a product was made, by whom, where, when and how) are mobilized as key product properties and forms of value (Smith Maguire 2012). Additionally, AOC status may be further enhanced through other provenance properties: e.g. significant personalities in a brand’s development, historic sites and traditional practices. However, only a subset of these provenance goods are terroir goods: champagnes for which site-specific origins and mode of production are used to make an explicit claim about an expression of place, which then serves as a form of value.

Terroir goods may be all a proprietary brand offers (e.g. a single site vigneron), or one of a range of goods (e.g. a vintage from a house-owned specific vineyard). Note: there is no guarantee that small scale of production equates with terroir: a grower may have too high a yield in the vineyard to meaningfully express terroir (Rand 2008) or may have low yield, but rely on a co-op to make and bottle their wine, thus ‘losing’ their terroir in the vats. Likewise, there are no necessary dichotomies within the territorial brand between house and grower, exclusive and authentic. All champagne proprietary brands have product qualities (regional specificity, long-term traditions) amenable to framing as authentic, and terroir goods offer qualities that may be framed as authentic (e.g. a high degree of geographic specificity) and exclusive (e.g. low yield, single site vineyards that limit supply and legitimate a higher price point). Different articulations of place and brand myth are co-present in the territorial brand, and potentially within the same proprietary brand.

We can thus see how place is constitutive of the territorial brand, along two different dimensions. In the case of appellation, this is relatively straightforward: place is used to define and police market boundaries, including and excluding potential products and producers. The role of terroir is less straightforward. For some cultural intermediaries such as small-scale brand representatives and wine writers, terroir is used to differentiate between ‘fascinating’ and ‘industrial’ champagnes. However, cultural omnivores (at which such terroir narratives are directed) are not the only consumers, and the relevance of traditional hierarchies of taste persist. In established markets (e.g. the UK), low-involvement consumers may access champagne through the territorial brand and/or the myth of exclusivity (i.e. they look for champagne as a sign of luxury, but are unaware of, or uninterested in particular brands), while the vestige of univore snobs (Peterson 2005) may ignore vigneron champagne as a passing fad. Whereas in emerging markets (e.g. China), consumers are primarily concerned with established prestige brands as a means of marking social distinction (Tian & Dong 2011). Thus, the co-presence of the myths of exclusivity and authenticity, and of appellation and terroir champagnes may be a source of competitive advantage for the
territorial brand in the *global* marketplace, offering different points of attachment to different consumers and markets. At the same time, *terroir* champagnes exist in a parallel market targeting high status, high involvement omnivore consumers, within which small-scale champagne is placed in competition not with big brand champagne, but with other goods that compete on the same terms (e.g. craft beer, artisanal chocolate, hand-crafted, environmentally sustainable fashion goods). Like appellation, *terroir* is used to define and police market boundaries, including and excluding potential consumers and competitors.

In conclusion, these findings suggest two implications for the brand extension of Champagne, which regard to the recruitment and retention of cultural omnivore consumers. First, omnivores are known for both the diversity and the volume of their tastes (Warde et al 2007), making them voracious consumers. For example, 86% of *Decanter* readers have been on a wine-related holiday and 59% have been on a wine course. Thus, the territorial brand could be extended through development of place-based wine tourism, which would suit established cultural omnivore tastes and habits, extend the provenance goods available for consumption (to include other/new local cuisine, sites, invented traditions and services), reinforce the regionality of Champagne (to the advantage of other local businesses), and potentially reinforce the *terroir* products on offer by making the local context of production visible through tangible tourist encounters and experiences.

Second, as noted in the analysis of the specialist wine media, ‘good taste’ in champagne is being constructed for an elite niche of consumers through a dual move to debunk the exclusivity of champagne, and then re-enchant champagne in the guise of small-scale, authentic, *terroir*-driven wines. Thus, the territorial brand could be developed through greater attention to the *terroir* dimension of products, and/or the framing of what it offers with regard to authenticity. That is, the pursuit of omnivorous consumers (and wine writers) is linked to a ‘trickle up’ (Trigg 2001) of the authenticity myth and focus on *terroir* within proprietary brands, to impact on the larger-scale production—e.g. when large houses experiment with biodynamic viticulture (e.g. Lanson, Roederer), or explicitly frame products as ‘sustainable’ and ‘eco-conscious’ (e.g. Pommery), or position their vintage wines as ‘extreme, that take risks to reflect their year’ (Moët). Such developments are likely to have long-term momentum, as the preferences of taste-leading omnivores ‘trickle down’ to the mass market. However, as noted above, a final word of warning is required: the idea that ‘bling is dead’ and that champagne is now about heritage rather than luxury risks ignoring (or worse, alienating) large consumer groups within established and emerging markets, for whom the exclusive cachet of big brand champagne may offer a more effective point of attachment.

References:


