Abstract

The paper examines the construction of the myth of luxury in the specific case of champagne. Champagne has a global and long standing reputation as a luxury product; yet changes in recent decades have challenged both its status as a prestige product, and established notions of what constitutes an elite champagne. Drawing from interviews with champagne producers and an analysis of media representations of champagne, the paper examines how—and to what effect—the myth of luxury is constructed. Combining a semiotic approach to myth with a cultural field approach to the study of consumer culture, the paper provides an overview of the champagne field and its contextualizing factors: structural properties and changes in the market; a new nexus of producers, consumer tastes and sites for the public affirmation of champagne’s status; and media texts that circulate a field-specific discourse linking champagne to good taste. The analysis identifies, first, how champagne’s product myth of luxury is anchored in particular material and symbolic properties. Second, the analysis disentangles two different articulations of the meta myth of luxury: that of exclusivity and authenticity. These two articulations are typically conflated with particular organizational modes of production, creating an either/or flexibility to the meta myth of luxury, and raising both radical and conservative implications of the possibility that authenticity is the new luxury.

Introduction

Myths are discursive constructs that reproduce and legitimate consumer culture. Luxury is one such myth, the articulation of which reveals and reproduces social norms around goods, desire and value. In this working paper, I offer an analysis of the contemporary construction of the myth of luxury. As an empirical entry point, my focus is on champagne. Champagne
has long been considered a luxury good. As one late 19th century champagne maker declared, ‘champagne should be to wine what haute couture is to fashion.’

Yet, in the last decade, the myth of luxury surrounding champagne has been disrupted. The dominant position is occupied by the champagne houses, who are responsible for approximately 66% of production. The grande marques (literally, big brands) such as Moët et Chandon and Veuve Clicquot have enjoyed continued success in terms of global sales, and maintain their prestige status. Nevertheless, ‘big brand’ champagne is increasingly the target of criticism from connoisseurs. In marked contrast to the move towards locally sourced, artisanal ingredients in the field of food, ‘big brand’ champagne (as well as medium scale producers, including grower co-operatives) is made from grapes sourced across the region. Critics liken the scale of production to that of other mass produced products, and complain that retailer discounting cheapens champagne’s reputation. At the same time, increasingly prized are those champagnes produced at a small scale, often through environmentally-friendly (organic, biodynamic, sustainable) agricultural and winemaking practices. Such champagnes are often referred to as ‘grower champagnes’ because many (though not all) are produced by the vigneron who grow the grapes. A 2011 industry news nicely captures these tensions through various quotes from champagne producers:

‘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.’

While Pannier and Jacquart are medium-sized co-ops, Taittinger is a large producer (approximately 5 million bottles per year). A concern with scale, transparency and value thus permeates the champagne market, at both ends of the spectrum from house to grower. In the case of champagne—as in luxury goods more generally—the question arises: is authenticity the new luxury?

Champagne is doubly useful as a lens on the contemporary construction of the myth of luxury. First, its long standing status as a luxury product allows insight into what has, and has not, changed in terms of the signification of luxury. Second, it is marked by the same structural changes (including increasing scales of production, democratization of access,
dilution of exclusivity) that arguably place the myth of luxury in crisis more generally.

Specifically, the paper examines the changing meaning of champagne vis-à-vis how—and to what effect—marketplace myths are constructed. To do so, I draw on research involving interviews with champagne producers and their representatives, and an analysis of how champagne is represented in both general and specialist media.

I adopt a framework that combines Barthes’ semiotic approach to myth (1972) with Bourdieu’s conceptualization of cultural fields (1984, 1993). The paper proceeds with a review of those concepts in light of the theoretical and methodological context for the paper. I then provide an overview of the champagne field and its contextualizing factors: structural properties and changes in the market; a new nexus of producers, consumer tastes and sites for the public affirmation of champagne’s status; and media texts that circulate a field-specific discourse linking champagne to good taste. Doing so allows me to identify how champagne’s product myth of luxury is anchored in particular material and symbolic properties. I then turn to a more detailed discussion of the field discourse, disentangling two articulations of the meta myth of luxury: that of exclusivity (typically associated with grande marques champagne), and of authenticity (typically associated with grower champagne). As a close reading of these myths reveals, the symbolic juxtaposition of exclusivity and authenticity breaks down in practice (i.e. there is no firm divide between house and grower modes of production), but performs the function of reasserting the meta myth of luxury as an either/or proposition, which poses opportunities and limitations to the radical potential of the myth of luxury.

The Myth of Luxury

Myth is a significant sociological phenomenon. In Barthes’ classic, Mythologies (1972), myths are essential to the reproduction of the bourgeois social order. ‘Myth is a type of speech’ (1972: 109) that both conveys and imposes meaning (117). Myths have the status of being ‘imperfectible and unquestionable’ (1972: 130). Their ideological content, which is arbitrary and socio-historically specific, is passed off as natural, universal and eternal (hence it is ‘depoliticized speech’; 143). In part, that naturalization is accomplished by myth’s expansive and mundane character. Myth spreads to a vast array of materials or ‘forms’ from everyday life (from cars to wine to cinema stars) leaving seemingly no possibility for other conceptualizations of human relations beyond those writ in bourgeois terms. Crucially,
therefore, myths perform a role of ‘ex-nomination’ (146): the bourgeois foundations and vested interests of myths are veiled, so that the bourgeois, capitalist order is taken for granted as the social order. This is the social function of myth.

The dominant myths of a time are thus bound up with the characteristics of the social order. Cultural, economic and political changes (including increasing tolerance to personal debt, dominance of private spending in GDP, and infrastructure for the promotion of consumption) have further spread bourgeois ideology in advanced Western societies since Barthes’ time. Broadly considered as ‘consumer cultures’, these societies share a number of collective myths that underpin and ensure their ideological reproduction. Among the dominant myths underpinning consumer culture are: romanticism, which holds that some/all of life is a work of stylistic self-expression (e.g. Barthes 1972: 149; Campbell 1987); economic exchangeability, which presents all things as having a monetary value, thus rendering all things saleable (Simmel 1978); individual sovereignty and the privatization of freedom, which fetishizes the autonomous creativity of the consumer and obviates collective responsibility (Rose 1996, Slater 1997); the duty to have fun, which maintains that leisure and self-actualization are moral obligations (Baudrillard 1998; Bourdieu 1984); and the democracy of goods, which promises egalitarian access to the good life through consumption (Marchand 1985). Another of the dominant myths of consumer culture is that of luxury, the focus of this paper.

The myth of luxury holds that that which is without use (unneeded, surplus to requirements, of no practical use) is valuable (Sekora 1977). Such a myth sits in awkward tension with other deeply-held ideas about how social relations ought to be organized, and thus the myth of luxury has at times been cast in moralistic tones, with wasteful opulence castigated as debased, unproductive and corrupting. Notwithstanding such objections, the allure of luxury has long been recognized as a driving force behind capitalism. From the early 18th century, in Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees (1924), to Sombart’s early 20th century Luxury and Capitalism (1967), the myth of luxury has framed the pursuit of luxury as the stimulus for productivity, entrepreneurialism, trade and development (see also Simmel 1978; Veblen 1959). The myth of luxury is crucial to the reproduction of the bourgeois social hierarchy and consumer culture built on conspicuous consumption of positional goods and stylistic obsolescence (Bourdieu 1984; Veblen 1959; Ewen 1999). If the Protestant work ethic (Weber 1992) is the ‘stick’ of capitalism, luxury is the carrot.
Nevertheless, the myth of luxury appears to be in crisis in contemporary consumer culture: ‘It is not luxury itself that has disappeared, but rather the social function that it once had’ (Schrage 2012: 191). Luxury is a relational property, defined in a socio-historically contingent manner. It is only in reference to the behavioural norms and distribution of goods and forms of capital that particular objects and practices become capable of carrying the myth of luxury. Similarly contextually specific are the capacities of goods to be operationalized by individuals and groups in their performance of social distinction and defence of their group borders (Bourdieu 1984). Luxury is thus reliant on some degree of exclusivity regarding who has legitimate access to the goods and practices of luxury. Limited access to luxury goods was historically prescribed through sumptuary laws and, later, economic constraints. However, such exclusivity is increasingly challenged.

On the one hand, social mobility dilutes exclusivity, as is apparent when the nouveaux riches gain new access to old markers of luxury—be that in 19th century American (Veblen 1959) or 21st century China (Smith Maguire & Lim 2014). In such cases, exclusivity is reasserted (and the membership of the elite potentially modified) by the development of new constraints, such as the requirement for elaborate cultural capital or ‘gratuitous knowledge’ (Bourdieu 1984: 26) for the legitimate access to, and competent use and display of luxury goods. On the other hand, exclusivity is diluted through the modern development of mass consumption and its contemporary expansion, niche diversification and personalization, which have seemingly democratized what were once the exclusive signs of membership in the elite. The global expansion of luxury brand boutiques and brand extensions, social media luxury bloggers and increasingly sophisticated luxury brand counterfeiters and luxury goods consignment services have all weakened the hurdles to accessing luxury goods. At the same time, ‘mass-tige’ and ‘affordable luxury’ have become mantras for fast moving consumer goods such as shampoo and coffee (Silverstein & Fiske 2005). Such a context, alongside the continued power of the myth of luxury, provokes innovation on the part of the luxury goods industry and luxury brand managers. Such market actors articulate ‘new luxury’ and bemoan the lack of ‘old luxury’ (e.g. Csaba 2008 for a review), and formulate new iterations of luxury to feed a global personal luxury goods market that has increased in value from 77 billion euros in 1995 to 217 billion euros in 2013. This continual process of myth renewal has moved marketers towards a multidimensional definition of key luxury brand traits: ‘high quality, expensive and non-essential
products and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, and authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values through customer experiences’ (Tyan et al 2009: 1157).

Challenges to the exclusivity of luxury goods do not spell the end of the myth of luxury. From this brief review of the sociological dimensions of the myth of luxury, it becomes clear that significations of luxury are shaped by (and thus should tell us about) the contemporaneous distribution of resources through which particular objects and properties become meaningful as signifiers of the concept of luxury. Barthes’ semiotic approach to myth invites an investigation of the ‘repetition of the concept through different forms’ (1972: 120). Myth ‘appears through a given substance’ but is ‘defined neither by its object nor by its material’ (Barthes 1972: 122; 110). With that in mind, I now turn to the methodological dimensions of the paper.

Research Design: Cultural Field Approach

The myth of luxury is the conceptual focus for this research, and the empirical entry point a signifier of luxury par excellence: champagne. In operationalizing a concern with the cultural myths and meanings of champagne, I employ a cultural field approach to the study of consumption. Building on Bourdieu’s (1984, 1993) concept of a cultural field as a network of sites, texts, producers and consumers, such an approach considers ‘how consumption bridges economic and cultural institutions, large-scale changes in social structure, and discourses of the self’ (Zukin & Smith Maguire 2004: 173). Ferguson’s use of the approach in relation to gastronomy in 19th century France identifies five structural factors that underpin the emergence of cultural fields (1998: 601-3): new social and cultural conditions; specific sites of cultural production and consumption; the institutionalization of associated standards and forms of expertise; the emergence of sub-fields that lend dynamism through cooperation and competition; and associated networks to adjacent fields that ensure social prestige. Through this sort of grounded attentiveness to the material operation of fields and the subjective dynamics of field actors, such an approach attempts to avoid both the false separation of consumption and production, and the narrow emphasis on symbolic meaning and the subjectivity of the consumer that typifies much sociological studies of consumption.

Investigating the cultural production and consumption of the myth of luxury in the specific case of champagne, a cultural field approach attempts to overcome the typical
divides between research on individual field nodes, which typically focus on either representations of champagne in popular culture and brand marketing, or the political economy of the champagne market, or the attitudes and actions of consumers, or (much less frequently) the attitudes and actions of producers. This working paper focuses on two particular nodes in the field of champagne: producers and discourse.  

Data comes from a set of semi-structured interviews with champagne producers (8 from 2009; 8 from 2012). Interviews were guided by a cultural economic view of product properties: ‘properties of the object (material and symbolic) as they are perceived by particular categories of people in the context of particular relations of consumption’ (Slater 2002: 73). Questions probed what the respondents felt were their products’ defining material and symbolic characteristics and uses, their consumers’ defining characteristics, and the defining characteristics of their marketplace (and thus their competitors). Interviewees were either the winemaker, owner or marketing representatives of large-, medium- and small-scale champagne producers:

- Large (>4 million bottles/year): Respondents A, B, C, D
- Medium (0.5-2 million bottles/year): Respondents E, F, G, H
- Small (<300,000 bottles/year): Respondents I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P

Respondents G-P were all ‘first order’ cultural producers, directly involved in either viticulture (growing the grapes) or viniculture (making the wine), and were family members (usually the current owner) of the company. Respondents A-F were all involved in the representation and communication of a champagne producer (e.g. roles in public relations or export), with their career in the industry ranging from 6 to 30 years (average, 17 years). These respondents are cultural intermediaries (Smith Maguire & Matthews 2014), a ‘second order’ of cultural producers. Such cultural intermediaries also include the wine writers and reviewers whose media products form the second body of data on which the paper is based: a purposive sample of media reports collected from specialist wine media and general news media from 2010 to 2014, including all champagne-related feature articles in *Decanter* magazine from 2008 and 2010. Reflecting broader gender patterns in the labour market, all of the first order producer respondents were male with one exception (I), whereas half of the second order producer respondents were female (A, B, D). This more equitable gender balance also roughly applies to the second order producers *in absentia*: the wine writers behind the media texts included in the research.
Data was treated interpretively: interview responses were taken as reflections of respondents’ (producers or cultural intermediaries) market roles and situated perspectives. A thematic analysis of the data was approached both inductively and deductively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). Following immersion in the transcripts and informed by background research on the champagne market, inductive analysis identified a number of recurrent product properties related to the product’s function (e.g. champagne as something used to celebrate, or akin to wine), the producer (e.g. references to the winemaker’s or brand’s ethos), and the place of production (e.g. references to the Champagne region or specific vineyards). These three dimensions were then used to deductively code the transcripts and media texts, with subsequent inductive coding to identify patterns within responses (e.g. by respondent’s scale of production, or type of media—specialist or general news).

Bringing the cultural field and semiology approaches together, the discussion of the findings proceeds in two stages. First, I provide an overview of the champagne field in order to identify the signifiers through which champagne is framed as a luxury product. Analogous to Barthes’ (1972: 115) level of language, this is the level of product myth. I then move to Barthes’ second level, that of myth, to discuss exclusivity and authenticity as the two dominant articulations of the meta myth of luxury. These articulations tend to coalesce around two different organizational forms: *grande marques* champagne made by the houses and grower champagne. This second level rests on the first: the meta myth of luxury works through materials (in this case, the product myths of different styles of champagne) already ‘worked on’ as carriers of meaning (Barthes 1972: 110; 115). However, as a close reading of these myths reveals, there is no neat correlation between form and concept, nor a necessary antimony between exclusivity and authenticity.

**The Champagne Field and the Conditions for the Product Myth of Luxury**

The contemporary development of the champagne field, marked by the emergence of grower champagne as a legitimate counterpart to *grande marques* champagne, hinges on three factors: a change in the availability and diversity of the product itself; a new nexus of cultural production and consumption (a new generation of producers, new consumer desires, new modes of public display of champagne practices and knowledge); and field specific texts that disseminate judgements of good taste. A brief overview of each of these
factors both introduces the field’s conditions for the articulation of a meta myth of luxury, and identifies some of the material anchors for the product myth of luxury.

The product: Champagne has developed a global reputation over 300 years, strongly associated with luxury and celebration (Charters 2012; Guy 1999; Lockshin 2012). A crucial aspect of that global reputation and a material anchor for the myth of luxury was the formalization in 1936 of the Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) designation of champagne. AOC regulations stipulate that only sparkling wines made from particular grapes grown in the Champagne region and using the *méthode champenoise* (secondary fermentation in the bottle) may be called champagne (Charters 2012). AOC regulations not only bolster quality claims and connotations of exclusivity, but also assist in the construction of scarcity. In terms of viticulture: a logical extension of the AOC designation is that the global supply of champagne is dependent on a finite grape crop from a geographically bounded region. There is an inherent maximum capacity of production. The region produces around 300 million bottles per year, with most production (66%) coming from the large houses who are responsible for the best known brands (*grande marques*), made from grapes across the region. However, the houses own only 10% of vineyard land and are therefore reliant on the growers: 15,000 small land holders, each with an average of two hectares of vineyard, who provide the houses with the grapes they require, either directly or via the intermediary of a growers’ co-operative. Scarcity of grape supply is nevertheless subject to manipulation: besides ongoing debates about expanding the region (Rand 2008), the regional trade body sets the maximum yields allowed per vineyard. Increasing allowed yields decreases exclusivity and, it is argued, compromises quality.

Scarcity is also constructed in terms of viniculture. As noted above, champagne production is dominated by the large houses and their global brands: the largest, Moët et Chandon, produces approximately 2.2 million cases per year. However, about one third of the growers have their own brand of champagne for sale direct to the public; in 2010, there were 340 houses, 136 co-ops, and 4,751 growers making and selling champagne (CIVC 2011). Grower champagne now has a 23% market share—but nearly 40% of the market in France. Grower champagnes, and those from co-operatives, have grown in significance since the 1950s and are increasingly important in some mature international markets, such as the UK where they account for over 14% of sales (in comparison with 0.24% in India). Whereas
the houses may produce many millions of bottles of champagne each year, the growers may produce as little as 2,000, with around 16,000 being the average.

Thus, in terms of both viticulture and viniculture, the myth of luxury is anchored to, and challenged by, the exclusiveness of the production process itself. Attempts to meet global demand by increasing yields or regional boundaries risks diluting quality and reducing the perception of scarcity; the increase in the number of co-operatives and growers making champagne increases the number of products in the market and diminishes the monopoly of the grand marques, particularly in export markets.

The production/consumption nexus: At least three dimensions can be disentangled here, much like Ferguson’s (1998) observations regarding the confluence of a new cadre of experts (chefs), educated, affluent consumers, and new sites (restaurants) in the development of gastronomy. With regard to the experts, I will touch only on the winemakers as first order producers. Unlike the chef de cave of the big houses who traditionally remained invisible to the public, many of today’s champagne makers are publicly and promotionally identified with their products, with some becoming quasi-celebrities in the food and drink world. By virtue of the legal and cultural structure of vineyard ownership, growing plots tend to stay in families, lending an objective reality to prestige of heritage. This is echoed more generally in references to the region’s heritage. However, heritage does not preclude innovation and change. As the post WWII generation (for whom industrial agriculture—pesticides, herbicides—was the norm) hands on ownership to the new generation (often, as my research suggests, with reluctance and doubt), there appears to be a marked shift in practices for some producers. The new cadres of producers have matured in an era of environmental degradation; their concerns with environmental sustainability reflect their generation more generally. Unlike their predecessors, the new producers have also often gone through a process of professionalization that is cosmopolitan and oriented towards sustainability. (Indeed, all of the small scale respondents were working with a sustainability agenda. For some, this was explicit and all pervasive—e.g. through organic certification, or through practicing biodynamic viticulture and viniculture.) Leaving the champagne region to work vintages in other wine regions and countries and attending oenology courses and institutes in and beyond France are increasingly common. These patterns of professionalization both ensure
a network within the producers (e.g. they have trained together) and link the new mode of champagne to the established prestige of wine.

With regard to consumers: patterns of taste and cultural credibility are shifting in light of what sociologists of consumption call ‘cultural omnivorousness’ (e.g. Peterson 2005; Warde et al 2007). Omnivorousness refers to the increasing diversity and volume of cultural preferences for a portion of consumers, and to the application of connoisseurship to previously vulgar or mundane objects. The cultural omnivore thesis involves both the perceived democratization of formerly elite cultural goods and practices, and 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. 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). Such consumers are as likely (or more so) to prefer the authentic and artisanal over established, large brands (e.g. Johnston & Baumann 2007).

In the sparkling wine market, this means cultural omnivores are turning their attention to smaller-scale and ‘local’ alternatives, including grower champagne, English sparkling wine and Prosecco (Mickle 2014). As a 2011 article in the International Herald Tribune suggested:

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.¹⁰

The prestige of grande marques champagne is still secure and fits within a diverse portfolio of omnivorous tastes. However, the omnivorous taste for artisanal or ‘non-brand’ products is to be taken seriously as a factor reshaping the champagne field, not least because (as suggested in my research) the first order producers themselves display an omnivorous sensibility.

Finally, such changing taste patterns are reflected in the public or quasi-public consumption displays associated with champagne. Online: wine blogs provide a virtual forum for cultural intermediaries’ and other connoisseurs’ performances of good taste, with a number now explicitly focusing on grower champagne. Offline: grande marques champagnes remain major sponsors of prestigious sports, bringing together the brands with
elite events and audiences: Mumm and Formula 1; Moët et Chandon and tennis; Veuve Clicquot and polo. Perhaps the most established site for the association of champagne with luxury is the fine dining restaurant, for which champagne remains a fixture of the serious wine list. Changing taste regimes are echoed there as well, in the ‘New Nordic Cuisine’ (NNC) restaurants, which adhere to the principles of ‘purity, freshness, and simplicity; with local, seasonal ingredients from the Nordic terroir; and with a healthy, green, and environmentally friendly profile’ (Byrkjeflot et al 2013: 44). Restaurants in the NNC vein (and its ilk) draw credibility from and—in light of their success in the established currency of Michelin stars—affirm the prestige of grower champagnes and, by association, the winemakers themselves. Consider the epicentre of NNC, Copenhagen’s Noma restaurant. Five of the 37 pages in its wine list are devoted to grower champagnes (the winemakers of several of which were respondents in this research); there is no grande marques champagne listed at all.

Thus, in terms of the nexus of cultural production and consumption, the product myth of luxury is objectively anchored and affirmed. The family-owned nature of production aligns champagne with heritage as a marker of exclusivity, yet also introduces dynamic change inherent in family transition and generational change. The attention of affluent, omnivorous consumers and their cultural intermediary proxies validates the elite status of champagne (through sales, awards, media attention). Associations between champagne and luxury are affirmed through links to prestigious positions and actors in other fields, such as Michelin starred restaurants, exclusive sporting events and connoisseur media. Champagne remains an essential aspect of a serious wine list, and the inclusion of particular champagnes on the wine lists of the world’s best restaurants signals their elevated status.

Field Texts: Fields require a ‘second-order’ product of field-specific texts to allow for the standardization and circulation of forms of expertise, qualification and distinction (Ferguson 1998). In the case of champagne, such texts can be both specialist (e.g. Decanter magazine; wine blogs) and generalist (e.g. wine columns in newspapers). It is through such circulation that champagne’s associations with elite taste can diffuse beyond a narrow niche of affluent connoisseurs. However, field texts also pose challenges for the association with luxury.

On the one hand, the pedagogical orientation of much such media gives rise to democratization (cf. Mennell 1996). Teaching consumers about champagne threatens a
dilution of champagne (knowledge of it, if not consumption of it) as a marker of luxury. For example, under the headline ‘The champagne “con,”’ a Daily Mail article debunks the practice of retailers discounting artificially inflated champagne prices in the prelude to Christmas.\(^\text{11}\) Specialist wine media likewise is engaged in the demystification of champagne: reporting annual sales figures of the big houses, which undermine their marketing as ‘exclusive;’ providing tutorials (e.g. detailed histories of champagne, profiles of producers, and specific tasting notes) that make once-exclusive cultural competence arguably more accessible. ‘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, to the (seeming) exclusion of grande marques champagne.

On the other hand, the need for wine writers to establish their ‘aesthetic disposition’ (Bourdieu 1984: 35) and thus maintain credibility as arbiters of good taste motivates a championing of grower champagne as a display of critical distance from the taken-for-granted prestige of grande marques champagne. For example, when renowned wine writer Andrew Jefford writes of the dawning of the era of grower champagne, he signals his own good taste: ‘Champagne is on the verge of profound change. There is a growing realisation that its viticulture has become slovenly and the subtleties of its terroir have been neglected. The era of good growers and great vineyards is just beginning.’\(^\text{12}\) A 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.’\(^\text{13}\) Similarly, a 2010 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.’\(^\text{14}\) While this aspect of the field discourse may challenge the prestige of some champagnes, it ensures the dynamism of the field and the ongoing renewal of associations of some other champagnes with good taste, re-mystified through juxtaposition between scales and styles of production.

Thus, challenges to the product myth of luxury arise from the democratizing and debunking roles of much consumer media. Yet, field texts also ensure the broad circulation of the status of champagne as a serious object worthy of connoisseurship (and its associated expense). Such texts provide a forum for the display of cultural competence (by their producers and readers), and facilitate the ongoing linking of (some) champagne with elite
taste, through reporting blind tasting competition results, favourable reviews and tasting notes. Summing up the above section, it is through the figuration of field producers, consumers and sites, the political economy of the market and material realities of production, and the discursive circulation of field-specific practices and judgements of taste that champagne’s objective and symbolic properties are attached to the myth of luxury in terms of exclusivity, scarcity, quality, prestige and heritage. In short, champagne is a firmly established signifier of luxury. The following section now moves from the level of product myth to meta myth.

Articulations of the Meta Myth of Luxury

The product myth of luxury is, as discussed in the preceding section, anchored in particular attributes of champagne: the nature of the product (practices and regulations related to viticulture and viniculture), the material nexus of cultural production and consumption (consumer tastes, the place of champagne as a product in sites for the display of cultural knowledge and competence, such as restaurants and blogs), and the field discourse (marked both by democratization/demystification, and re-mystification). A product myth is not simply an external ‘layer’ added by wine writers or marketers, and requires research that treats it not as a fait accompli but as the contingent outcome of processes of cultural production and consumption. Product myths are crucial to the constitution of products: it is by making particular attributes available (visible, tangible) that product myths afford champagnes particular qualities such as exclusivity, heritage, prestige and so forth.

Turning to how those product myths feed into a meta myth of luxury, I now examine the discursive construction of luxury in more detail, from the perspective of product properties. To do so, I read ‘across’ the data, guided by common families of product properties. Of note is that there was little variation in the framing of objective product properties—i.e. what is in the bottle/glass. For example, references to intensity of flavour, degree of sweetness, ‘mouthfeel’ of the mousse, degree of finesse or elegance, and flavour notes (e.g. brioche, honey) are common across champagnes—from the tasting notes for expensive champagnes reviewed in Decanter magazine to those described by the small scale grower who only sells to local customers. However, in relation to the product’s function, the producer, and the place of production there emerged two different articulations of luxury—as exclusivity and as authenticity—which are outlined below.
Luxury as exclusivity: This is the established myth for champagne (Charters 2012) and the dominant articulation of luxury (e.g. Veblen 1959). In terms of product function, the responses from the representatives of the large-scale producers (respondents A-D) shared the common element of something out-of-the-ordinary, confirming the dominant association of champagne with moments of celebration (e.g. Lockshin 2012). For example: ‘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’ (C). The product myth is thus linked to the exclusiveness of the moment. However, such an articulation risks narrowing the potential market for champagne, if it rests entirely on the ‘celebrate-ability’ of consumers’ lives. Hence, the exclusivity of celebration is—at least for respondent D—elite but not elitist: ‘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.’ While not an objective property of the ‘product in the glass’, notions of product function nonetheless colour how it tastes, as when a wine writer notes of her expectations when rating champagnes in a blind tasting: ‘I want something with enough complexity to feel you’re having a drink that’s a bit of a luxury.’

With regard to the producer, the heritage of the big houses was commonly referenced as a distinctive feature of champagne (confirming related research on the staging of authenticity by champagne houses; Kniazeva & Charters 2011). For example: ‘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’ (D). The heritage of the producer reinforces the product function, as captured by respondent A:

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.

Nevertheless, respondent A works for a house that produces roughly 25 million bottles a year: a scale of production that fundamentally challenges the construction of a myth of exclusivity. Thus, as the interviewee readily acknowledges, this requires a strategic
decoupling (Beverland & Luxton 2005) of the myth of the product from the reality of production: ‘[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.’

Finally, with regard to place, most of the references from the large-scale point of view were predominantly to the region’s AOC status and its history. Region plays a central part of the territorial brand (Charters & Spielmann 2014), 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 respondent F, a representative of a medium-scale co-operative producer, 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.’ The scale of the framing of place as a distinctive product quality is inherently linked to the nature of production in champagne, which typically involves blending multiple sites’ grapes and, in the case of non-vintage champagne, blending from across different years. Thus, place was fundamental, but framed in terms of the AOC designation at the level of region and regional heritage.

**Luxury as authenticity:** In the past decade, a second product myth of authenticity has emerged, exemplified in the media by grower champagnes (and affirmed by all of the respondents from small-scale producers). However, this was also found in the responses of the medium-scale producers, some of whom are houses and co-operatives. In terms of product function, the meaning of the product was framed quite differently than by large-scale producer representatives. For example, a small scale producer (J) suggested that the connotation of celebration was inappropriate to his price point:

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.

Instead of celebration and the out-of-the-ordinary, respondents focused on champagne as a wine (including the aforementioned respondent F). For example, the representative of a medium-scale house said:
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. (E)

Similarly, respondent I, a grower, remarked: ‘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.’ The framing of ‘small-scale champagne as wine’ as prestigious relies on an external referent—the established prestige of the world of wine. More so, the external referent was specifically Burgundy, widely acknowledged as the exemplar for wine that takes seriously its terroir or place, and follows small scale production and a sustainable philosophy.  

In terms of producer, some small and medium-scale respondents referred to the heritage of their brand, as did the large-scale producers. In addition, there was more emphasis on the biographical specificity of small-scale production through, for example, reference to the sensibility or ethos of the producer, who is often conflated with the grower. For example, the champagne buyer of the world’s oldest wine club writes:

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.

However, as this research makes clear, there is no sharp divide of grower/big house in practice. Rather, these become iconic symbols for different producer philosophies. Thus, the medium-scale co-operative respondent (F) likened his brand’s approach to the mentality of small-scale producers: ‘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.’ Similarly, specialist wine media profiles of a champagne house’s owner or chef de cave can accomplish biographical specification for large-scale products.

Finally, and quite unlike the large-scale respondents, 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, for respondent J from a small house (which like the co-op of F, above, is technically not a vigneron because he buys in some grapes):
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.

The focus on specific place is even more explicit for the grower (respondent I):

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.

In this way, not only is specificity of place made available as a product quality, but so too is uniqueness. Unlike the consistency year to year of grande marques non-vintage champagne, growers offer an explicitly non-standardized product.

In the specialist wine media texts, the product and place meanings are inseparable when it comes to the authenticity of grower champagne. For example: ‘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.’

Or consider this grower, quoted by Jefford in a 2008 article:

‘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.’

Yet, there can be resistance to a terroir-ist framing of champagne, as the representative of a medium sized house remarked: ‘Anybody in the wine circles says, ’[dismissively] Ah, champagne...’ They don’t want to see the terroir aspect of it. [For us], it’s clearly pinot noir, southward facing pinot noir’ (E).

**Myth and Market Change**

In closing, a review of the two articulations of the meta myth of luxury raise four points. First, in both the media and interview data, exclusivity and authenticity coalesce symbolically around particular scales of production. Second, particular organizational modes (houses/négociants, growers/vignerons) are often conflated with those scales of
production. Thus, there is a myth for the larger-scale producers, with exclusivity claimed for the product (used to celebrate something extraordinary), for the producer (who possesses exceptional attributes, such as longstanding heritage) and for the region (via the unique Champenois history and the exclusive appellation). And, at the same time, there is a myth for smaller-scale producers (stereotypically growers, especially in the media texts), 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).

However, the third point is that no such neat alignment of scales and organizational structure applies in the material reality of the champagne field. The myth of authenticity is not exclusive to growers but was also found for small and medium scale houses. Moreover, the myth of authenticity—because it is grounded in place and philosophy—can be readily appropriated by big houses, thus diversifying their portfolio of points of attachment. For example, large houses experiment with biodynamic viticulture (e.g. Lanson, Roederer), explicitly frame products as ‘sustainable’ and ‘eco-conscious’ (e.g. Pommery), and position their vintage wines as ‘extreme, that take risks to reflect their year’ (Moët). Moreover, the same champagne can be framed through both articulations as many of the terms are interchangeable: for example, small scale biodynamic growers possess the hallmarks of authenticity and are ‘authentically’ exclusive in terms of their small scale (scarce) production. Authenticity is no less a myth than exclusivity, despite its framing as more tangible and ‘real.’ Similarly, the construction of authenticity is no less strategic in the marketplace, whether it arises from non-instrumental vocational passion or a calculated attempt to communicate with a market demographic: either way, consumers appear to buy it.

This third point calls to mind one of the primary rhetorical forms of myth identified by Barthes: ‘neither/norism’, which ‘consists in stating two opposites and balancing the one by the other so as to reject them both’ (1972: 153). Such a myth essentializes diversity into two ideal types and then subjects them to an evaluation in order to neuter them. However, in the case of the myth of luxury in the field of champagne, I suggest we have the rhetorical form of ‘either/orism,’ which allows for both the exclusive prestige of the big houses and the authentic sincerity of the growers to coexist as legitimate products within the same, and
overlapping markets. This is crucial to the reproduction of luxury as a resonant myth in the face of ‘mass-tige,’ the global diffusion of luxury goods, and taste regimes for which conspicuous (prestige) consumption has become passé. Such a crisis is resolved (or at least forestalled) in the champagne field (and beyond) by the either/orism of ‘think global, act artisan’ (The Economist 2014: 8). Thus, I argue that the social function of luxury has not disappeared (contra Schrage 2012); it is a foundational myth through which social hierarchies are defended and challenged, market sectors develop and compete, and individuals find meaning and devices in order to accomplish the work of self-production. As the case of champagne demonstrates, the myth of luxury is alive and well despite the various challenges it faces in an age of ‘exclusivity for everybody’ (Unger 2014).

Fourth and finally, the data makes clear that scale of production (and more broadly provenance) is a resonant objective referent for the myth of luxury. The point of differentiation in the minds of first and second order producers (in the interviews and media texts) related 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). The linchpin of place and provenance in the articulation of luxury-as-authenticity raises the possibility of a radical potential for luxury: a drive towards environmentally sustainable scales and methods of production, fuelled by the desire for prestige and exclusivity. This is akin to what the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels (2011) calls ‘hedonistic sustainability,’ in which the compelling motivation to adopt sustainable practices is hedonic pleasure, as opposed to the self-denial and moralistic overtones associated with, for example, reducing carbon footprints.

Such an approach to achieving sustainability works along existing ‘social desire paths’ (Nichols 2014) and suggests radical potential not only for the myth of luxury-as-authenticity, but also for social science research on those myths. For example, can research identify the social desire paths that lead particular producers to more sustainable viticulture, and can that be leveraged to achieve more sustainable agriculture generally? What social desire paths lead cultural intermediaries to promote forms of good taste that are ‘socially just’ and not just ‘aesthetically good,’ and can that be directed at trickling down consumer demand for more sustainable global relations of trade? What desire paths lead producers to cooperatively engage in more sustainable business models? Can those paths be replicated in other fields? Recalling Mandeville (1924), can the private vice of luxury be
employed to accomplish the public good of a more environmentally sustainable and socially just capitalist social order?

In closing, however, this optimistic view of myth’s radical potential must be tempered by consideration of the conservatism of the meta myth of luxury, and myth more generally (Barthes 1972). The construction of authenticity works through much the same forms as that of exclusivity, as noted in point three above. The symbolic sheen of authenticity is thus available to veil less sustainable practices; there is no requisite radicalism that comes with biographically and geographically transparent products. In addition, the availability of objectively sustainable products at the premium, luxury end of the market runs the risk that more affluent consumers will disinvest from pressing for broader changes to relations of production and trade. If wealthy connoisseurs have access to authentic, sustainable champagne (and food, fashion, tourism, automobiles, homes and so forth), what social desire paths will encourage them to oppose the less sustainable ‘bulk’ versions from which their premium purchases distinguish them? Finally, if the positive valuation of sustainable practices relies, in part, on the current ‘taste’ for authenticity, then it is precarious. The aesthetic regime of artisanality, transparency and provenance is increasingly common; as it reaches saturation point, it is highly likely, in the ineffably fickle manner of the market, that we shall swing back towards an aesthetic of industrial standardization. That aesthetic is already firmly embedded in the modus operandi of global capitalism. Nevertheless, industrial standardization is not necessarily adverse to sustainability; indeed, it is the standardization, normalization and mass up-scaling of sustainable practices that is required to effect broader change beyond the biodynamic vineyards of Champagne.

References:


**Notes**


3 Barthes writes, ‘our society is still a bourgeois society’ (1972: 137). It is beyond the scope of the paper to cover the various arguments related to the impact of political policy and cultural forms (such as lifestyle television) on the middle-classification of advanced Western societies (e.g. Edwards et al 2012; Lewis 2008; Philips 2005).
It is also beyond the paper’s scope to consider the global diversity of consumer cultures and their ideological underpinnings, be they in Western bourgeois contexts or otherwise (e.g. Tian & Dong 2011).


Ideally, future research would broaden the empirical base by including data on consumer attitudes. ‘Standing in’ for such attitudes in the present study are those of the proxy consumers (the cultural intermediary respondents representing their brands, and the writers who are present via their media texts).

Statistical information in the following section comes from, variously, Charters 2012, CIVC 2011, Rand 2008.

2011 production volume for the top 10 champagne brands (in millions of 9 litre cases):
Moët et Chandon 2.21; Veuve Clicquot 1.45; Nicolas Feuillatte 0.8; Mumm 0.64; Laurent-Perrier 0.58; Piper-Heidsieck 0.52; Tattinger 0.46; Pommery 0.41; Lanson 0.35; Perrier-Jouët 0.21. Source: The Drinks Business. 2012. Top 10 Biggest Champagne Brands. 6 September. http://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2012/09/top-10-champagnes/

Space prohibits a more thorough consideration of the multitude of experts at play in the champagne field, the diversity of whom is signalled in my related work on cultural intermediaries in the wine field (Smith Maguire 2010, 2013).


