EUROPEAN OBJECTS

Shaped by taste or social pressure? The European champagne glass

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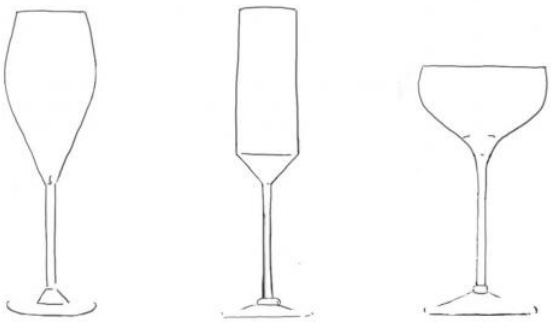
ABSTRACT

The shape of the champagne glass has changed regularly over the last 250 years. Originally a tall straight-sided glass was used for all sparkling drinks. In the 1830s the coupe or saucer form that prioritised effervescence over taste and aroma became increasingly popular, first in Britain and later in other European markets. Though it never fully replaced the tall flute form the coupe appears to have become the dominant form between the wars. After World War II, it lost ground. The coupe form was both less practical for hospitality venues and increasingly thought by connoisseurs to prioritise effervescence at the cost of aroma and taste and the major champagne houses and wine critics endorsed the tulip-shape of glass. However, the coupe remains a popular symbol of luxury and hedonism.

1858 image of the flute glass from the popular humorous magazine *Punch*. This is probably, the last 19th century *Punch* cartoon to show the flute glass. Source: *Punch*, 30 January 1858, p. 46 (reproduced by Graham Harding).



The major champagne glass forms (left to right): tulip, flute, coupe/saucer.
Source: Graham Harding.

Alphonse Mucha's 1896 advertisement for Ruinart champagne. It shows how the glass was linked in advertising with female sensuality. Source : Wikimedia Commons.

The dominant saucer glass in a 1923 French advertisement, in *L'Illustration*, n° 4209, 3 novembre 1923, p. 11. Source : Wikimedia Commons.

Shaped by taste or social pressure? The champagne glass

Until the late 20th century, the market for champagne glasses was divided between two distinctly different forms. The first was the tall 'flute' glass, sometimes straight-sided, sometimes curved with a narrow rim; the second the saucer or coupe shape. In different countries at different times one or other form predominated. Only in the 1980s did the so-called 'tulip' glass with a wider flared bowl than the flute and a tapered mouth become generally popular, though in common usage it has replaced neither of the older forms. But what accounts for these changes and their national variations? What is the balance between oenological considerations, including changes in the style and taste of the wine, and socio-economic factors?

The glass, a reflection of the tastes of champagne consumers

Wine from the cold northern French region of Champagne has always had a tendency to referment spontaneously in barrel as temperatures rose in spring. The carbon dioxide thus created generated the 'bubbles' that characterise sparkling wine (and other drinks such as cider and beer). Such secondary fermentation was neither understood nor adequately controlled in the 18th and early 19th century but improved wine-making techniques in France and stronger bottles (developed from the 17th century invention of the 'English' bottle) made highly effervescent sparkling wines both possible and popular by the 1850s.

Before then there is little evidence for a dedicated champagne glass shape. The first dedicated glass – described by the English statesman Benjamin Disraeli as 'a saucer of ground glass mounted on a pedestal of cut glass'–was introduced in Britain in the 1830s. This shape became fashionable in the 1840s in Britain because it showcased the foam produced by the newly effervescent wine. The disadvantage of the saucer shape is that the aromatics of the

wine are quickly lost. For that reason French wine-makers and connoisseurs continued to urge the use of a tall flute glass until the end of the 19th century and beyond. The saucer shape also allows the bubbles which drive the alcohol into the bloodstream to dissipate and this may have been a factor in its favour in countries such as Britain which prized physical and emotional control. By the end of the 19th century, however, the saucer glass was widely used across much of Europe – including France. This glass was subject to frequent changes of decoration and detail – for instance the fashion for hollow stems which, despite the difficulty of cleaning them properly, was to be found throughout the first half of the 20th century.

A social marker on the table

In the mid-19th century, not only the style but also the role of champagne changed. From the 1860s onwards it became steadily drier across most of Europe (though not Russia). This was partly a consequence of its increasing usage by Britain's newly prosperous middle class as a 'dinner wine' to accompany savoury dishes. The dinner table itself became a place to display possessions and status. Sets of matched glasses dominated the table and the distinctive saucer shaped champagne glass (and the equally distinctive champagne bottle) became powerful markers of economic and social capital.

The adoption of the saucer glass form was slower in the rest of Europe, perhaps because wine-producing countries paid more attention to the aroma and taste than the effervescence. Analysis of early 20th century German advertisements for sparkling wine suggest that although there was a wide range of shapes, the flute was still the most popular form in that market. So too in Poland and Russia. By the early 20th century, the coupe form was gaining popularity in France and Francois Bonal, the distinguished French historian of champagne, suggests that the coupe form had 'totally replaced' the flute by the 1930s. In northern Europe there was also limited use of straight-sided tumblers in glass or silver which as in the British and French market, were mostly used by men at outdoor activities such as hunting and sport.

A new glass for new consumers: between democratisation and mythification

After World War II and during the 1950s and 1960s the flute glass appears to have regained popularity in the major markets of France and Britain. With economic recovery the market for champagne as a celebratory drink for middle-class consumers returned. The flute glass was more practical for catering service; it was more robust, it allowed for more glasses on a waiter's tray and was less likely to overflow on to the clothing of guests at weddings and public events.

With increasing prosperity new players entered the sparkling wine market: Sovetskoye Shampanoyske in Russia, prosecco in Italy, 'Babycham' (sparkling perry) in Britain. Many of these favoured or promoted (in the case of Babycham) the coupe glass form to appropriate and exploit the image values of champagne as a drink of hedonism and celebration. To differentiate themselves, the traditional champagne houses began to stress the quality of their wine rather than relying simply on a generic 'celebratory' positioning. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the saucer glass was attacked for dissipating both bubbles and aroma. The tulip glass was increasingly recommended by wine critics and journalists and the 'official' glasses of champagne houses such as Bollinger and glassware manufacturers such as Riedel are now variants of this shape–often with laser-cut pits in the base of the glass to act as foundation points for the 'bubble trains' that rise through the liquid.

But the coupe glass has remained a symbol of luxury and hedonism. The myth that the original coupe was modelled on the breast of Queen Marie Antoinette surfaced in Britain in the 1970s. In the first decade of the 21st century, glasses were modelled on breasts of models Claudia Schiffer (2008) and Kate Moss (2014). Such glasses have cultural rather than connoisseurial power and the coupe glass remains a potent visual marker as a symbol of

wealth. The so-called ‘champagne glass effect’ uses the shallow bowl of the coupe glass to represent the richest 20% in the world who own 80% of the wealth of the world, whilst the poorest 20% at the bottom of the spindly stem have almost nothing.

To summarise, the changes in shape and form were driven by changes in the preferred style of champagne itself and by broader social shifts including the change in European dining habits in the 19th century. The flute form – with countless variations of decoration and design – has been preferred in most markets for most of the last three hundred years. The coupe or saucer form can be found in all markets and periods but was the dominant form only in 19th century Britain. More recently, the tulip form has gained popularity on the strength of its supposed capacity to better capture and express the aroma of the wine it contains.

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