

# Bubbly for your palate

When different champagnes are paired with exquisite cuisine, dinner is a gastronomic indulgence, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**T**HE night holds much promise. The invitation to an exclusive dinner used the word “effervescent”, conjuring pictures of bubbles and fun. The food, prepared by award-winning Chef Michael Elfwing of Hilton Kuala Lumpur’s Senses restaurant, was sure to be a gastronomic indulgence. Nevertheless, the star of the show was undoubtedly the champagne, Taittinger.

Pronounced “Teh-tan-jay”, the origin of Taittinger Champagne House can be traced back to the 18th Century, according to Nicolas Delion, the company’s export manager for Asia Pacific. It is the third oldest champagne house and remains family-owned.

Mellow from the glass of pre-dinner champagne, the first course is paired with Taittinger Cuvee Prestige Rose NV. The deliciously sweet taste of this champagne perfectly accompanies the foie gras and white peach pate. The champagne grapes add a touch of authenticity to this first dish.

Any reluctance to try escargot dissipates with the first mouthful.

Superbly prepared, it complements the serving of fresh peas, creamy potato espuma and watercress. The food is washed down with Taittinger Brut Reserve. Delion explains that this champagne is approximately 40 per cent each of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and 20 per cent Pinot Meunier.

The most intriguing part of the next course, which features red gurnard fish, is the item called “edible sand”. Delion guesses that this is probably semolina. Whatever the raw ingredient, its texture is certainly similar to sand.

As the waiter pours Taittinger Brut Vintage 2005 (from the Vintage Collection) to accompany this dish, Delion says: “There is never a ‘bad’

“There is never a ‘bad’ year for champagne.”

Nicolas Delion



*Marilyn Monroe was so often photographed drinking and holding a champagne saucer or coupe that there’s even a champagne named after her*

year for champagne. If we don’t produce champagne in one year, we’ll just say it’s a ‘technical’ year. Consumers are never served ‘technical’ champagne.”

By law, all champagne must age for at least 15 months. “All our champagnes are aged for a much longer period,” says Delion. “We also use a higher proportion of Chardonnay and self-produced grapes.” Apparently, most houses of champagne use 25 per cent of their own grapes and the remaining from others.

When generous portions of pot roasted quail with scents of hay and toasted rice are served, it is hard to eat everything on the plate. This is no reflection on the quality of the food. On the contrary, everyone is just full. Surreptitiously, everyone concentrates, instead, on the champagne — Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2000—

and justifies food being returned to the kitchen with “after all, it’s the champagne we came for”. This cuvee is 100 per cent Chardonnay of which five per cent is aged in oak.

Delion has a story about this champagne. In the 13th Century, there was a Count who was in love with a much older woman who also happened to be the wife of the king. Aware of this liaison, the king sent the Count on a crusade. On his way back from the crusade, the Count discovered the rose chardonnay grapes of the region.

The Taittinger family is said to have bought the building in Reims, France, where this Count once lived. To honour his memory, they released their Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs and use an image of him on their products.

“Even the bottle is special,” says Delion. “Can you see how it’s not as

slim as the others and it’s deeper at the neck of the bottle? These were the bottles that were used before modern fermentation techniques were perfected. So, when you pour the champagne, more sediment will settle at the bottom of the bottle before the champagne is poured into the glass.”

When the elegant dessert of panna cotta, nectarines and homemade macaroons is served, no one refuses the dish. Instead, one guest says, “We always bring the ‘other stomach’ for dessert.” Then, it’s more champagne.

Finally, ever the charming Frenchman, Delion ends the night with a quote from none other than King Louis XV’s mistress, Madame de Pompadour: “Champagne is the only wine that leaves a woman beautiful after drinking it.”

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*Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2000 has an interesting story behind it and why its bottle is shaped as such*



*Taittinger Brut Reserve*



*Taittinger Cuvee Prestige Rose has a lovely rosy hue that matches its sweet flavour*