

Future Today

HOW A FRENCH WIDOW CONQUERED RUSSIA

At the beginning of 1814, Russian troops had occupied the town of Reims in a famous French winegrowing region. The long campaign against Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was now finally over and the winners celebrated their triumph extensively. Many Russian officers also took advantage of the situation: the sweet and sparkling drink of the region flowed like water! What they specifically liked was a vintage wine that has long been considered legendary: 1811 had been one of the best harvests of all time and the refreshing drink made a lasting impression on the officers!

A few weeks later, a secret meeting in Reims took place. Everything discussed had to remain secret under all circumstances; the curtains were closed and the doors locked. **Only a woman and a man were present as bold plans were made to break the law and collaterally form a new empire.** She, a widowed entrepreneur from Reims, and the widow's most loyal and confident employee and sales representative from Germany Mr. Louis Bohne. With the rising of the sun, the plan was ready.

Few weeks later in Rouen, near the English Channel, Captain Cornelis reads the order from his shipowner and his brow furrows. As Captain, he was responsible for the crew, the ship and its cargo, and as an experienced smuggler during the sea blockade, he knew the risks this job entailed. The whole of Europe had fought against France during the war, and Napoleon had signed the declaration of abdication in the town of Fontainebleau only a few days ago. Peace was still very fragile and the trade blockade against France still in force.

"Who in hell is the client who wants to bring an unspecified cargo via Koenigsberg in Prussia to St. Petersburg in Russia while the ports are still closed for any goods from France?" he asked with an astonishing voice.

*"It is a respectable widow from Reims, who took over the winery business after the early death of her husband and led it through the war. **Her main product is a sparkling wine.**" The captain was still not satisfied so continued with more questions: "She managed her husband's company, survived the war and also the occupation of Reims?" "Yes", the messenger replied.*

"She saved the company from bankruptcy several times. Her plan is risky, of course, but it does make sense. Though I must admit that this consignment is indeed a 'coup de surprise". To reassure you, the cargo will be accompanied by a trusted friend, Mr. Bohne." The answer reassured the captain a bit. Mr. Bohne accompanying the cargo himself, would lower the risk for the captain, and so he began to prepare the Zes Gebroeders, for the voyage.

A short time later, an entire column of horse-drawn carriages in Reims, loaded with **10,550 bottles of the legendary vintage of 1811, began their journey.** These had been loaded as part of a cloak and dagger operation. Every worker had been obliged to keep the secret. Under the lead of Louis Bohne, the column advanced on secret paths which had been carefully chosen, along with everything that followed.

The top-secret mission had two specific goals; namely, to save the widow's business from ruin, and to supply Russia the first time since the war with the novel champagne of the **widow Clicquot.**

This could only be achieved if no one knew of the plan: neither the competition, against which the time advantage was invaluable, nor the authorities, because there was no permit for such transport. In addition, everything was built on the speculation that by the time the ship reached Koenigsberg, the ban on French goods in Russia would be lifted: **a game of everything or nothing.**

The transport took an agonizingly long time. On June 10th, the Zes Gebroeders set sail with Louis Bohne and his 10,550 bottles of the best champagne; it was not until July 3rd that they reached Koenigsberg.

As soon as the news of the "champagne ship" in port was known to the rich citizens of the town, Louis Bohne **was able to sell just enough of the coveted and long missed champagne bottles at an astonishing price to cover in full the entire cost of the expensive journey.** A wise structure and well-chosen strategy to reduce the risk bore the first fruits.

And the strategy continued to prove right: just in time, the ban on imports of French goods in Russia was lifted and the champagne bottles were quickly sold in St. Petersburg. The Russian officers, who had since returned home, were willing to pay virtually any price for the wonderful drink that they had learned to love in Reims. **The champagne became so popular in Russia that even Tsar Alexander I. was said to have mentioned that he did not want any other drink in his lifetime.**

This adventure not only resulted in the triumph of the 1811 Cuvée of the widow (Veuve in French), **Veuve Clicquot**, but also led to the conquest of the Russian market and rescued the company of Veuve Barbe Nicole Clicquot-Ponsardin.

Furthermore, it was the basis for the rise of the House of Clicquot to become one of the leading champagne producers in the world and, in turn, helped the industry as a whole, as the company introduced the new riddling-method.



In 1813, Barbe-Nicole's cellarman Anton von Müller, had discovered that by gently shaking and swiveling the bottle, dead yeast sinks as sediment into the bottle neck, allowing for removal in a further step. For the first time this made it possible to produce optically clear champagne in large quantities, which had a more desirable look and was easier to market than the champagne that had formerly been cloudy with yeast.

History shows that it always pays to implement ideas courageously and creatively by using structures. However, it also shows that it is always wise to have these structures accompanied and managed by trusted partners such as, in this case, Louis Bohne.

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