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A CLASS ACT

How *Charles Chen Yidan* is Transforming Education



SARAN- RAPT

To mark the 150th anniversary of its Imperial champagne, Moët et Chandon has unveiled Chateau de Saran, a meticulously restored 18th-century masterpiece that operates as an invitation-only hotel

BY SEAN FITZPATRICK

The world of champagne bubbles with competition and anxiety. Maisons cast furtive glances over their shoulders and vie for market dominance. Critics anoint new stars, while collectors gush over boutique producers, limited editions and privileged access. For a brand as ubiquitous as Moët et Chandon, it could be difficult to cultivate the aura of artisan-imbued exclusivity that is the obsession of today's marketers.

But Moët's latest unveiling—the painstaking restoration of its spiritual home, Chateau de Saran—is a mic dropped all the way from the apex of what luxury pundits like to call the “experience economy.” Put simply, Chateau de Saran is a hotel. But you can't book it. And, unless you quaff Moët

by the nebuchadnezzar or you are royalty, chances are you're never going to get an invitation.

Chateau de Saran began life in 1801. Set among the bucolic perfection of Chouilly, Champagne, it was originally built as a hunting lodge by Jean-Rémy Moët, the grandson of the maison's founder Claude Moët. Third-gen Jean-Rémy is credited with taking his family's modest business in wine trading and growing it into a famous champagne house. Jean-Rémy was as adept at public relations as he was at business, and he built a lasting friendship with notable people, including Napoleon Bonaparte. The chateau became a residence for the family and was passed down the generations through a series of bequeathments that ultimately outlasted the Moët family name itself. The chateau wound up as a hospice in the 1950s before it was acquired by the owners of the Moët brand. In 2014, the chateau was closed for a five-year restoration, the completion of which was timed to coincide with this year, 2019, the 150th anniversary of Imperial, Moët's flagship cuvée, which was named to honour the centennial of Napoleon's birth.

If you ask anyone at Moët how many bottles they produce, they often respond with the cute but vague phrase, “At Moët, we do not speak of numbers.” You get exactly the same response when you ask how much they spent on the restoration of Chateau de Saran. But there's no doubting the vast investment made in returning this 18th-century masterpiece to its full glory. Its glitzy re-opening party was hosted by the brand's owner and LVMH chairman Bernard Arnault. The restoration was overseen by Yves de Marseille, a veteran of France's film industry who's known as the go-to guy for period drama sets. When I met De Marseille at the chateau during my recent stay, he hinted that he was given a



Chateau de Saran. Opposite page from top: inside the tasting salon; the large dining room in the vanguard; a champagne tower to toast the reopening of the chateau.

blank cheque by Arnault, adding with Gallic gusto that “in a two-year period, I attended over 100 auctions.”

Each of the 11 guest rooms is studiously themed: the Louis XIV Sun King room, the Josephine Baker-inspired Twenties room, the Hollywood room—a paean to Marilyn Monroe. There’s even a Dior room, a nod to De Marseille’s previous assignment for Arnault, the Dior Maison, La Colle Noir, in the southern French town of Grasse. Other rooms include the Chinese room and the Japanese room—these both veer away from an authentic Asian aesthetic. De Marseille is careful to point out that these rooms in particular are designed to evoke the Victorian-era fascination with the Orient: “My choices for decoration for the rooms were made through an 18th-century European lens.”

On my visit, I occupied the Imperial room, which pays homage to Napoleon, who was a friend and VIP customer of Jean-Rémy Moët’s. De Marseille is meticulous, placing touches like a well-thumbed tome about heredity next to a bust of Napoleon on the spectacularly ornate fireplace. An Empire mahogany console table stands on the oak parquet flooring, a reference to Versailles. As I slept at night, the



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bust of Napoleon and the portraits of his two empresses, Josephine and Marie-Louise, watched over me.

While the chateau is decidedly retro in its styling, the adjoining building, referred to as the vendangeoir, stands in stark contrast with its modern industrial-rustic interiors. Here there is a lavishly appointed dining room, where chef Marco Fadigo plies his culinary excellence, as well as a cosy, private nightclub for after-dinner drinks.

Chateau de Saran overlooks the undulating vineyards of Chouilly, where some of Moët's chardonnay grapes are grown. I was also lucky enough to have stayed at the chateau on September 19th, the last day of the 2019 harvest. After receiving a pair of Moët-branded rubber boots, I crawled and crouched my way through the vineyards, snipping the bunches until my row was cleared. The effort—and back aches—were surprisingly intense, giving me a new sense of appreciation of what goes into making champagne. It was much better, I concluded, to appreciate the bubbles firmly ensconced in the gloriously decadent salons of the Chateau de Saran instead. ●

