

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Champagne Charlie

In June of 2011, it was announced that French drinks group *Rémy Cointreau* completed the sale of the *Charles Heidsieck* and *Piper-Heidsieck* Champagne brands to *Société Européenne de Participations Industrielles* (EPI). The *Henriot* Group had previously sold the *Heidsieck* brands to *Rémy Cointreau* in 1985. French fashion-led luxury goods company EPI had already lined up Cécile Bonnefond (former managing director of *Veuve Clicquot*) to run the Champagne end of the business. The previous year, *Charles Heidsieck* and *Piper-Heidsieck* won more than 20 medals in the 2010 Decanter World Wine Awards, including five regional trophies.

Champagne Heidsieck & Co. was founded in 1785 in Reims just a few years before the French Revolution by Florenz-Louis Heidsieck and was later split into three different entities: *Piper-Heidsieck*, *Charles Heidsieck* and *Heidsieck Monopole*. As a group, they are some of the world's most renowned (and most awarded) Champagne brands.

Based in the Reims region of Champagne, *Charles Heidsieck* produces both vintage and non-vintage *cuvée*. The term *cuvée* is used with several different meanings, more or less based on the concept of a tank or vat of wine put to some purpose. In Champagne, the *cuvée* also refers to use of the first and best grape juice from gentle pressing of the grapes (as opposed to the *taille*, or tail). *Charles Heidsieck* owns 30 hectares (74 acres) of vineyards in Ambonnay, Bouzy and Oger (communes in the Marne department in northeastern France) and produces approximately three million bottles annually. The firm makes the standard label *Brut Réserve mis en Cave*, while the prestige label "Champagne Charlie" has been replaced by the label "*Blanc de Millénaires*". Today the *Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve* (non-vintage) sells for about \$55. *Wine Enthusiast* and *Wine Spectator* each rate it 93 out of 100.

What follows is an adventurous tale of Charles-Camille Heidsieck (1820-1871), the founder of the eponymous Champagne house *Charles Heidsieck* in 1851, his visits to New Orleans, and how he acquired the name "Champagne Charlie".

This fledgling Champagne magnate was the first Champagne maker ever to travel to America (making four trips in the 1850s and 1860s), and is credited with popularizing Champagne in the United States. Affectionately known as "Champagne Charlie" during his visits, he was always successful at marketing samples of his delightful wines in cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, Richmond and New Orleans. But during the Civil War, General Benjamin F. "Beast" Butler arrested and imprisoned Heidsieck under suspicion of being a spy for the French government and the Confederacy. His seven-month incarceration sparked an international incident between France and the U.S. over what became known as *The Heidsieck Incident*.

Charles Heidsieck's great uncle Florenz-Louis Heidsieck had emigrated from Germany to found Champagne Heidsieck & Co., when he married the daughter of a local wool merchant. Charles' father (Charles-Henri) famously rode on a white stallion in 1811, just ahead of Napoleon's advancing army, all the way to Russia as a publicity stunt. Master promoter, his father arrived in Moscow with cases of Champagne and his order book. Only son Charles-Camille became a champagne-maker himself at the age of 29 and (being a daredevil gentleman adventurer at heart and, not satisfied with this early success,) his wanderlust led him to tackle the New World. New York was his first stop.

Every young scion of a Champagne house was raised to be an excellent sportsman, and Charles was no exception. In the United States, Charles figured it was good advertising strategy to combine business with pleasure by shooting bear and buffalo in the American wilderness during his annual trips. He'd always bring with him the most modern firearms available in Europe along with his Champagne. And, like his dad, he brought along his order book. All along the Eastern seaboard, his daring feats were reported in the local newspapers with pictures and his company name before his arrival in each town. As a result, his parties and receptions were extremely profitable. The suave and charismatic Heidsieck was soon the debonair darling of American society. The media couldn't help but nickname him "Champagne Charlie".



Charles Heidsieck



Barely a year after establishing his company in France, Charles toured New York State and the New England area. And he eventually found his way to New Orleans, in the former French colony of “*La Louisiane*”. The city became one of his favorite stops. In an 1860 letter to his wife Amélie Henriot, he described the citizenry of the Crescent City:

“They are warm, they are hospitable, they are generous ... and they love to eat and drink!”

And in New Orleans, he sold thousands of bottles per annum to the city’s appreciative cosmopolitan population, which goes to show that his publicity efforts really paid off.

The potential for the American market was apparent to Heidsieck, and he retained an agent to maximize his import sales. The mass import of Champagne was a roaring success and, when Heidsieck returned five years later, he was greeted in New York City with much pomp and massive newspaper coverage. Banquets were held in his honor, and he embraced the persona of “Champagne Charlie”, now a fixture of the New York high society scene.

But in 1861, Charles Heidsieck received news of the impending conflict in America known as the War Between the States. With more than half of his firm's assets tied into unpaid accounts back in the United States, Heidsieck quickly left the bucolic countryside around Reims and set sail for America. Upon his arrival, his sales agent informed him of

a new law passed by Congress. It absolved Northerners from having to give payment for cotton purchased from the South, and it also absolved the agent from having to pay his debt to Heidsieck.

With no other course of action, "Champagne Charlie" made his way to New Orleans in order to seek repayment directly from the merchants that received his Champagne. With the war now in full swing, Charles had to travel in secrecy and far out of the way to get past the Union lines into the Deep South. He arrived in New Orleans in April 1862, finding the city to be nearly bankrupt and incapable of paying their debts financially. One merchant did have a warehouse full of cotton, which was in high demand back in Europe. Heidsieck accepted the cotton as payment, but he had to smuggle it past the Union blockade. He put the cotton on two ships at the port of Mobile, hoping that (by taking two different routes) the cargo would not be intercepted. But the vessels were captured and sunk with all the cotton destroyed.

Meanwhile, the Battle of Forts Jackson and St. Philip took place from April 16 to April 28, 1862, when the Confederate-controlled Fort Jackson was besieged for twelve days by the fleet of U.S. Navy Flag Officer David Farragut. Fort Jackson (in Plaquemines Parish) fell on April 28 after the Union fleet bombarded it and then pushed on past its guns. Union forces then went on to capture the valuable port city of New Orleans.

By this time all routes to the North were effectively sealed off, so Heidsieck went back to New Orleans to attempt to charter a boat via Cuba or Mexico in hopes of making it back to France. To facilitate his passage, the French vice-consul in Mobile gave him a diplomatic pouch to deliver to the consulate in New Orleans. Arriving in New Orleans on May 5, 1862, he found that the city had now fallen to Union forces. Worse yet, the city was under the command of Union General "Beast" Butler (or alternatively "Spoons" Butler, the latter nickname derived for his alleged trait of pilfering the silverware of Southern homes which he visited). Butler immediately seized Charles Heidsieck upon his arrival in New Orleans. Here's what the General had to say about Charlie:

"He had, when arrested, a canvas wrapper, of the size of a peck measure, firmly bound up with cords, covering letters from the French, Swiss, Spanish, Prussian, and Belgian consuls, also a great number of letters to private persons, mostly rebels, or worse, intermeddling foreigners, containing contraband intelligence. A portion of these letters were forwarded to the honorable secretary of state, in December last, by me."

It is said that the letters were from French textile manufacturers about supplying the Confederate armies with their uniforms. Despite Heidsieck's declarations of innocence and ignorance about the contents

of the documents, he was charged with espionage and imprisoned in a squalid cell in Fort Jackson, now in Union hands. Butler wanted to execute Heidsieck as he'd done to William Mumford, who tore down the United States flag placed atop the Mint:

"I should have tried him as a spy, and hanged him upon conviction as a spy, if I had not been interfered with by the government at Washington," Butler opined.

As mentioned earlier, Charles Heidsieck's imprisonment caused a diplomatic incident between France and the U.S. government that became known as *The Heidsieck Incident*. It took several months before the French Government could negotiate the entrepreneurial Champagne maker's release. Several times, French diplomats and even the Emperor Napoleon III contacted President Abraham Lincoln campaigning for Heidsieck's release. It was finally granted on November 16, 1862. After months in prison, Charles was in frail health with his business in financial collapse (and his wife selling off family property to pay his debts). The once cheerful Charlie returned to France, broke and demoralized.

But that was not the demise of "Champagne Charlie". Back in France, Charles Heidsieck had an unusual visitor. In early 1863, an American missionary delivered to him a packet of papers and a letter from the United States. The letter was from the brother of Heidsieck's former New York agent. The man, it seems, was ashamed of how his brother cheated Heidsieck out of his obligations and offered him a pile of deeds to acreage in Colorado as repayment for the debt. It turned out that the deeds were for real estate that represented a third of a small town known as Denver, which was to soon to mushroom into one of the largest and most prosperous cities in the American West. In time, Heidsieck was able to sell the land and repay all his debts. With this unexpected good fortune, he was able to rejuvenate his Champagne house and rapidly build it back to one of Champagne's premier houses.

Kudos came to the Champagne house of *Charles Heidsieck* through the years. In 1910, explorer and British Royal Navy officer Robert Falcon Scott brought bottles of *Charles Heidsieck* on his expedition to the South Pole. Roald Amundsen's Norwegian expedition, however, beat his team there by 35 days. During Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's historic and cordial 4-day stay at the White House in October 1957, President Eisenhower served *Charles Heidsieck 1949* in her honor. At home in France on May 11, 1960, Madame de Gaulle christened the SS France as it was launched from the French docks (the longest passenger ship ever built at that time) with a magnum of champagne - with its label hidden. Only a chosen few knew that it was a magnum of *Charles Heidsieck 1952*.

And in 1989, a much-romanticized story of the colorful Champagne purveyor was told in the full-length French-Canadian biopic "Champagne Charlie" starring Hugh Grant as Charles Heidsieck. In it a Louisiana belle named Pauline captures his heart, as Hugh hawks the bubbly. He even enjoys a mint julep on her verandah.

Years before, the name "Champagne Charlie" was immortalized in song. It is reputed that Charles Heidsieck's exploits and stylish manner inspired George Leybourne to write and sing his famous Victorian music hall song, *Champagne Charlie*, which he first performed at the Sun Music Hall, Knightsbridge, in 1867. Leybourne came out on stage in top hat and tails, dressed as a "toff" or "swell" in immaculate evening dress, with cane, gloves and scarf, waving about (not a bottle of *Charles Heidsieck* but) vintage *Moët et Chandon*.

Leybourne's rival Alfred Vance engaged in a fierce competition with the composer-performer, introducing a tune called *Cliquot*. These two entertainers, or *lion comiques*, had top billing in their day. They deliberately distorted the idleness, drinking and womanizing of the upper class "swells", creating a parody of social reality for escapist entertainment. They were called *lion comiques* because of their lion-like whiskers, rakish hat, monocle, fat cigar and gold toothpick (among other exaggerated accessories). The rivalry between the two comedian-performers was featured in a play (1860s) and later in a British film (1944), both entitled "Champagne Charlie". The film starred Stanley Holloway (Alfred Doolittle to Audrey Hepburn's Eliza).



The song *Champagne Charlie* was so popular that it was adapted by the Salvation Army for their song *Bless His Name He Sets Me Free*;

and Leon Redbone based his 1978 album *Champagne Charlie* around that very song.

And of course, the Grand Duke Alexis and the people of New Orleans also loved the music of George Leybourne. He wrote the city's ever-popular Mardi Gras theme song, *If Ever I Cease to Love*. To this very day, the beaus and belles of Carnival dance the night away and raise their Champagne glasses to the traditions, grace and style of those who went before - chaps like "Champagne Charlie", the man who (like New Orleans), continues to promote something truly wonderful. Cheers!

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"Champagne Charlie"
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