

Qweekend

CHAMP DE CHAMPAGNE

By Susan Johnson



Bernadette O'Shea, also known as Princess Peach, or the Divine Miss O, knows her champagne – right down to the year the grapes were picked.

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A flower is made for the enjoyment of eyes and noses and for the sustenance of birds and bees, while a glass of champagne is made for nothing but delight. It is somehow fitting, then, that Bernadette O'Shea, who has devoted her life to flowers and bubbles, is known to the three little boys who live in the house next to hers in Brisbane's inner north as Princess Peach (of Super Mario fame), loved ruler of the mushroom kingdom, who bestows delight wherever she goes.

The woman named for a saint by her Irish-Australian Catholic parents has left in her wake a trail of happiness because of her work with flowers and champagne. For many years she made wedding bouquets for brides, great scented masses of freesias and roses and hyacinths and lilies and baby's breath, so that thousands of women throughout Queensland still remember that first sight of their wedding flowers. She ran the flower business with her mother, Lily, who birthed ten children (of whom seven survived) and who liked to answer the phone by saying, "Hello, Mother O'Shea speaking." For one of her many births, Mother O'Shea rang her husband, Brendan, to tell him she was in labour, then

walked 1km from Wilston to the tram stop at Grange to get to the Royal Women's Hospital at Bowen Hills where she checked herself in.

Princess Peach, the fourth child, grew up among beauty. When her industrious and clever mother first opened the flower business – called Little Flower after Saint Thérèse, also the name of the eldest O'Shea sibling – she ran it from under the house, so that the smell of flowers saturated Bernadette's existence. "We were surrounded by smells; we grew up in a flower world where the smells were there. I remember unpacking snowdrops and freesias and little daffodils from Mount Tamborine – in those days Tamborine grew a lot of flowers – and putting them in water; we'd get pocket money for that. I think it helped me tremendously in my world, in the champagne world, I suppose without knowing it, it alerted my nose, it helped me to use my nose."

That talented nose led to Bernadette's second (and current) career, leaving a trail of joy as Australia's only full-time champagne consultant. In the famous French wine-growing region of Champagne, she is widely known as the first Australian winner of the prestigious 2010 Gourmond Award for the world's best French wine book, as a holder of a French knighthood ▶



for services to French agriculture, and as Dame-Chevalier de l'Ordre des Coteaux de Champagne, bestowed for support of the wines of the region. If Princess Peach loves champagne then Champagne loves Princess Peach, where she is known personally to all the most famous Champagne dynasties, such as the families of Pol-Roger, Krug and Taittinger.

Indeed, Christian Pol-Roger penned the foreword to Bernadette's beautiful self-funded book about famous champagne dinners, *Champagne & Chandeliers: Grand Dining Celebrations*, in which he writes not only of champagne as being part of the art of life, imbued with "a spiritual mystique which gives rein to the imagination", but also of Bernadette herself and her "endearing personality", whose very name has become "synonymous with champagne".

He's not the only one who thinks Princess Peach is a bit special. In late 2009, when Bernadette's book first came out, Frédéric Heidsieck, of the Louis Roederer house, happened to be in Brisbane to host a function. He said he would love to launch her book and began his launch speech by declaring that "there is only one Bernadette in the world". He went on to say that no-one in the world captures and conveys the magic of champagne the way she does, nor expresses her love with "such passion and delight that others cannot help but fall under her champagne spell".

Between you and me, Princess Peach is a bit of a good witch. Perhaps it's her heritage, with the Irish love of enchantment and fairy stories and poetry and song, but Miss Bernadette O'Shea believes in God, angels, prayer, and that champagne is more than just an alcoholic drink. Somehow, in her company, you come to believe too that champagne is not just a sparkle on the tongue but a way of celebrating the great human rites of passage, and that life itself would be a poor, shabby thing without it.

This is a woman who took out a second mortgage on her house to finance the publication of a few thousand copies of her award-winning book, which no Australian publisher would touch, not unlike those publishers who passed on *Harry Potter*. While *Champagne &*

Chandeliers will never sell as many copies as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, its author displays the same courage and self-belief as J.K. Rowling. As much as anything else, Bernadette O'Shea's story is one of unwavering faith.

And like many a good witch, Princess Peach is ageless, not so much refusing to give her age as dismissing time, refusing to be squashed into a little drawer with a number. As a matter of fact, one of the small boys from the house next door asked her just the other day if she was more than 40. When she said that she was, he **Champagne missionary ...** O'Shea's many awards include a knighthood for services to French agriculture.

was open-mouthed: "Gosh, you really *are* old, aren't you?" And with that, the three little boys, Andrew, Thomas and Oliver Bartlett, once again rescued Princess Peach from the bad mushrooms. "Fleeing all the time takes energy," O'Shea writes to me later in an email, "so Princess Peach does not age – I think it is because she has to keep very fit to run the kingdom and her imagination must run at full speed!!"

Exactly how a working-class Irish-Australian girl who grew up on a hill in Brisbane's suburban Wilston turned herself into ageless Princess Peach, Queen of Bubbles, friend to the rich and one of the foremost champagne specialists in the world, makes for an enchanting story.

BEFORE PRINCESS PEACH ALLOWS YOU TO know any more of her story, though, you must first learn a bit about champagne. Number One: there is only one drink called champagne and it is made from three particular grape types (pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier), grown in a specific area of about 30,000 hectares within the region of Champagne in north-eastern France. Every other alcoholic drink with bubbles in it is just sparkling wine.

You should probably witness the champagne queen in action, too, such as watching her host a champagne dinner at the Hyatt Regency's "A Taste of Coolum" event on a mild winter night in June, where the five-course degustation menu at the resort's flagship restaurant, Eliza's, is a cool \$295 a head. It's a black-tie affair and Princess Peach, blazing like a star with her

glittering rings and necklaces and brooches, her black cropped hair glossier and neater than a Louise Brooks 1920s bob or Uma Thurman's wig in *Pulp Fiction*, is at her proselytising best, breathtakingly zealous in her ardour.

It's not for nothing that her friend, editor and marketing guru Stefan Treyvaud, refers to her as "a champagne missionary". By the second course she has the bejewelled audience willing to follow her to the ends of the Earth (or at least to the next glass of Champagne Philipponnat Sublime Reserve).

Lesson Number Two: You *can* drink champagne throughout the course of an entire meal and you can, like Miss O'Shea, drink nothing but champagne or water. She doesn't drink tea or coffee or even wine; it is champagne, water or nothing. At the Hyatt Regency she gives us a lesson in matching champagne with food, proving that over and above still wines, champagne brings "texture and mouth aroma" to a match. You see, its high acidity cuts down saltiness, cuts through fat and its effervescence "degreases the tastebuds". It's a drink for all reasons and seasons.

While we are at it, let's address champagne lesson Number Three: Champagne is not elitist. The Queen of Bubbles will not hear a word about it being a fancy drink meant for rich people to throw down their necks while laughing at the misfortunes of the poor. Rather, Miss O'Shea declares champagne to be a drink for everyone, even if you have to save your pennies to drink it, because the memories of drinking it are without

price and, as Oscar Wilde said, "pleasure without champagne is purely artificial".

"You can still drink your beer if you want to!" says O'Shea. "But nearly everyone drinks champagne to mark the very special occasions in life, and they always have. The ordinary people on the goldfields, what did they do if they found gold? The only thing they wanted was champagne! We use it to toast success, we drink it at weddings, when we christen babies, the very word means celebration!"

Here you should know that the Queen of Bubbles talks very, very fast, running her words together in excitement, jumping from here to there, plonking down the word "anyway" in the middle of sentences while she skips gaily along to something else. You might say that her speech comes complete with exclamation marks, and when she sends an email she never uses one exclamation mark when she can use two. Her excitement is infectious, and quite soon it is as if her love of champagne is actually a love of life, and everyone within the reach of her vivacity is swept up. When she was a florist she naturally won the Australian Florist of the Year ("in the early '80s sometime, I'd have to look it up"), because it is quite clear she puts a certain quality of excitement, passion and energy into everything she does.

You can easily see why she was such a success as a florist, and why for years in Queensland she was the florist of choice for ladies who lunch and matrons from Brisbane's dress-circle Ascot ►

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who wouldn't miss a spring racing carnival ("She knows absolutely everyone," says Treyvaud. It is true that she counts among her friends High Court judges and medical professors and people of substantial means). But a major part of her charm is that she is interested in everyone, treating whoever she meets exactly the same, so that she is as warm toward a High Court judge as she would be to a garbage man or shopgirl.

Princess Peach is a regular churchgoer (more of that later, but never ask her anywhere on a Saturday night because she is always in church, Holy Cross, Woolloowin, at Vigil Mass). For almost 30 years, she has been a member of the Zonta Club, a professional businesswomen's association that – among other things – put the first libraries and toy depositories into women's prisons for children visiting their incarcerated mothers. And here is another story that tells you what kind of person she is: when she was making those wedding bouquets all those years ago, she would always tuck in a few hyacinth petals, even if the bride hadn't asked for them, because she believes in the old Persian proverb, "If thou hast two pennies, spend one on bread and with the other buy hyacinths, for thy soul". O'Shea believes in souls, and the saving of them. When she hosted the posh champagne degustation dinner at Coolum, for example, she did not charge a fee. She did it for the love of champagne.

SOMETIMES PRINCESS PEACH CAN BE

naughty. She is a great one for slightly risqué jokes and she tells her Coolum audience a few very funny tales about prominent Australian wine figures that cannot be repeated here. She praises the Hyatt staff for their skill in removing champagne corks without vulgar explosions or a single cork being aimed at the ceiling. "As the French say, 'the only sound you should hear when extracting the cork from a bottle of champagne is the sigh of a contented woman,'" she says, and the audience titters.

An old family friend, Sarah Ogilvie, daughter

of the late legendary Queensland milliner Patrick Ogilvie and now a linguist and lexicographer at Cambridge University, says her father and Bernadette could be very wicked when they were together. The pair met through their work, and Bernadette was present at baby Sarah's christening in 1969. Sarah recalls hilarious tales of their working life, the most famous being the night Bernadette had enormous difficulty attaching the flowers to a wedding headpiece Patrick had designed, and calling him out of bed to come to her rescue. The problem was they had no "head" on which to pin the flowers and lace – except that of an elderly Carmelite monk, Father John, who happened to be staying with Bernadette.

So Princess Peach did the only decent thing for a waiting bride: she dragged Father John from his bed, sat him in a chair and used him as their model for the bridal headdress. As the sun came up he looked particularly fetching. Perhaps, like most people who come into O'Shea's effervescent orbit, the old monk even felt a bit sparkly and rejuvenated.

Sarah Ogilvie certainly felt that way whenever she visited Bernadette as a young child. A long, long time ago, Princess Peach was married to a Canadian man, but she prefers not to speak about that, except to say that having children "was not meant to be" for her. With no children of her own, she seems to have surrounded herself with other people's children – the many children of her brothers and sisters, and those of friends and neighbours.

Sarah remembers as a ten-year-old sitting at Bernadette's feet while she worked and told stories, a "consummate storyteller" who entranced the child with tales of the Benedictine monk, Dom Perignon, making champagne in his abbey at Épernay. Sarah recalls in an email: "She made you feel like you were down in the dark cellar with Dom Perignon as he called out to his fellow monks: 'Come quickly, I am drinking the stars!'"

connoisseurs



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Today, the most frequent childish visitors to chez O'Shea are the three little Bartlett boys from next door. When they are at Princess Peach's house, she requests that they speak to her only in French, just as her dog, eight-year-old border collie cross Meinier (named for the grape) only takes French instruction ("She doesn't know she's a dog, I've never told her").

Princess Peach has rechristened Andrew, 9, Thomas, 7, and Oliver, 4, as André, Tomás (pronounced "Toma") and Olivier. André Bartlett's name is listed in her book's acknowledgements. "That little boy spent so many long hours at my side tidying papers, encouraging me and giving me faith in my own ability," says O'Shea. "He would accept cutting playtime short so I could return to the computer, and he told me he was sure it was going to be a 'winning' book. Therefore I acknowledged him because in his beautiful way he really thought I could do anything, and this gave me confidence in myself."

She may love champagne and Champagne, France, but clearly Lansdowne Street, Wilston, Brisbane, is the place she still feels most comfortable and secure. It is the street where Princess Peach grew up (her parents owned the house two doors up from where she lives). For a woman whose existence depends on a small slice of earth on the other side of the world, she is a fruit that has not fallen far from the ancestral tree. The family house has since been demolished to make way for one of those new-style, rendered Brisbane houses. From that old disappeared house, Brendan O'Shea would go off each morning to his job at the stores at the Royal Brisbane Hospital and all the seven O'Shea children would wander down the hill to school at St Columba's. On Sundays they would get out their good Mass dresses and their Mass shoes and Father O'Shea would put on his Mass suit. If they ever were invited to a party (a party!), they would wear their good Mass clothes.

After primary school, Bernadette helped in the family business during the day and put herself through matriculation at night, attending business college one night a week to learn typing and shorthand so she could do correspondence and accounts for her mother on weekends. (She didn't do French as a matriculation subject, so later, when she needed it, she put herself through several Alliance Française courses.)

The O'Shea family loved poetry, and Mother O'Shea played the piano and Father O'Shea played the violin; and even though there was not much money, they still remembered the

poor. Mother O'Shea collected clothes for the nuns looking after the lepers on Fantome Island (near Palm Island, off the North Queensland coast). Once she gave away Father O'Shea's entire record collection so the poor Irish nuns could have music to listen to. When Father O'Shea complained, she replied, "But you don't *need* them, Brendan."

There was never any alcoholic drink in the house except for some occasional sherry for any visiting aunts or sometimes a few beers for passing priests. Bernadette's transforming moment came one night at a party when she was 17 years old, and someone offered her a glass of red wine (which she had never drunk). It was Wynns Coonawarra. To say that it was akin to the sickly French peasant girl, also called Bernadette, who had a vision of Our Lady, leading to the discovery of the healing waters of Lourdes, is not only sacrilegious but hyperbolic. Still, the very next day our Aussie Bernadette rushed out and bought a wine book (by Len Evans, as it happened, who later became a friend) to teach herself all about wine. It was not until 1979 – possibly when she was in her ageless twenties, but I'm guessing – that she began to seriously dedicate herself to learning everything there is to know about champagne.

She taught herself: writing notes about every champagne she tasted, saving up to buy two or three bottles a month. Because she didn't possess "a chemistry mind, you know, how much acid it has, what was the rainfall and the sunshine", she started to "feel how different years had a shape in your mouth".

By 1984 she had won the Vin de Champagne medal and part of her prize was a month in Champagne. "And that was absolutely it. I thought I'd arrived in heaven." She remembered to give thanks to God.

That is the family Christian tradition Princess Peach tries to carry on, why she tries to live a good life and why she has built a little meditation corner in the back of her small garden, where she goes every morning to pray and feed numerous birds, as if she were named for St Francis and not St Bernadette. "Without that faith I wouldn't be where I am, and it's my parents who gave me this incredible faith," she says. "My mother, who just kept believing that ... being so poor, having all these children, she'd still find money for us to have music lessons and, you know, she had a faith that life was good, and that there were good people in the world."

She has never lost her belief in life as being "something amazing". "Faith is what's carried me through life, you know. With the book, everyone said, 'But you can't take a second

mortgage out! You'll lose your home, you'll lose everything!' and I said, 'Oh, yes I can', because I knew that God would look after me. I said, 'God's not taking me away from this hill!'"

SO HERE SHE IS, STILL ON HER HILL, GIVING US

yet another champagne lesson. Her party trick is being able to open a bottle of non-vintage champagne and tell you not only what year it was picked ("That's an '06 base, with some lovely '05, some really, really good '04, and no '03 in this one ...") but also which particular area of Champagne it comes from. "How I pick an Ambonnay is the taste; I taste it immediately and know it's a *grand cru*. It's the quality of the fruit, and with Ambonnay, it's just strawberries and strawberries and strawberries."

Here she is, Princess Peach, sticking her nose into a glass but smelling deeply with only her right nostril ("If I put both nostrils in, I lose

a lot of what is there, but if I put only one in, *schhoom*, it's just amazing. It's my right nostril that really gives me every bit"). Next she makes a noisy sucking sound with her teeth, and then begins to describe the champagne in the mesmerisingly beautiful, metaphorical language of food and flowers, that takes in glazed figs, toasted almonds, apricots and purple irises.

Miss Bernadette O'Shea believes that champagne heals and comforts ("We drink it in victory but we need it in defeat," said Winston Churchill) and that it carries the whiff of the divine. But Sarah Ogilvie, like many others, believes there is something divine about Miss Bernadette O'Shea. As Christian Pol-Roger writes in his foreword to her book: "In singing to us of history, tradition and mystery, Bernadette O'Shea brings us hope." *À votre santé* to that. ■ *Champagne & Chandeliers: Grand Dining Celebrations* by Bernadette O'Shea (Hardie Grant Books, \$120).



Something divine ... O'Shea, who drinks only champagne and water, in the kitchen of her inner-north Brisbane home