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Morphing from CEO to Celebrity

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“I always thought about word of mouth marketing. You can’t do just one or two things. People forget.”





Bubbly Biz CEO

# Mireille Guiliano

## Morphing from CEO to Celebrity

Last summer, Mireille Guiliano, president and CEO of Clicquot Inc, the American subsidiary of famous French Champagne house Veuve Clicquot, was sitting across from me in a banquet hall in New York's light-filled Modern restaurant. Over lunch I was struck by how much she matched her surroundings and her brand: elegant, chic, charming, and very, very French. Her smile hinted at her *joie de vivre* spirit and her perfectly tied designer scarf reflected her focused discipline, attention to detail, and above all, her sense of style. **Elin McCoy** talks to Guiliano about building a brand.

All those characteristics and what industry insiders call her genius for soft-sell marketing and savvy networking have helped Mireille Guiliano build the Veuve Clicquot brand in America from practically nothing 22 years ago to a 23% market share today, and her leadership has resulted in enviable double digit growth annually. One of the few women in a top corporate position in the male-dominated wine and spirits business, Guiliano has made Veuve Clicquot America's second best-selling Champagne brand and the image leader, its bright yellow-orange label instantly recognizable.

Now, a year-and-a-half after publishing international bestseller "French Women Don't Get Fat", Guiliano is in the throes of branding herself, using the passion and innovative, sophisticated marketing ideas she pioneered with Veuve Clicquot.

In the process she's morphing from CEO to celebrity, and building a second successful career.

Naturally we were drinking a bottle of her company's prestige cuvée, La Grande Dame, named for Veuve Clicquot's trailblazing female founder. It was the expensive rosé version, pale pink and oh-so stylishly savory. As if to illustrate the eating for pleasure philosophy of her book, the slim, disciplined Guiliano sipped slowly, lingering over the refined bubbles.

New York restaurateur Danny Meyer, Modern's owner, stopped by the table to chat. Guiliano's new celebrity status ensured that our lunch—and a mention of Veuve Clicquot—made *The New York Post's* gossip page 6.

### Starting out

The seeds of Guiliano's career were planted in her childhood, growing up in the French countryside near



The widow (Veuve) Clicquot, Nicole Barbe-Ponsardin Clicquot, only 27 when her husband died in 1805, was the most famous of the many widows in Champagne to take over their family's firm. Often regarded as the world's first businesswoman, she thrived in the competitive male-dominated industry. Shrewd and determined, she understood marketing and brand identification, beginning with her choice of bright yellow-orange to differentiate her label. Quick to spot opportunities, she built the market for champagne in Russia after the Napoleonic wars. By the time she died in 1866, Veuve Clicquot had become one of the great champagne houses.

The world's first big-business wine region, Champagne is now a 4 billion euro-a-year luxury industry, producing 307.5 million bottles in 2005. Exports to the US (20.7 million bottles) and UK (36 million) are booming. Veuve Clicquot sells about 10 million bottles globally. The firm makes a range of eight champagnes, from the popular non-vintage brut yellow label to the wildly expensive La Grande Dame. A new brut rosé was released worldwide earlier this year.

LEFT: PORTRAIT OF MADAME CLICQUOT AND HER GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER ANNE DE MORTEMART-ROCHE-CHOUART, FUTURE DUCHESSE D'UZÈS, PAINTED BY LÉON COGNIET BETWEEN 1860 AND 1862. THE CHÂTEAU DE BOURSULT IS IN THE BACKGROUND.

Alsace in a family that loved food and entertaining. Her first taste of Champagne, at age six, fortuitously turned out to be Veuve Clicquot. She spent a year as an exchange student in Boston during high school (gaining 20 pounds, more on the significance of that later), studied English and French literature in Paris at the Sorbonne and received the equivalent of a master's degree in English and German from the Institut Supérieur d'Interprétiariat et de Traduction. (By the way, she speaks Italian, too.)

What looked like the route to a teaching job in France took a turn when she met American academic Edward Guiliano on a bus in Istanbul, moved to the US and married him.

Fast forward to New York where her career began in 1973 at the UN. "I was a technical translator, and it was so boring," Guiliano recalls. "I had to get out."

In 1979 she landed a much more enjoyable position at the Champagne News and Information Bureau, a public relations firm that promoted the French Champagne industry. "I was surprised my boss hired me. I had never even written a press release," she says, "I had no experience with PR or budgets."

Being enthusiastic and French proved more important. When she proposed the very new concept of pitching spots on Champagne to 80 radio stations, her French accent in the follow-up call got results, as it did with TV. Five months into the job she was on Channel 5, talking about Champagne for New Year's Eve.

Her five years there were training ground in discovering the effectiveness of soft-sell, like her idea to bring the Champagne region's premiere chef, Gerard Boyer of La Crayères, to the US to create lunches and dinners where great bubbly were served. Never mind that he couldn't speak English – Guiliano translated. It was an era when few top chefs traveled. "We never had so much press before," she reports.

And she made connections with the major players in the industry. A program of Champagne dinners at restaurants gave her

entrée to the best chefs in America, and she spread Champagne awareness with tastings at cooking schools.

### The big break

Then, in 1984, the chairman of family-owned Veuve Clicquot hired her away to start Clicquot Inc as its US importing and marketing arm, naming her senior vice president. She saw the challenge as her big break, a chance to be more entrepreneurial, and told him, "I don't want to have to call Paris every time I want to do something."

"Other firms said I was out of my mind to take on such a risky job," she says. "But my mother always told me to ask myself, 'What's the worst that can happen?' Besides, I already knew all the competition."

Others had tried to recruit Guiliano, but everything seemed right about Veuve Clicquot – it was family-owned, it represented quality and it had a rich history, starting with the remarkable woman who built it.

### Spreading the word

In 1984, with limited money and a staff of two, Guiliano set forth her plan to promote Veuve Clicquot as the quality and image leader and began creating buzz in ways that were then highly unusual in the American wine business. "I always thought about word of mouth marketing," Guiliano says. It wasn't easy, but she left nothing to chance, spreading the word through lavish parties, clever radio spots in her own voice, imaginative product placements, and reaching out to businesswomen. "You can't do just one or two things. People forget."

Her first fabulous party, a Halloween bash complete with prizes – La Grande Dame for the best costumes – became an annual



event rotated among six cities. “I got the idea while watching the famous Greenwich Village parade from my apartment. I realized the orange and black colors were the same as Veuve Clicquot’s label,” she says.

Her dozen-plus parties a year not only entertain Veuve Clicquot’s top customers, chefs, influential foodies, wine connoisseurs, and professional friends, but also perpetrate exactly the kind of image she wants Veuve Clicquot to have – both luxury and fun – and galvanize sales, too.

After a friend produced *Babette’s Feast* (1987), which featured Veuve Clicquot in the film, Guiliano capitalized on it by hosting a private screening and re-creation of the dinner at Petrossian restaurant in New York. “That event had a huge ripple effect. It got Veuve Clicquot on the *Today* show. We did the dinner in restaurants across the country. People loved them.”

She convinced high-end stores like Saks to use dummy bottles of Veuve Clicquot in fashion displays.

“I was hands-on. I wanted Veuve Clicquot to be in the hot restaurants. I persuaded Le Cirque to make the brand their highly visible by-the-glass choice. Then San Francisco’s Jeremiah Tower saw it there and said, ‘I want it, too.’”

Today, if a new buzz-worthy restaurant is opening, Guiliano expects her staff to make sure that Veuve Clicquot is on the wine list from day one.

She concentrated on getting brand support from the best wine shops with the toniest clientele, such as Sherry-Lehmann on New York’s Upper East Side. “Veuve Clicquot had been a forgotten brand,” says owner Michael Aaron. “We were only selling 100 cases a year. Mireille talked me into giving it more space in the catalog.”

And retailers, restaurateurs, and distributors who support Veuve Clicquot receive personally written thank you notes.

A master of networking, Guiliano remembers how at one early tasting event in Washington, DC, “I overheard one woman tell another that ‘Veuve Clicquot is Mrs Getty’s favorite champagne,’ so I immediately sent Mrs Getty a bottle with a note,” says Guiliano. The Getty family made it fashionable among their Hollywood friends and when their children opened a restaurant in San Francisco, Veuve Clicquot was on the list.

In fact, Guiliano has always recognized the importance of women, especially businesswomen, as customers. Today dozens of companies are scrambling to catch up to what she did years ago.

“When I read about a woman in business or the arts achieving an honor, I send a personal letter of congratulations and a bottle of La Grande Dame,” says Guiliano. And adds her name to a very individualized Veuve Clicquot database to tap for consumer events in that city.

She sends birthday cards and bottles of La Grande Dame to chefs, knowing that when they plan their wine lists, Veuve Clicquot will probably be on their minds.

And her tastings for MBA students have had long-term effects

in building brand loyalty. “I don’t think people recognize the power of women,” she says.

One former New England wine distributor observes, “Mireille convinced wine buyers that Veuve Clicquot was the best champagne you could buy, an elitist luxury that you could afford. Instead of comparing the non-vintage Veuve Clicquot with other non-vintage Champagnes, they compared Veuve Clicquot and super high level Dom Perignon. But it wasn’t ‘push’ marketing, where a company just shoves the stuff down your throat; her genius is ‘pull’ marketing, to get consumers to demand it.”

Although Veuve Clicquot merged with Louis Vuitton in 1986 and then joined with Moët Hennessy to form luxury goods group LVMH, Guiliano had little interference from Paris. “If you have good results they leave you alone,” she says. In 1991 she was promoted to CEO, a title she says she didn’t particularly want at the time. “Up to that point there hadn’t been a CEO. I reported to someone in France.”

### The symbol of luxury

Champagne has been a symbol of luxury since the 19th century, as much about image and fashion as taste. So the financial boom years of the 1980s and 1990s and clamor of wealthy baby boomers for luxury experiences certainly helped Guiliano’s game plan, as did the new American interest in wine. “But there were many tough moments,” she says. “The beginning was hard and in 1991 during the recession we lost in six months everything we had built.”

One key to the brand’s continuing success is her insistence that every detail convey the right image.

“What I learned from her is to look at the big picture, to be comprehensive. To Mireille, every little thing matters. The stationery, invitations, the design of the office, where an event is held, how store displays look, point of sale items like pens or ice buckets – everything has to be at a very high level and say luxury. There can be no stupid key chains,” says a former employee.

That concern extends to employees. “My interview with her included lunch at Daniel Restaurant,” says a former sales manager. “I think she wants to see how people who work for her would represent the brand.”

Known as a tough, demanding manager, Guiliano thinks of herself as “an iron fist in a velvet glove. I tell my staff you don’t have to love me but you have to respect me.” She prizes loyalty and won’t rehire anyone who leaves the company. But even former employees who are critical of her personally admire her as a business woman.

A member of the Committee of 200, an international professional organization of prominent women executives and entrepreneurs, she lives her job, and expects others to do the same. “If a journalist

At my age I know what I like, what I want, what I am. I'm opinionated. Neither money nor title motivates me. I want to finish the day and say I did something today that made a difference."

calls for information, that is the priority. I tell my staff, if you have to work until 9 o'clock to prepare materials for them, you do it."

Yet at the same time, she says employees must be happy and balanced in their private lives in order to perform. Despite a schedule that includes frequent travel and eating 300 meals out every year, she practices yoga regularly, relaxes by listening to music on her iPod, and shops the Union Square market. She and her husband, now president of the New York Institute of Technology, divide their time among New York, Paris, and a home in Provence. They have no children. "If I had had a child I don't think I could have done what I did."

For many years Guiliano was the highest level woman in her company since Madame Clicquot. But in 2000, Cecile Bonnefond, a former Kellogg and Dannon executive, became the global CEO in France.

### Branding herself

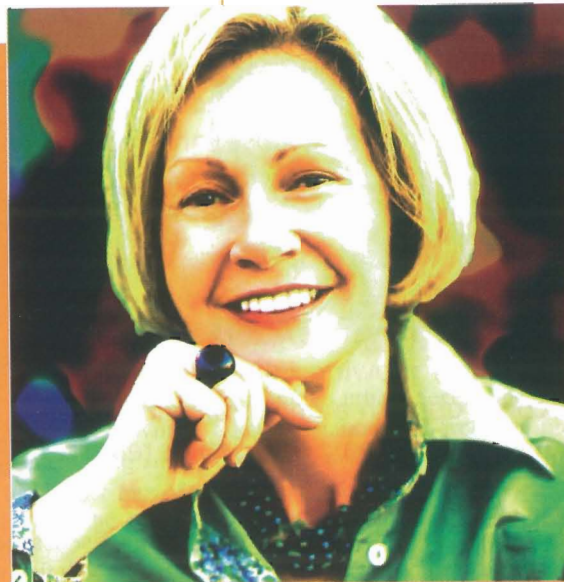
At the end of 2004, the publication of Guiliano's book "French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure" propelled her into wider popular consciousness. Dozens of speaking invitations flooded in – from Oprah, Goldman Sachs in London, New York University's Stern School of Business – and offers to host a TV cooking show ("no"), produce a documentary ("maybe").

"I thought it would sell 200,000 copies, but it's over a million. It's in 36 countries!" she says. The bestseller quickly turned into a cultural phenomenon that inspired cartoons in *The New Yorker* and an amusing spoof book, *French Cats Don't Get Fat*, which she sent out for a Christmas present last year.

Unpretentious, charming, her own book is both memoir and eating guide; it tells the story of how she lost that 20 pounds gained in America, musing on the way French women mix moderation with pleasure when it comes to food.

"Women were always asking me, 'You eat out in the best restaurants – how can you stay so thin?' I would brush it off by saying we French women have our secrets." Finally, a friend insisted now was the time to write it."

Then she did what she knows so well: wrote a marketing plan, made sure details were perfect and started creating buzz. Michael Aaron displayed the book in Sherry-Lehman's window; restaur-



rants around the country created menus from the book, and her appearances on TV – ABC, CBS, NBC – generated so much publicity for Veuve Clicquot that promoting Guiliano and her book became part of the company's corporate marketing plan.

A few months before the book came out, LVMH consolidated all its wine and spirits brands in America into billion-dollar company Moët-Hennessy USA. "It's the normal way a corporation does business now," Guiliano says. "But if I hadn't had the book it would have been sad for me, because Clicquot is now part of a different culture. A factory can't function like a workshop."

So she's also been working with a branding company. First step: a just-launched membership website, [www.Frenchwomendontgetfat.com](http://www.Frenchwomendontgetfat.com), where you can get personalized eating advice (\$19.95 one month trial subscription). "I get thousands of emails. Today the way to reach people and create buzz is the Internet."

Her new book, "French Women for All Seasons", a collection of more stories and recipes, will be out in October and Guiliano finds herself contemplating a new direction that relies on her own image.

"What's are my first love," she says. "I'm closing my circle. I love to be with people. I'm organized, a doer. I don't like anything with numbers; I'm no good sitting at long meetings. I'm not patient. At my age I know what I like, what I want, what I am. I'm opinionated. Life is too short not to do what you love. Neither money nor title motivates me. I want to finish the day and say I did something today that made a difference."

And Clicquot? She smiles and says, "I'll see what happens next year and then I'll make my decision."