



Exploring Sparkling Wine

It doesn't have to be
Champagne to be delicious

BY NICK TROILO

While French Champagne is the most celebrated and well-documented sparkling wine, it isn't the only one with merit. Through some rather enjoyable study over recent years, I've learned that the winemaking methods used in that tiny corner of France are employed throughout the world to make high-quality, reasonably priced, appealing wines.

IF IT HAS BUBBLES, IS IT CHAMPAGNE?

The traditional method of making sparkling wine owes much to the innovation of an 18th-century French monk named Dom Pérignon. The French have since laid claim to the method and reserved the name "Champagne" for their wines produced by this method (see sidebar on p. 56). True Champagne must be made from chardonnay, pinot meunier, or pinot noir grapes (or a combination) grown entirely in the Champagne district. The process, time-consuming and costly, requires more than a hundred hands-on operations.

Today, most winemakers throughout the world respect the historic claim of the French to the name "Champagne" and instead use terms such as *méthode champenoise* or simply "sparkling wine" for the wines they make according to this classic process. Italy calls such wines *metodo classico* or *metodo tradizionale*; Spain uses the word *cava*. A group of American producers has established the term CMCV (Classic Method, Classic Varieties) to designate highest-quality sparklers made primarily from traditional Champagne varietals in the time-honored eight-step process. As of September 1994, new regulations from the European Economic Community

Effervescence adds an extra dimension to sparkling wines. The bubbles, called "beads," help carry the aromas to your nose, and the fizzy texture refreshes your palate.

What makes wine sparkle?

The traditional method of making sparkling wines, called *méthode champenoise*, follows these eight steps:

1. PRESSING THE GRAPES to extract the juice. As with olive oil, the best wines come from the first pressing.

2. ADDING YEAST TO FERMENT the grape juice into wine.

3. BLENDING THE WINE to produce the “house” style desired by the winemaker, who selects from wines produced from various vintages and locations.

4. BOTTLING THE WINE FOR THE SECOND FERMENTATION. More yeast is added to the wine, and then the bottle is sealed with a metal cap so that this fermentation, which produces the bubbles, takes place in the bottle.

5. “RIDDLING” THE BOTTLES (*remuage*), which are arranged in a rack, by gradually turning and inverting them during an eight-week period until they are upside down. Riddling allows the yeast sediment to accumulate in the neck of the bottle.

6. “DISGORGING” THE SEDIMENT (*dégorgement*) by freezing the neck of the bottle with super-cold liquid and removing the frozen plug of sediment.

7. ADDING SUGAR (cane sugar dissolved in wine) to bring the wine to the sweetness level desired. This step is optional depending on the style of the wine.

8. TOPPING OFF THE BOTTLE with additional wine to replace the small amount lost in disgorging, and finally corking the bottle.—N.T.

limit the use of the term *méthode champenoise* to French sparkling wines made in this traditional way.

Sparkling wines are made in other ways in France and in other wine-producing countries. In the Charmat (or bulk) process, the secondary fermentation takes place in large tanks rather than in the bottle. The sediment is then filtered out as the wine goes from tank to bottle. Because the Charmat process is not as labor-intensive, wines made in this way are generally less expensive than wines made in the traditional method.

In the transfer method, the second fermentation takes place in a bottle, just as in *méthode champenoise*. Next, however, the contents of many bottles are mixed in a pressurized vat, the sediment filtered out (eliminating the costly riddling and disgorging steps), and the wine returned to the washed bottles. This actually allows for more uniform quality from one bottle to the next.

“Champagne” on the label of an American sparkling wine often means a wine of inferior quality that has been carbonated, as soft drinks are, to create bubbles. These wines generally sell for under \$5 and have little flavor interest.

JUDGING THE APPEAL OF SPARKLING WINE

Evaluating sparkling wines is quite similar to evaluating still wines, with the added interest of the bubbles, or “beads,” and the overall effervescence, or “mousse.” As with all wines, the first appeal is how the wine looks in the glass. To judge appearance, we look not only for clarity, intensity, and attractiveness of color, but also for the size and liveliness of the beads. Generally, the smaller the beads, the longer they last. They should flow in a steady stream that collects in a ring (“collar”) at the edge of the glass.

Next we judge the wine’s aroma, or “bouquet.” Since we actually gather most of a wine’s flavors through our sense of smell, this step is essential. But don’t swirl the glass as you would with still wines—the bubbles themselves will carry the scents to your nose, and you don’t want to dissipate the effervescence. Some wines will show yeasty, doughy qualities; others will give off aromas of apples, lemons, peaches, or even butter. These variables reflect the type of grape used, the vineyard conditions (such as soil and climate), and the winemaker’s skill in blending different samples, or “lots,” to produce an interesting, complex result. Of course, part of enjoying the “nose” of sparkling wine is the tickle. Perhaps that is one reason sparkling wines are often used to celebrate—it’s hard to put your nose into a glass of sparkling wine and not smile.

The appearance and fragrance of the wine should build your anticipation toward your first sip. The most interesting wines will deliver a full-bodied

Sparkler-speak

Key terms found on the labels of many sparkling wines can help you understand what type of wine is in the bottle.

Sweetness level

A sparkling wine becomes sweet by the addition of sugar after the second fermentation.

Brut is dry, with no more than 2% sugar.

Extra-dry, despite its name, is a little sweeter than brut, with up to 3% sugar.

Sec will be quite sweet, with 3% to 6% sugar.

Demi-sec is the sweetest category of sparkling wine, at 6% to 8% sugar.

Vintage vs. nonvintage

Most sparkling wines are not bottlings of a single vintage (unlike good-quality still wines), but rather a blend of wine from different years and locations. Blending helps the winemaker maintain a consistent style from year to year. In years when the harvest is very good, however, producers in Champagne and elsewhere may choose to declare a "vintage" year, in which a portion of their production will come from grapes of that vintage only.

Vintage (millésime) sparkling wines are more expensive and generally of higher quality, but because each producer's vintage varies from year to year, the consumer needs to follow vintage quality and availability.



Varieties

Blanc de blancs (white wine from white grapes) is made primarily from chardonnay and has a fairly light body.

Blanc de noirs (white wine from "black" grapes) has a fuller body and comes primarily from pinot noir or pinot meunier grapes, or a blend of both.

Rosé sparkling wine, which is very full bodied, is made by macerating pinot noir grapes with their skins to infuse the juice with some flavor and tannin.



Choose the right glass for more fizz and flavor. When choosing glasses to serve a sparkling wine, avoid low, wide “coupe” cups (left) that dissipate the sparkler’s delightful bubbles. Save these for sherbet and stick with tall, slim “tulips” (center) or “flutes” (right). These let you admire the rising beads and the collar they form at the

surface. The tall, narrow shape of these glasses also concentrates the wine’s aromas in a small space, delivering them—as the bubbles pop—right to your nose. Many experts use nothing but hot water to wash their glassware, claiming that detergent residue not only imparts off flavors, but actually prevents bubbles from forming.

mousse to the tip of the tongue. Next, look at the wine’s balance. Is it as sweet or dry as expected, as light or full-bodied, as crisp or as creamy? Finally, evaluate the finish of the wine. How long do the flavors remain? Do new or different flavors develop as you savor the wine? Are you tempted to take another sip?

CHAMPAGNE VS. OTHER SPARKLERS

Although I usually choose a Champagne for special celebrations, for most occasions I can find high-quality, good-value sparkling wines from various areas of the world. Other areas of France, notably Vouvray in the Loire region, produce good *vins mousseux* at affordable prices. Spanish *cavas*, also relatively inexpensive, offer fresh, fruity flavors for everyday quaffing. The best ones come from the Penedès region just west of Barcelona in Catalonia. Although these are traditionally made from Spanish white grapes, including parellada, viura (also called Macabeo), and the exotic-sounding xarel-lo, recent plantings of classic varieties promise future bottlings in the French style. *Cavas* to look for include Segura Viudas, Castellblanch (their Brut Zero has no added sugar), and Paul Cheneau, in addition to Codorníu and Freixenet.

The Italian term *spumante* simply means “sparkling,” and the best-known examples come from the town of Asti in the Piedmont region. Although these Asti Spumante and Moscato d’Asti wines, made

from the muscat grape, are usually sweet enough to serve with dessert, other *spumante* wines can be absolutely dry. For a light, pleasant aperitif wine in the \$10 range, try a *prosecco* from the Veneto towns of Conegliano or Valdobbiadene. Fontanafredda, from the Piedmont, makes a very fine traditional sparkling wine, and Ca’ del Bosco, in the Lombardy lake district, produces several Champagne-style bottlings of exceptional quality.

American *méthode champenoise* wines also provide both quality and value. Schramsberg, Scharffenberger, Iron Horse, Château St. Jean, Shadow Creek, and Jordan make consistently fine sparklers. Additionally, many of the famous French houses have vast vineyard holdings in California and produce sparkling wines using the same grapes and the same methods—and in some instances the same winemakers—as in Champagne. These French-Californian wines include Piper Sonoma, Mumm Napa Valley, Maison Deutz, Domaine Chandon, Roederer Estate, and Taittinger’s Domaine Carneros. And recently, the two largest Spanish *cava* producers have followed suit: Codorníu, with Codorníu Napa, and Freixenet, with Gloria Ferrer. Because of differences in soil and climate, the European and American wines will be different. I like to compare French and American wines from the same producer in side-by-side tastings to look for stylistic similarities in texture, concentration of mousse, and color density.

Although California leads the way domestically in producing quality *méthode champenoise* wines, several other states have begun to produce excellent and economical examples. Domaine Ste. Michelle in Washington State, where the northerly latitude provides both a cool climate and long, sunny days during the growing season, makes a range of good sparklers. And in the cool climate of Oregon, Argyle makes very fine sparkling wine from the classic French varieties.

Sparkling wine, straight up. For the most part, I avoid mixing sparkling wines with other beverages. Although the mimosa, which blends bubbly with orange juice, is popular for brunch and lunch, I take the purist approach, preferring to savor the wine as made by the winemaker. Likewise, I’d rather buy a demi-sec sparkling wine when I want a sweeter drink than add cassis to a dry wine to make kir royale. Since mixing in other flavors camouflages the wine, use a less expensive sparkling wine if you want to experiment for yourself with mixed drinks.

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Sparkling wine goes with...

BY ROSINA TINARI WILSON

Does sparkling wine go with everything? Many experts say yes, although I draw the line at heavy, full-flavored roasts and dense chocolate desserts, which tend to wipe out the wine's subtleties. The world of sparklers offers such a broad range of flavor, sweetness, and overall intensity, however, that you can serve them with just about anything else, from clear soup to toasted nuts.

Sparkling wine differs from still wine in a number of important ways, creating a unique set of food affinities. Because the grapes are picked early, when they're still underripe and full of natural acidity, the finished wine is both delicate and pleasantly tart. The second fermentation, which creates the bubbles, gives the wine a whole new texture. If the bubbly is then aged on the yeast that's left from its second fermentation (still wines rarely have extra yeast contact), it picks up complex flavors reminiscent of bread or pastry. And unlike many still wines, sugar is often added to sparklers—even to the driest category, known as “brut.”

TART

The high acidity of sparkling wine makes it a good match for tart foods, such as lemon sauces or citrus dressings. Acidity also works—as do the bubbles—as a palate cleanser, cutting through rich, fatty foods, such as salmon (smoked or otherwise), cream and butter sauces, and the ultimate in unctuousness, foie gras.

The “mousse,” or effervescence, of a sparkler gives the wine a mouth-feel all its own. Not only does it create a “party on your palate,” it adds enough texture so that even a simple consommé, for instance, won't seem boring.

SAVORY

Salty foods make great partners for sparklers as well, and once again, it's because of the bubbles. Salt makes a carbonated drink fizz up in your

mouth, magnifying the flavors of both food and beverage. So bring on the briny raw oysters, tangy cured olives, and, of course, the caviar.

When sparkling wines that are aged on their yeast show doughy or pastry-like flavors, they tend to bond with any kind of bread product. “Late-disgorged” sparklers that have spent a dozen or more years on yeast (*en tirage*) show this effect even more dramatically. Croissants or muffins at brunch, croutons in a lobster bisque, and toast points for canapés all echo similar flavors in the glass.

SPICY

Slightly sweet sparklers (even those marked “brut” can have noticeable sugar) show a special affinity for both spicy and somewhat sweet foods. Just as a fruit chutney can tame the flames of a curry, an off-dry wine can balance out the heat of a mildly spicy dish. Try an inexpensive but good bubbly with sushi, Thai shrimp salad, stir-fried dishes, or even jambalaya. Don't go too high on the heat meter, though, or you'll erase some of the wine's delicacy.

SWEET

For sweet dishes, especially desserts, choose a wine with a sugar level that matches or exceeds that of the ingredients. A dish that's sweeter than a wine can throw the wine completely out of whack, making it seem sour, bitter, or tasteless.

As with all food and wine pairings, the main guideline to follow with sparkling wine and food is to match the overall body of the wine and the dish. For example, if you have a delicate chardonnay-based blanc de blancs, go with something subtle: light seafood, chicken, or perhaps pasta in a cream sauce. A bigger bubbly, such as a blanc de noirs, can handle fuller-flavored food: meaty salmon, roast turkey, pork, veal. And a dry rosé sparkler, halfway to red wine, is probably your



Sparkling wines go with more than just caviar. There are so many styles of sparkling wine that it's easy to find a perfect match for almost any dish, even slightly spicy Asian food.

best bet with red meat such as beef, lamb, or venison—but don't expect it quite to stand up as an equal partner.

Rosina Tinari Wilson is a food, wine, and travel writer and consultant. She teaches the Food & Wine Affinities course at the California Culinary Academy and has just published her first cookbook, Seafood, Pasta & Noodles—The New Classics (Ten Speed Press, 1994). ♦