

A GOOD SEASON FOR *Sparkling Wines*

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As the holiday gets into full swing consider the role of sparkling wines in the celebrations that are basic to the welcome accorded to Christmas and the New Year. But just how much do aficionados know what they are drinking? Here are some clues.

Champagne is synonymous with its French origin. But other sparkling wines are attracting the attention of price-conscious consumers who can save considerable funds by switching to Crémants from Alsace, the Spanish Cavas, or the Italian Proseccos. And, of course, there are domestic champagnes/sparklers from New York State, California, Oregon and Washington State.

In Champagne, the classic grapes are Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and "la Bonne Sauce," Pinot Meunier. The best California sparkling wine producers use the same Champagne grapes often adding or substituting Pinot Blanc for Pinot Meunier since little of the latter is planted in California.

Other countries such as Portugal, Argentina and Australia (which has just introduced a sparkling version the highly successful Yellowtail) also produce a clutch of sparklers from indigenous grapes. Sweet and dry Shiraz are among the most innovative bubbly to arrive in the U.S. in years, although not yet major factors on local shelves.

Some American effervescent are labeled Champagne under a "grandfather" law that permits the producer to use the French regional name such as Roederer and Mumm in California

and Brotherhood in New York State.

Global Champagne sales are expected to drop to as low as 260 million bottles this year from a high of 339 million bottles in 2007. By 2008, as the recession set in, sales slipped to 322 million bottles, the first decline since 2000. one of the starkest signs yet of how cutbacks in consumer spending are affecting this segment of the luxury-goods market.

Grape growers and bottlers of the wine in the Champagne region haven't significantly cut the volume of usable grapes since 1955, when a bumper harvest was reduced.

This year there are some price breaks as suppliers offer concessions to restaurants and package stores. In contrast, there are some price advances at the top end of the market.

Even the scientific community has gotten into the tastevin art of discriminating favorites. "It is Champagne's bubbles which give the drink flavor and fizz, and glasses that pro-

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mote bubbles will improve the drinking experience," says Dr Jamie Goode, a specialist in wine technology. "Research shows there are up to 30 times more flavor-enhancing chemicals in the bubbles than in the rest of the drink."

Commenting on the research he notes, "In the past, we thought that the carbon dioxide in the bubbles just gave the wine an acidic bite and a little tingle on the tongue.

"But the research demonstrates that using fluted tulip glasses for sparkling wine and champagne is more than sim-



ply a matter of etiquette. The narrow opening concentrates the visual bubbling effect."

Not advised is the coupe with its wide surface area and modeled so history tells after Marie Antoinette's breasts, a custom shape prevalent in the days of Helen of Troy.

This year is the 50th anniversary of a unique version of the traditional unsweetened brut. At the house of Laurent-Perrier, in 1959, Bernard de Nonancourt, World War II hero and the current owner, decided that the current system, with its roots traced to 1812, was too restrictive and he realized that by combining three different vintages he could make a prestige vin de cuvée (free run juice) that was at the same time more complex and more consistent.

Hence was born Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle (\$210), a new category — a multi-vintage prestige cuvée with flavors of almonds, hazel nuts and honey, white peaches and toasted bread, and all this a testament to the fine art of blending Champagne.

Today, the dominant style in Champagne is the non-vintage house blend (NV) and receives the most consumer attention. The honor roll is a guide to the best of the bubbly and includes such grands maisons as the smallest of the great producers, Gosset, to one of the fastest growing brands, Nicolas Feuillatte. In this group, among other houses, are such famous NV's as Taittinger, Pommery, Mumm, Perrier Jouet and Roederer. Their house style, then, provides a consistency for consumers..

The art of Champagne is in the blending. Even a vintage cuvée is a blend of Champagnes made from three differ-

ent varieties of grapes grown by hundreds of different vigneron.

Bottles from this year's harvest won't be uncorked until they have aged for at least two years. Champagne from different years can also be blended in a standard bottle. The last few years yielded record harvests — 405 million bottles were produced last year — which are now coming onto the market just as demand slumps.

To move more Champagne in a tough market, some wine distributors have been making "creative offerings" to restaurants, such as offering a discounted price if a certain amount is purchased.

Obviously all Champagne does not come from France. In an international agreement some U.S. producers are still legally allowed to use the appellation name.

Taking an eclectic approach, the Brotherhood Winery in New York's Hudson Valley, dating to 1843 and the oldest operating winery in the U.S., now reinvigorated by an infusion of investment by Chilean wine makers, has produced a really fine Blanc de Blanc whose label includes the subscript Champagne made by the méthode champenoise.

Possibly one of the most famous Champagne-sparkling wine houses in New York is Chateau Frank in Hammondsport, founded more than a half century ago by Dr. Konstantin Frank, who introduced vinifera vines to the state. Now, under the management of third-generation Frederick Frank, it's distributed in 30 states, earning a clutch of gold medals this year.

In Guerneville, Calif., the 125-year-old Korbel Champagne Cellars has introduced

its first Brut Champagne made entirely with organically grown grapes, according to Gary Heck, owner and president. The Korbel Winery has incorporated sustainability across its vineyards and wine-making process for decades, from land conservation to recycling and reclaiming materials used at the winery.

The grapes used to make the new Korbel California Brut Champagne have been produced according to the USDA organic certification requirements. The fruit is grown without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers. Like all Korbel California Champagnes, the new Brut with organically grown grapes is made using the traditional méthode champenoise technique where secondary fermentation takes place inside the bottle.

The most classic California sparkling wines often are bottled using méthode traditionnelle by companies with French mother houses, such as Domaine Chandon and Roederer. Wines produced in this way are among the more expensive domestic offerings. What they most often have in common is a focus on traditional sparkling wine production methods and the primary use of the three classic Champagne grapes: pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier.

Italy's fast growing Mionetto Prosecco, its volume up 28 percent in the US for the first half of the year, is typically produced via the charmat process, wherein the secondary fermentation occurs in stainless steel tanks, using a white grape variety native to the Veneto region.

Now the historic producer, who has been making wine

since 1887 and who introduced Prosecco to America, is adding a certified organic wine, according to Enola Ceola, managing director of Mionetto USA.

Spanish Cava also uses the méthode traditionnelle from the grape trio of macabeo, parrellada and xarel-lo and can be produced in quite a few regions, although the bulk of it hails from Caraluita in northeast Spain and less pricey Champagne.

“Cava offers an alternative to Champagne,” says Roy Danis, president of importer, Aveniu. “Codorniu Cava products are made in the exact style of Champagne, unlike other Spanish sparkling wine producers. We use the same grape varieties as do most champagne houses: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Yet our prices for Codorniu Cava products are significantly lower than Champagnes. Our Codorniu Cava Original Product has a suggested shelf price of approximately \$9.99 and our Codorniu Cava Pinot Noir has a suggested shelf price of approximately \$14.99.

And in this year of the swine virus, consider the advice of Edmond Mauchère, consulting enologist for Domaine Chandon. He advises, “In a pan, pour a half bottle of Chandon brut and five tablespoons of sugar and simmer on the stove. Add a pinch of cinnamon.

“Before drinking this potion, get in bed, cover yourself with two blankets then — and only then drink the solution. Within 15 minutes you will be asleep,” M Mauchère advises you will be fast asleep and your cold will be on its way. “Repeat as needed.”

Nota Bene: Coming into

spring, if you are planning to christen a boat with a champagne bottle this year, don't. Besides a waste of good Champagne, there is a danger of flying glass, a fate avoided in major ceremonies by using a bottle that has been scored to shatter easily.

And don't aim a cork upon disgorging at a friend. The 6G muzzle velocity is awesome.

HARVEST SPARKLER

3 red grapes and 3 green grapes

1 lemon wedge

1/2 oz. simple syrup

1/4 oz. Cointreau or Grand Marnier

3 oz. Moët & Chandon Champagne

Method: Muddle the grapes and lemon wedge in the simple syrup. Add the champagne with ice and stir briefly. Strain into a champagne flute. Garnish: sliced red and green grapes floating inside the glass.

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