

Tiny Bubbles: Choosing The Sparkler For Your Valentine

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On the hunt for that special bottle of bubbly to share with your sweetheart this Valentine's Day? Maybe this is the year to ditch your go-to sparkler and try something a little different.

Local retailers offer a wide range of options in the sparkling wine category. But Mike Carroll, owner of Leesburg Vintner and Carroll Vineyards says for special occasions there's nothing like real French champagne. "It's got a unique taste...it's the soil," he said. "There's nothing like it."

While there are excellent sparkling wines available from all over the world, real champagne only comes from the Champagne region in France. The region's chalky soils and cool climate lend themselves to distinct characteristics that lead many experts to consider Champagnes the best sparkling wines in the world. Because of the complex and time-consuming process used to make them, real Champagnes tend to be relatively pricey, but there are high-quality alternatives for almost any budget.

Champagnes—and many other quality sparkling wines—are produced using the méthode champenoise or méthode traditionnelle, a double fermentation process. This process involves the initial fermentation of still wines, followed by the blending of those wines to achieve a desired style—called assemblage in France—and secondary fermentation in the bottle (the fermentation under pressure creates those wonderful bubbles) in which blended still wines are bottled with yeast and a small amount of sugar. Regional rules require that Champagnes age in the bottle for at least 15 months—this aging of the yeast, or lees, gives many Champagnes a sought-after rich, nutty flavor. Champagnes are made at various levels of sweetness, which is controlled by adding a sugar syrup or dosage before the final bottling. Most Champagnes are Brut, which is on the dry end of the spectrum.

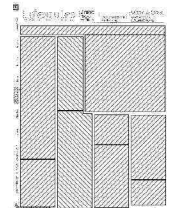
Most Champagnes are also non-vintage, a blend of base wines from several different years. Winemakers generally do this to achieve a consistency of flavor that many consumers expect, so you won't see a vintage year on the bottle. In years with a good harvest, Champagne producers do make vintage Champagnes made of grapes from one harvest. Vintage Champagnes are made from

more selectively chosen grapes and also require a longer aging time, so they tend to be more expensive.

And if you really want to splurge, you can take it up another notch with a prestige cuvee, or blend, which uses the very best grapes from a particular vintage. Some of the better-known prestige cuvées include Dom Perignon (produced by Moët et Chandon), La Grande Dame (produced by Veuve Clicquot) and Cristal (produced by Louis Roederer). But most of the larger Champagne houses offer prestige cuvées so the options are expansive. These high-end Champagnes are often marketed as luxury products with brand appeal, but are also fine wines that offer complex, rich flavors that many experts consider to be worth the price.

Most Champagnes are a blend of white and black, or red, grapes, and there are three main grape varieties used in champagnes and other types of sparkling wine: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. While most winemakers opt to blend different varieties to achieve a balance of flavors, many do offer single varietal blends: a Champagne made exclusively of Chardonnay grapes is a Blanc de Blancs, and a Blanc de Noirs is generally made only of Pinot Noir, sometimes with a little Pinot Meunier added. Winemakers press gently and allow a minimum of skin contact to get clear juice from dark grapes. Rosé champagnes, appreciated by many aficionados as the most food friendly of champagnes, are made by allowing some of the wine from black grapes to sit on skins after crushing, or by simply adding a small amount of red Pinot Noir wine to the blend during assemblage.

Producers in the Champagne region have been leading a crusade to ban the use of the word Champagne on labels of sparkling wines produced in other places. While American officials have so far declined to ban the name, most high quality U.S. producers opt to use the words sparkling wine on their labels. However, some lower end U.S. producers continue to use the term. (A word to the wise: if it costs \$6 and the



label says Champagne, it's not really Champagne.)

Other methods used to achieve bubbles in less expensive sparklers include the injection of carbon dioxide into wine and the Charmat method in which the secondary fermentation takes place in tanks rather than in the bottle.

However, many other high-quality sparklers also use the méthode traditionnelle technique. Spanish Cava and Italian Proseccos are among the best known European sparklers, and there are many highly rated U.S. sparklers produced using the traditional method.

Karen DeLeo, wine manager at Wegman's in Leesburg, says price point is the first question she asks when someone comes in to the store without an idea of what he or she wants. "Then we want to know how they're going to be consuming it"

For example, more expensive Champagnes, she says, are not recommended for mixing in mimosas and other cocktails. There are plenty of less pricey sparklers that are better for those purposes. Just as you wouldn't add orange juice to \$30 Bordeaux, champagnes are best on their own. Wegman's offers a weekly Mimosa Sunday tasting from 10 a.m. to noon, mixing various sparkling wines (including Cava, Proseccos and sparklers from various regions in France and the U.S.) with fresh-squeezed orange juice.

Wegman's best selling sparkling wine, DeLeo said, is a Cava called Cristalino, which sells for \$6.99 and is popular for parties and receptions. "People tend to buy it by the case," she said.

DeLeo says French sparkling wines from regions other than Champagne are often a bargain, including the popular Charles de Fère at \$11.99 and Villamont, a Crémant de Bourgogne from the nearby region of Burgundy for \$14.99.

"It's not necessary to spend a great deal of money to get something good," she said.

DeLeo also points out that many well-known French Champagne houses, including Mumm, Piper Heidsieck, and Moët et Chandon, produce lower priced sparkling wines in California. These California siblings often retail in the \$15 dollar range while their Champagne sisters are between \$30 and \$40. DeLeo also is a fan of Gloria Ferrer, a Sonoma sparkling wine, which offers a Brut and a Blanc de Noirs for \$16.99 each.

"I tend to give it as gifts," she said. "People aren't necessarily familiar with it, but they love it."

But while consumers choose something less expensive for parties, they may want something special for Valentine's Day. Wegman's best selling

champagne is the famous Veuve Clicquot yellow label, which retails at \$39.88. A bottle of 2005 Cristal sells for \$199.99 and a 2002 Cristal rosé for \$449.99.

Consumers often stick with familiar brands when buying a non-vintage champagne for \$30-\$40. But Leesburg Vintner's Carroll says lesser-known champagnes can often give consumers more bang—or bubble—for their buck.

Carroll carries a Grand Cru Champagne, Louis de Sacy, at \$35 for a brut and \$39.99 for a rosé. For everyday sparklers, Carroll recommends Villa Jolanda Prosecco at \$11.99 or Segura Viudas Cava at \$9.99.

"Buy one you've never heard of—that's where the bargains are," he said. "With French champagnes, I don't think you can make a mistake."

On the same note, Wegman's offers a Champagne produced by the not-so-well-known house Jeanmaire at \$27.99.

And then there's Costco's Kirkland Champagne, produced by respected producer Janisson & Fils. Costco's characteristic minimal markup and the lack of marketing expenses allow the company to sell its well-rated store brand champagne for \$19.99

Because of production costs and the complexities of making a traditional method sparkling wine, most Virginia wineries have avoided producing their own sparklers. However a few wineries around the region are giving it a shot. Loudoun's Tarara Winery recently launched its Bad to the Bone Bubbles, which sells for \$35 at the winery.

Carroll also recommends the Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay produced in Charlottesville (\$17.99 for a half bottle and \$29.99 for a whole). Winemaker Claude Thibaut produces this Virginia sparkler in partnership with Manuel Janisson, who produces Grand Cru Champagnes in France under his own label, as well as the Kirkland Champagne available at Costco.

Thibaut, who runs the operation in Virginia, is a native of the Champagne region and has consulted in wineries around the world, producing sparkling wines in France, California and Australia. Thibaut settled in Virginia in 2003 to consult for the now-defunct Kluge winery and then launched his own company with Janisson in 2005.

"I saw an enormous potential in Virginia," he said.

The company's Blanc de Chardonnay has garnered positive reviews and has been served at a state dinner at the White House. It's currently being poured by the glass at Salamander Resort in

Middleburg.

Producers and retailers agree that Americans should stop reserving sparkling wines for special occasions and try them as every-day wines. Carroll recommends sparkling wine with Chinese and other Asian cuisines—the salty, spicy flavors pair well with the bubbles and crisp acidity of many sparklers.

“They’re so good with food,” he said. “I wish people would drink sparkling wines more than they do.” ■



Could you tell the difference between “real” champagne and this sparkling wine?

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