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Suddenly, West Coast is sparkling

Two short years ago I asked why there weren't more West Coast sparkling wine producers. Did I tempt fate? It now seems like practically everyone is getting into the sparkling game.

After all, Americans are drinking more sparkling wine than ever before. Last year, sparkling wine sales in the U.S. grew by 25 percent, and sparkling rosé by 20 percent, according to Nielsen data. Our palates seem increasingly interested in light and refreshing drinks; witness the popularity of rosé, or of spritz cocktails (which often incorporate sparkling wine). In 2016, I named a cult California sparkling wine producer, Michael Cruse, the Chronicle Winemaker of the Year. Surely a few short years ago we could not have fathomed the phrase "cult California sparkling wine producer."

Now, in addition to the old California standbys — the Schramsbergs and Iron Horses and Scharffenbergers — there's a smattering of new names, too. Some are following the age-old method of transplanting a Champagne-based company to California (Pommery), but in a new trend, several California wineries (Jordan, **Boisset**, Claypool, Vivier) are actually making Champagne *in Champagne*.

Then there are California's native newcomers. In addition to Under the Wire, Lichen Estate, Caraccioli and Cruse's Ultramarine, a bunch of new wine labels are entirely devoted to bubbly (such as Loubud, Breathless, Flaunt), and established still-wine producers are now dabbling in the stuff (Presqu'île, Lucas & Lewellen, Alma Rosa, Fess Parker and too many more to name here).

Beyond the wines modeled on Champagne, there are all sorts of sparkling wines made with unorthodox grapes or by unorthodox methods: sparkling

Grenache (Rock Wall), charmat-method Sauvignon Blanc (Bodkin), plus pétillant-naturels of every hue imaginable from the likes of Scar of the Sea, Donkey & Goat, Halcyon, Birichino and Broc. Next year, Larkmead assistant winemaker Dan Person will be debuting his sparkling-focused Carboniste label with a traditional-method Albariño.

(For visual proof of this proliferation, check out Liz Dodder's maps of sparkling wine producers just in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties on her blog, Cali Coast Wine Country.)

Given the bubbles-positive consumer market, I assumed that many of these new American sparkling wine labels would be the products of extensive R&D, born of calculated marketing strategies.

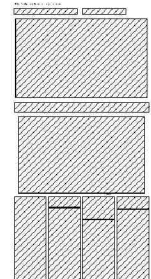
I was very wrong.

"Bubbly was a backup plan," says Ryan Beauregard of Santa Cruz's Beauregard Vineyards, who released his first sparkling wines earlier this year. "The weather forced us into doing it."

2010 brought such a cold harvest season, Beauregard explains, that a section of grapes in Beauregard's Bald Mountain Vineyard couldn't get ripe. The result? Pinot Noir and Chardonnay far too acidic to make into still wine. Although he'd never made sparkling wine before, Beauregard figured he'd give it a shot.

That nascent base wine spent five years *en tirage* — resting in bottle with the dead yeast cells — while Beauregard saved up to buy the equipment he'd need to finish the process. To fund the purchases of a riddling rack, a bottle neck freezer, a disgorgement agent and more, he offered the sparkling wines to his mailing list as futures.

But equipment wasn't Beauregard's biggest hurdle. Knowledge was. When technical questions came up, he had no



one to call for guidance. “YouTube became my teacher,” he says. “I watched a bunch of videos in French. Eventually it started to make sense.” Now Beaugard has released some wines from that first, serendipitous 2010 vintage — but he’s keeping about 300 bottles *en tirage* until 2020, and plans to continue to keep a portion of each year’s inventory under extended lees aging.

A different sort of accident led to the inaugural 2014 vintage of sparkling wine from Oregon’s Willamette Valley Vineyards.

Back in 1983, the winery’s founder, Jim Bernau, planted an uncommon Chardonnay clone, called Espiguette 352, at his estate vineyard. Those Espiguette grapes “always made our least favorite Chardonnay,” says winery director Christine Clair. “It was too acidic, never had much body to it, and the flavors never got beyond lemon or lime,” Clair says. “It was just a neutral white wine.”

Decades later, it occurred to the team: What if instead of trying to make a Burgundy-style Chardonnay, they attempted a Champagne-style Chardonnay? “We decided that we could dedicate these grapes to what they were meant to do,” Clair says.

Willamette Valley Vineyards enlisted the help of local winemaker Andrew Davis, a protege of Rollin Soles at Oregon’s best-known sparkling winery,

Argyle. To spread the bubbly gospel, Davis had recently launched Radiant Sparkling Wine Company to help small wineries make sparkling wine — imagining an Oregonian version of the grower-producer Champagne movement. With Davis’ guidance, Willamette Valley Vineyards can make its brut mostly in its own winery, sending the bottles out to the Radiant facility only for riddling and disgorgement.

“We really believe sparkling is something Oregon can be known for,” Clair says, pointing out that its climate and varietals — Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, two of Champagne’s major grapes — “are a perfect fit.”

Production volume has expanded each year, reaching about 2,000 cases in the 2017 vintage. Willamette Valley Vineyards has even purchased a new vineyard in the Dundee Hills area that will grow grapes for sparkling wine exclusively. They’ve planted some more Espiguette 352 Chardonnay there, which will come into production in time for next year’s vintage.

Careful planning or happy accident? Who’s keeping track?

Ryan Beaugard is still feeling it out. “The sparkling is selling well now, and if it seems like something I feel I can actually make a couple bucks at, I’ll increase my production,” Beaugard says. “For now it just feels like beginner’s luck.”



Beauregard Vineyards Sparkling Rosé Brut Nature Coast Grade Vineyard 2015 (12.9%, \$65): Ryan Beauregard began experimenting with sparkling wine in the 2010 vintage, but didn't release any until this year. Now several vintages are available. Of his rosés, the 2015 — a Pinot Noir from the chilly Coast Grade Vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains — shows the most focus, with light fruit flavors, a rich texture and a bracingly dry mouthfeel. It smells like orange peel and tastes like strawberries and cream.

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McIntyre "L'Homme Qui Rit" Santa Lucia Highlands NV (13%, \$42): The McIntyre Estate Vineyard in Monterey County has long produced grapes for sparkling wines, and since 2005 has made its own. Stony and citrus-y, this Pinot Noir wine smells like blanched almond and leads on the palate with tart green apple. It finishes with the distinct impression of orange soda.

Jordan Cuvée by Champagne AR Lenoble Brut NV (12.5%, \$49): This collaboration between Sonoma's Jordan Winery and the Champagne house AR Lenoble is the only true Champagne on this list, created entirely in France's famous sparkling wine region. A roughly even blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, the wine is about one-third from grand cru sites. It's rich, with a full, creamy texture, dominated by citrus flavors.



Presqu'île Sparkling Rosé Santa Maria Valley 2012 (12.9%, \$65): Juicy and flavorful, this sparkling rosé has plenty of varietal Pinot Noir character: red berries, orange peel, steely iron. Lean, with a precise, linear texture.



Willamette Valley Vineyards Brut Willamette Valley 2014 (11.1%, \$55): This zippy, brisk wine holds a generosity of texture in beautiful contrast with its austerity of flavor. It smells like gunflint and yogurt, in the best possible way; hazelnut, lemon and brioche flavors follow. Equal parts Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

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Ryan Beauregard, Beauregard Vineyards, who released his first sparkling wines this year

Louis Pommery Brut California NV (12.5%, \$22): Louis Pommery is the latest grande marque Champagne house to make a California sparkling wine, and its first release is 96 percent Chardonnay. Honey and brioche lead into a creamy wine with flavors of lemon rind and golden apple.



Breathless Blanc de Noirs North Coast NV (12.5%, \$30): From a young Sonoma County winery, this quaffable wine is clean, if a little bit lacking in character, suggesting raspberry and almond.

Flaunt Brut Sonoma County NV (12.5%, \$85): Flaunt is the new sparkling label from Dianna Novy Lee, co-founder of Siduri Wines. Her inaugural release, a blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay sourced from Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley vineyards, is ultra-fruity, dominated on the nose by bright aromas of apricot and peach, with a crisp texture.