

## California's Champagne Affair

👤 Roger Morris 🕒 April 7, 2017 📁 Columns, Wine Spotlight

Can California wineries make Champagne?

Of course they can! Over the past three years, at least four California wineries have started doing so.

Before I get sabered by a regiment of WSET candidates for dealing in alternative facts, let me hasten to add that these Californians are making their signature Champagnes the only way true Champagne can be made: *in the famous French wine region.*

Yes, Champagne is very protective of its name, and has been for more than a century. This is not only their heritage, but a valuable intellectual property. According to EU law (and more than 70 countries that recognize it), no one but the Champenois makes Champagne, not even with a small c. And no wine writer worth his or her *dosage* will use the C word as a generic term for sparkling wines. Sparklers, fizz, bubbly – certainly, Champagne – never.

Even when a half dozen Champagne houses – Moët et Chandon, Taittinger, Roederer and Mumm among them – started making bubbly in California in the 1970s, they were careful to correctly label it “sparkling wine.” And the French region was delighted in 2006 when the U.S. government finally signed a European trade agreement that banned any American winery from labeling its wine as Champagne, unless it already had been doing so. The winemakers of Napa Valley, who also have their own important brand to protect, were in full agreement. Of course, a few California wineries can still legally mislead with their bubbles, but most of those so grandfathered have dropped the usage.

There's no law, however, preventing outsiders from producing the stuff *in Champagne*. Today, Jean-Charles Boisset's historic [Buena Vista winery](#) makes and markets a real-deal Champagne under its own label. So does Jordan Winery. Also, Vivier Wines. And Claypool. Undoubtedly, others will follow.

But, as my late mother-in-law was fond of asking, “Why would you want to do that?”

Let's find out, shall we? Here's a rundown of the new wave of Californians who have dared to cross the Merne:

### Buena Vista La Victoire Champagne Brut NV (\$49)



Not surprisingly, a prime mover on the west coast has been a Frenchman – Boisset – who no one ever accused of keeping a cork on sparkling ideas. “Champagne has always come to California,” recounts the Boisset Collection chief. “So we thought it would be a good idea for California to go to Champagne.”

He’s got a multitude of other reasons. First, the historical one. “In 1866, Arpad Haraszthy, who had studied in Champagne, made California’s first *methode traditionnelle* sparkling wine at Buena Vista,” Boisset notes. So making an actual BV Champagne closes that loop. Second, the Burgundy-born producer loves Champagne, and one day would like to have a Boisset-branded cellar there – so this BV sparkler may in part be a test run. Third, it was a significant marketing addition to the winery’s portfolio. Fourth, Boisset loves entertaining, and how can anyone be expected to entertain without Champagne?

Clearing this idea through CIVC, the Champagne trade group, was the initial hurdle. “They were very helpful,” Boisset recalls. Essentially, everything had to be done in Champagne. There, Boisset and his team directed the cuvée’s production and bottled the wine with American labels before it ever left the Marne Valley.

“We have friends who own a lot of premier cru and grand cru vineyards,” he says. “We started working on Champagne in 2012, but were not pleased with our first attempt. The goal was to create a good mouth feel, a good texture. And because we’re from Burgundy, we wanted it to be mainly Pinot Noir [70%], with no Pinot Meunier.”

The first run of 5,000 cases got good feedback from restaurants and hotels where it launched. “Our 10-year plan is to build up to 15,000 to 18,000 cases over time,” Boisset says. He’s also adding a rosé to the line this summer.

“It took a little longer to get the rosé right,” he concludes.