

The Basics of Bubbly

Sparkling wines pair with far more than holidays and special occasions.

STORY AND PHOTO BY BEVERLY TAYLOR

TOO OFTEN, RESOLUTIONS ARE NOT THE ONLY THING that fall by the wayside after Jan. 1.

According to the Wine Institute, about 40 percent of sparkling wine sales fall in the last quarter of the year. Consumers who save it for holiday celebrations or wedding toasts fail to realize how food-friendly and affordable fizz can be all year round. Local people in the wine business find it extremely versatile.

"It can work with every food and every meal you are eating," says Wendy Watts, wine buyer at Whole Foods Market.

Patti Davidson and Foster Smith at the Vintage Wine Shoppe agree there's virtually no food you can't match with fizz, citing fatty foods like buttered popcorn, fries or marbled steak.

"One of the jokes I use is it's scrubbing bubbles for your tongue," says Smith, who also holds tastings for groups around town. "Whether it's butter or animal fat, Champagne cuts through that."

We asked wine experts around town for their favorite sparkling wines and food pairings recommendations. Whether you're coupling bubbly with Valentine's Day or using it to brighten an ordinary occasion, these wines are sure to delight.

Wine buyer recommendations

• **Stand-alone bubbles:** Wine Buyer Wendy Watts at Whole Foods Market recommends De Chanceny Cremant de Loire Rose. "It's one of the best pretenders for Champagne, but it's \$13.99 instead of \$40," she says. "I have a glass and recork it with a pressure cap (available at the store). If you want light hors d'oeuvres that's great, but it's great on its own."

• **Popcorn, please:** If Vintage Wine Shoppe's Patti Davidson could have only one Champagne, she would pick Krug (\$144.99). Bollinger (\$50.99) is another favorite. "I love it with seafood or with popcorn, if I don't feel like cooking," she says.

• **Pizza and Champagne:** V. Richard's in Forest Park Owner Rickey Little names Duval-Leroy Brut (\$36.99) as a personal favorite to enjoy at home on Friday nights when the family has pepperoni pizza. "It sounds strange, but it's outstanding," says Little.

• **At V. Richards' annual bubbly tasting,** grower Champagnes (those produced at the same estate that grew the grapes) were a hit. Little found himself surprised at how much he liked the Moët & Chandon Brut (\$42.99) "since they dialed down the residual sugar," making it less sweet. And at the lower end, he thought the Charmeroy Brut or Rose (\$10.99) offered a great value.

• **Make mine a filet:** Lorraine Donald of Pleasure Is All Wine likes a "great robust and yeasty" Champagne with filet mignon, naming Femme from Duval LeRoy (\$160). At a lower price point, the Heidsieck Monopole (\$45), which was the house wine on the Titanic, is fun and interesting.

• **Sparkles and snacks:** "I love it to start my evening with little munchies," she says. "You can serve it with cheeses, fresh fruit dips, seasoned nuts,



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— WENDY WATTS, WINE BUYER

crackers ... it'll go with all that." Charles de Fere (\$12.99) is a well-priced sparkler made in the champenoise method. "I'd have it with roast chicken or ham, or with fried chicken fingers, if that's your thing," says Donald.

• **Spicy or smoked:** Saint-Hilaire Blanquette de Limoux (\$15.99) was a favorite at a recent Vestavia Hills' Wine Cellar tasting. Wine historians believe the first sparkling wine was made by the monks at the abbey at Saint-Hilaire, even before the Champagne region garnered fame. "I'd have it with spiced almonds or pecans, mini cheese biscuits or smoked salmon," says Julie Boetler at the Wine Cellar, who believes there's always an occasion for bubbly.

• **Champagne and chocolate:** For those who would like sparkling wine with Valentine's chocolates, the popular advice is to go for dark chocolate, rather than milk chocolate. Brut Rose is particularly good with chocolate. City Vineyard held a sparkling wine tasting with Godiva chocolates and Chad Johnson says that the Ruinart Brut Rose (\$79) with a vanilla-honey truffle was a favorite. City Vineyard also served buttered, salted popcorn and Johnson also favors salty flavors with fizz. "A salted caramel chocolate would be great with bubbly too," he says.

• **Whole Foods' Watts** likes Billecart-Salmon Brut Rose (\$89.99) with Divine Chocolate Ginger Thins or any dark chocolate and ginger bite. For Donald of Pleasure Is All Wine, the Rosa Regale Brachetto d'Aqui from Banfi (\$21.99) is perfect with dark chocolate-dipped strawberries for a decadent sweet treat, but feel free to experiment. ■