

FOOD & WINE

Sparkling Wine vs. Champagne: What's the Difference?

Champagne may be the most famous sparkling wine in the world, but more and more these days, great bubbly is produced elsewhere, too.

By **Brian Freedman** | June 17, 2022



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For a long time, the world of sparkling wine was divided into two halves: On one side there was Champagne, and on the other resided everything else. Which, of course, is no longer true at all...and it's questionable if it ever was. This was made deliciously clear last week at the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen when the highly regarded sommelier, media personality, and content creator Amanda McCrossin hosted the "Bubbles, Bubbles, Bubbles: Sparkling Wine Beyond Champagne" session for 80 thirsty, riveted guests.

Her goal, she told us, was "to really showcase the fact that great sparkling wine is being made all over the world, that there's merit in tasting sparkling wines that are being made at the optimum or ideal level in places that are both familiar and unexpected."

That's the case with both Champagne and sparkling wine that's *not* produced in the renowned French region. Of course, despite the fact that Champagne is classified under the umbrella category of sparkling wine, it has historically been looked at as somehow better, more refined, and possessing greater complexity and prestige than other sparklers. And while the most famous sparkling wines in the world tend to be Champagnes—names like Krug, Bollinger, Veuve Clicquot, Taittinger, Laurent-Perrier, Perrier-Jouët, and more are as iconic as Rolex in the world of watches or Lamborghini in the realm of automobiles—there are a great many bottles of bubbly from other parts of the world that are just as worthy of your time, attention, and dollars.

In other words, exactly the kind of wines that McCrossin featured.

A wine like the Ferrari, with its deep ties to the mountain terroir where it's grown in Italy's Dolomites, served another useful purpose for McCrossin as well. In fact, all of the sparkling wines she poured in Aspen did that. "Most people have a really hard time identifying terroir," she said. "And these wines really showcase the concept of terroir well." She added: "Terroir is not this thing that's relegated to professional use; it's the reason we buy *anything* in our lives that's location specific. It's like peaches from Georgia or San Marzano tomatoes: When we buy a food from a particular place, we want that place to be reflected in each bite. It's the same thing with wine, and these wines reflect that, and prove that great sparkling wines are being made at the highest level, and express the terroir of their origins in really interesting ways, all over the world."

The 2016 Ferrari Perlé Rosé, for example, embodied everything that's made Italy's Trentodoc such a favorite among wine professionals and a growing base of more casual consumers. It's crafted from a blend of 80% Pinot Nero and 20% Chardonnay, and spent more than five years on the lees, which has lent it a savory, subtly spicy depth that serves as a fantastic counterpoint to its more generous berry fruit. It may not be Champagne, but this Italian sparkling wine, made in the *metodo classico* from the two most important grape varieties in Champagne production, allow it to go toe-to-toe with the best of Italy...and France, for that matter.

Which is why she also featured wines from locations that, a decade ago, most people had no idea were home to exciting sparkling wine...or high quality wine at all. Yet the Clover Hill Brut Rosé NV from Tasmania and the JCB No. 47 Brut NV from India did exactly that. The latter, in fact, is produced by Jean-Charles Boisset, the world-renowned wine impresario who has been a leader in the world of wine for years.

Amazingly, it wasn't even going to be part of McCrossin's presentation; she was hoping to pour a sparkling wine from *another* under-the-radar wine-producing country. "Ideally, what I wanted to happen was to have an English sparkling wine," she explained, but she had a difficult time sourcing one. That's when fate stepped in: "I happened to stumble across this Indian sparkling wine from Jean-Charles Boisset," and it intrigued and charmed her. It's produced from 100% Chardonnay and fermented in French oak, after which it rested in the same barrels for 24 months prior to its secondary fermentation in the bottle. With a *dosage* of nine grams of sugar per liter, this Indian sparkling wine skews toward the fruitier end of the spectrum, which, she explained, "Leans into the more tropical tendencies that Chardonnay can sometimes express: Perfect for pairing with a wide range of Indian foods."

From closer to home, McCrossin also poured the 2018 Benovia Blanc de Noir from the Russian River Valley and the 2014 Gran Moraine Blanc de Blancs from Oregon's Yamhill-Carlton, both of which showcased how complex and age-worthy the best American sparkling wines can be.

McCrossin also trained a spotlight on sparkling wines that were crafted from grape varieties that aren't typical of the Champagne region of France, but that more than deserve consideration regardless: The 2020 Fuchs und Hase Pet Nat Rosé, a riveting sparkling wine from Austria made from Zweigelt and Cabernet Sauvignon, and the Lini 910 Labrusca Lambrusco Rosso, which brings together 85% Salamino and 15% Ancellotta. It was a sparkling red wine that made many guests reconsider everything they thought they knew about bubbly.

Which is exactly what McCrossin was hoping for. "I really wanted to show wines that had a place in someone's life, be it in the cellar or in a pairing or otherwise, that really was a great wine that wasn't going to be seen as a Champagne-adjacent brunch wine."

So what's the difference between sparkling wine and Champagne? Plenty...but more and more, the differences have nothing to do with quality or complexity, as guests of McCrossin's presentation at the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen discovered firsthand.