



The Perfect Bubbly

CHAMPAGNE AND
OTHER EFFERVESCENT
WINES ARE A FINE
MATCH FOR FOOD.

BY MARLA CIMINI

ENJOY

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h, champagne — the ultimate symbol of elegance, grandeur, celebration and sexiness. For centuries, it has been the life of the party, the theme behind luxury nightlife establishments in Europe and the United States,

the preferred drink of society's elite, and the perfect companion to flirtation. Yet what makes champagne an elixir of choice? Is it the swirl of its mousse, its sparkling effervescence or the lifestyle it represents?

No matter what its allure, the most festive of wines overflows with exuberance. A luxurious indulgence, champagne is an obligatory holiday beverage of choice, ringing in the New Year with a commemorative pop of the cork or the perfect companion for a celebratory toast.

As complex as it is flavorful, selecting the ideal sparkling vintage is perplexing and challenging. Recently, my friend and I were charged with the unenviable task of finding the right celebratory match for an event. Not a black-tie gala or a wedding, but a simple afternoon brunch, featuring Southwestern cuisine. We accepted the challenge, and after what seemed like a never-ending quest, we settled on a case of Bagrationi NV Classic Brut, a Russian sparkling wine (about \$13) from the province of Georgia. An unorthodox coupling, for sure, but the recommendation from our local wine store owner brought out the flavors of the taco fiesta and was a hit with guests.

"The secret to selecting the right bottle of champagne is to remain mindful of what taste you are seeking for the occasion," says Sam Heitner, director of the Champagne Bureau USA trade association.

Champagnes come in a variety of classifying styles that are used to refer to the wine's sweetness. The most common are: brut, extra dry, sec, demi-sec and doux, which is the sweetest and considered a dessert wine. And as long as we're learning

about champagne here, Heitner reminds us that although the word "champagne" is often used to describe all sparkling wine, strictly speaking, champagne refers to French champagne. For our purposes here, however, we'll refer to all sparklings as champagne. True champagne is created by a specific process from certain grape varieties (pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier) that hail from a particular area of France — "the Champagne region, of course," says Heitner. "All other vintages are simply called 'sparkling wine.' "

CHAMPAGNE WITH A MEAL? TRY IT

The tradition of pouring champagne (or its cousins) as an apéritif and bringing out the classic gastronomic bling — caviar and toast points — to accompany it isn't gone. But it is tired, and not just because beluga sturgeon is an endangered species. Champagne is moving beyond its celebratory reputation into the realm of dinner wine, and today's sommeliers are pouring it as pairs for everything from carpaccio to crème brûlée.

While it's usually not considered a first choice for a meal, wine experts agree that the versatility of an effervescent wine can be paired with a variety of foods and even sipped throughout an entire meal with pleasurable results. The elegant beverage features delicate flavors, moderate alcohol content, and a high acidity that helps to elevate the taste, similar to the enhancing effect you get from squeezing a lemon on a succulent lobster tail. In addition, the fizz serves a palate-cleansing purpose as well.

Grape varieties play a major role in how robust the flavor is, too. Blanc de blanc champagne is made exclusively with chardonnay grapes, while blanc de noir is made with the red grape varieties of pinot noir and pinot meunier, creating a full-bodied wine. And the distinctive color of rosé champagne is achieved by adding a still red wine to the base.





IMAGES: CHAMPAGNE BUREAU, USA

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Megan Wiig, French wine specialist and owner of New York City-based Wine Wise Consulting, offers a few pairing suggestions. She suggests a blanc de blanc champagne with its chardonnay grapes that are lemony, bright, and light feeling in your mouth. They match well with delicate foods like quiche or cured salmon that won't overpower the subtlety of the wine. The blanc de noir is more robust, powerful and demands richer sauces, and foods like roasted poultry or filet mignon. Regular brut non-vintage, which is the most common, is made from blending the white and red grapes for a style that is quite versatile and great with foods like sushi, as the levity of the sparkling wine activates the mildly sweet, vinegar-infused rice, she says.

PRICE POINTS

Contrary to popular belief, there is no need to break the bank, as the variety available offers sparklers to suit any budget.

“When selecting a sparkling wine, there are many options and there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ choice,” advises Wiig. She advises that buyers should familiarize themselves by category, not by brand. For example, the lighter, sweeter sparkling wines,

like Moscato, are the perfect selection for brunch or after dinner. The softer, fruitier styles, such as Prosecco, are great for Mimosas or when you need to buy a larger quantity. Of course, there is great quality champagne from France, ranging from about \$25 to thousands of dollars per bottle. Finally, there are sparkling wines from the United States (wonderful ones from California), Spain (Cava) and France (Cremant). “These mimic French champagnes at a lower cost,” says Wiig.

What surprises many wine drinkers is that champagne and sparkling wines can be enjoyed well beyond celebratory events. “The versatile beverage perfectly pairs with life’s more simple moments, like celebrating a new job offer, welcoming relatives for the weekend or even just enjoying a night at home with your significant other. No matter the day of the week or the season you are in, you can find a champagne that complements and embodies each day of your life,” says Heitner.

As sparkling wines continue to bask in a much-deserved spotlight, the bubbly attracts enthusiastic admirers every day — from the casual drinker to the devoted oenophile. And champagne’s enduring popularity the world over is providing more occasions than ever to pop the cork.

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