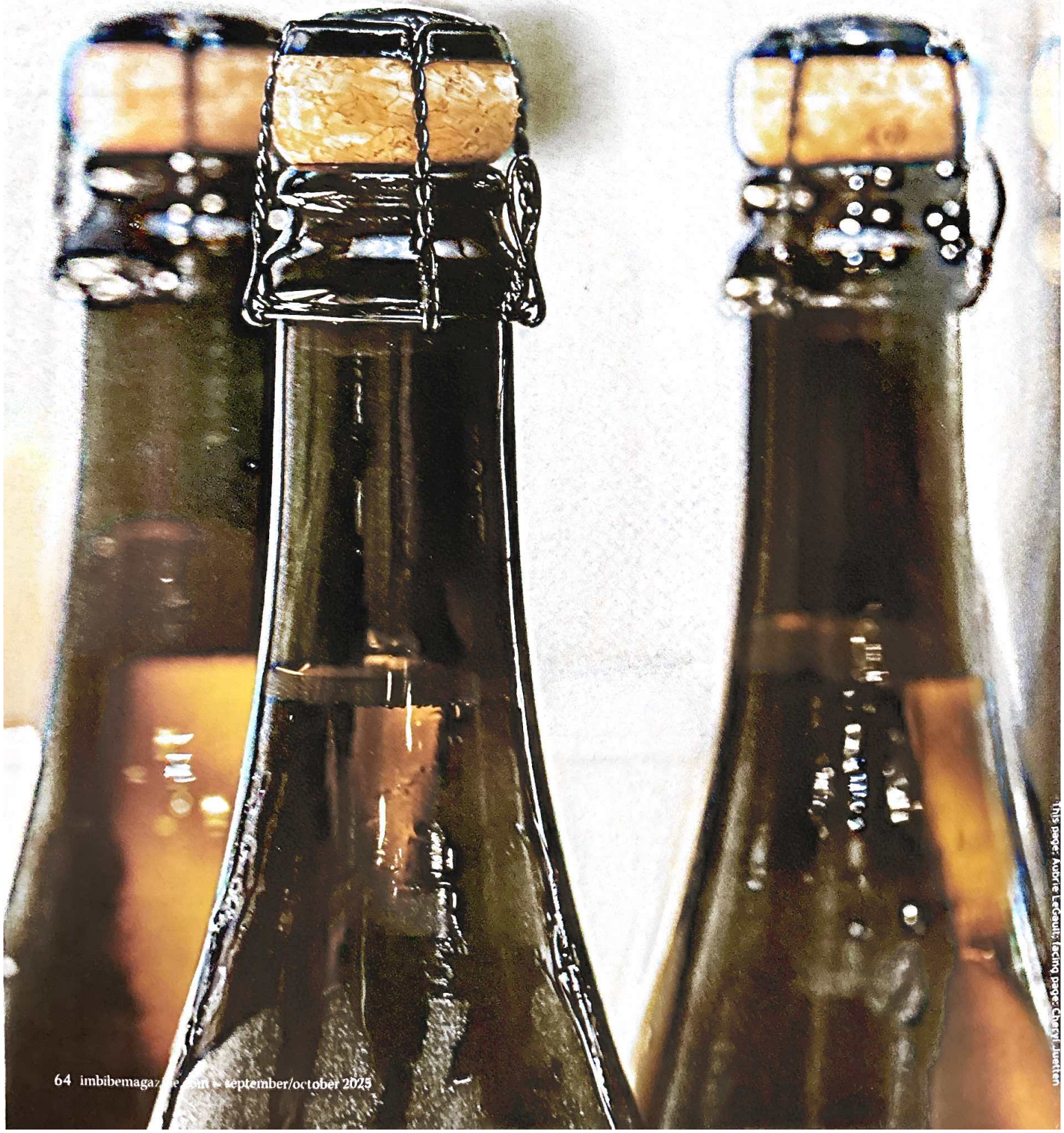


This page: Bottles waiting to be labeled at Radiant Sparkling Wine Company. Opposite: Adelsheim's Sparkling Brut Cuvée.



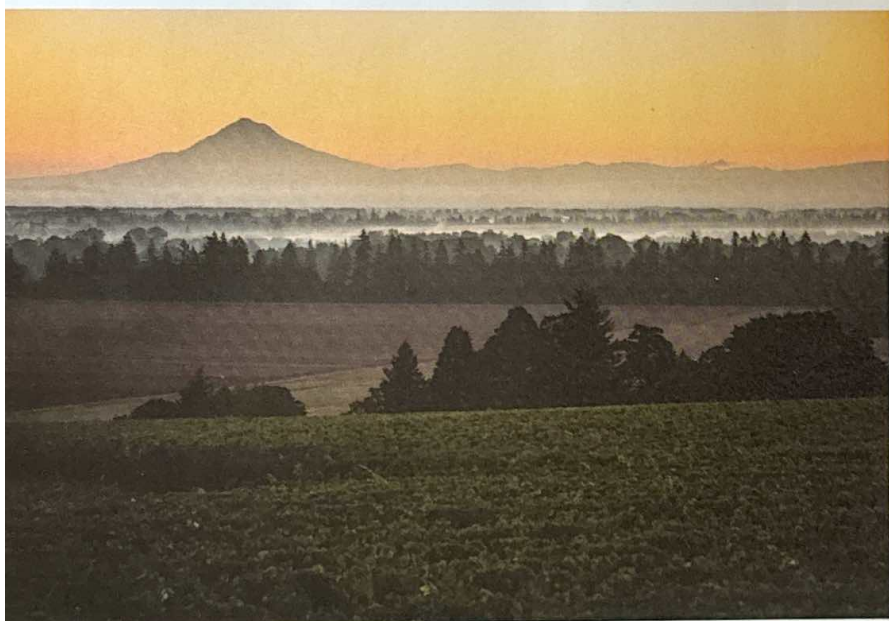
THE UP-AND-COMER

Oregon sparkling wine is proving its chops on the global stage.

Story by BETSY ANDREWS



Clockwise from top left: Wine ready to be disgorged at Radiant Sparkling Wine Company; Adelsheim director of winemaking and viticulture Gina Hennen; Adelsheim's Sparkling Brut Cuvée Rosé; Corollary Sparkling Rosé; Argyle's Lonestar vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA.



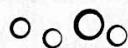
When Allison and Kenny McMahon completed their PhDs in wine at Washington State University, there was one place they wanted to be: the Willamette Valley. Here, in 2020, they bottled the first vintage for Arabilis, their winery and custom crush dedicated to sparkling wine. Says Kenny McMahon, who earned his doctorate in sparkling wine, “The climate, vine material, and soils add up to the perfect equation for spectacular *méthode traditionnelle*.”

Though still Pinot Noir “made this valley what it is today,” as McMahon puts it, Oregon’s premiere winemaking region has more up its sleeve. The flagship grape accounts for 69 percent of the valley’s plantings, but the majority of Champagne’s other noble varieties—Chardonnay, Pinot Meunier, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris—thrive here, too. The chilly coastal-mountain climate lends the proper conditions for sparkling wine’s bristling acidity, while the soils and sunlight bring flavor. More than 100 wineries now produce sparkling here, some to great acclaim. The region’s bubbles have attracted high-profile investors, including Champagne house Bollinger, which purchased Ponzi Vineyards in 2021, and the Portland Trail Blazers’ CJ McCollum, whose label includes a bright, linear Blanc de Blancs. Method Oregon, a festival dedicated to *méthode champenoise*, launched in the summer of 2025. All that, plus the work of some visionaries who set up the proper infrastructure here, and you have the makings of the top sparkling-wine region in the Americas.

I discovered as much earlier this year on a visit to the Willamette Valley’s Yamhill-Carlton, an AVA tucked into the rain shadow of Oregon’s Coast Range. There, I admired an orangey 2019 Brut Rosé from Soter Vineyards and a baked-apple 2020 Mount Richmond Brut with a bristling finish from Elk Cove. Both houses are pioneers, having launched their sparkling productions in 1997 and 1996, respectively. I enjoyed the lemon-zest 2019 Éclatant Brut from WillaKenzie, as well as Stag Hollow’s offbeat yet quaffable *méthode champenoise* 2020 Sparkling Dolcetto.

Then I sat down with Shane Moore, winemaker at Gran Moraine Winery. His non-vintage Brut Rosé showed lip-smacking tartness and loads of red currant on the mid-palate. His 2017 Blanc de Blancs, five years en tirage—i.e. rested on its lees in the bottle—meshed deep, sweet brioche with sizzling acidity. I had come to the Willamette seeking the latest, great Pinot Noir, so I knew how well that grape worked in Oregon. Moore’s Blanc

de Blancs showed the beauty of the other main Champagne variety here. “The Willamette Valley’s terroir is Grand Cru for Chardonnay,” he said. I had to agree. So I turned my attention from still red wine to Oregon’s effervescent bubbles.



“Now there’s lots of sparkling wine and lots of buzz,” Rollin Soles told me. But in 1987 when he founded Argyle Winery? “I was one hand clapping in the woods.” Back then, the vines yielded too many inconsistencies in still wines. “But I thought we could make high-quality sparkling every year here.” A few other now-defunct wineries were trying it, “but we blew the doors off everyone’s production. Our first vintage was north of 14,000 cases.”

Soles believed in the Willamette’s geography. Located well above the 45th parallel, the region has long summer days that shorten rapidly in fall, triggering the vines to ripen their fruit and mature their seeds in order to reproduce. “Beautiful sugars crash into the berries, which produces a high amount of flavor quickly,” Soles explains. “We’re one of the only regions in the world where we get such ripe fruit expression without losing natural acidity.” Tasmania, New Zealand’s Central Otago, Okanagan in British Columbia—“regions that normally cannot ripen red varieties like Syrah, only Pinot Noir,” he says, are where “the magic happens.”

For Willamette sparkling, that marriage of booming flavor and brightness is a hallmark. You taste it in Flâneur Wines’ 2019 Extra Brut, a lively dance of yeast and berries wrapped up in piquant pineapple. It’s there in the 2019 Adelsheim Brut Cuvée, which starts round and easy with cherries and apples and finishes with a squeeze of lemon peel. “We have fruit, no problem,” shrugs Gina Hennen, director of winemaking and viticulture at Adelsheim. “That’s just a part of the tasting profile of the region.”

Rex Hill winemaker Michael Davies chalks it up to the soil. With its tradeoff between mouthwatering brine and raspberry juiciness, his 2018 Grand Cuvée blends taut, phenolic Chardonnay from the Chehalem Mountains with Pinot Noir from the Dundee Hills, whose volcanic Jory soil lends a generous depth of fruit.

"The higher basalt slopes have a higher potential for developing flavors," agrees Jackson Holstein, co-owner and winemaker at Granville Wine Co. That abundance of flavor has allowed him to all but do away with the residual sugar in his savory, Chardonnay-heavy 2022 Basalt Sparkling, sourced from vineyards ranging to 1,000 feet up in the Dundee and Eola-Amity Hills. "I sometimes see non-dosage wines out of Champagne, and I get a shiver down my spine, like I'm going to love this, but it's going to hurt. The New World's fruit dominance can be too much, but with minimal dosage, we can use it to our advantage."



Not that the acids here can't be tart, particularly in the all-Chardonnay Blanc de Blancs. Director of food and beverage at The Allison Inn and Spa in Newberg, Oregon, Elaine Heide says, "I'm always looking for producers that can balance the malic acidity's sharp edge." One way to do that is through long aging, when autolysis—the breakdown of dead yeast cells in the wine—brings a countering richness. Heide credits Rollin Soles for developing the valley's extended-tirage style. In 2013, Soles left Argyle for ROCO Winery, launched with his wife, Corby, in 2003. Fermented in neutral barrels and left 10 years en tirage, his 2014 Delayed Disgorgement Brut unfolds opulent waves of flavor: lemon crème brûlée, raspberries, pear skin.

"I don't like to make skinny wines," says Soles. In general, three years of bottle aging is the minimum threshold for the Willamette Valley's méthode champenoise wines. But Soles' longer-aged style has caught on. After eight years on the lees in the bottle, the rich mid-palate of Pashey's 2016 Coast Range Blanc de Blancs Extended Tirage belies its 100-percent Chardonnay makeup and its zero dosage. Adelsheim's 2015 Brut Rosé Extended Tirage is yeasty and savory as can be, but with a punchy strawberry acidity that draws out its length.

Lytle-Barnett recently disgorged its 2014 extended-tirage sparkling. But its 2017 Brut has spent more than three years en tirage itself. It's textural and meaty, with salinity and an unusual yet appealing garrigue flavor. Winemaker Andrew Davis achieves that profile by fermenting it warmer than others do. "You blow off a little fruit, but you

get mouthfeel and these secondary and tertiary characteristics you normally wouldn't have," he says.

Davis worked with Soles at Argyle, and, like Soles, he's a game changer. In 2014, with initial backing by Soles, Davis launched Radiant Sparkling Wine Company, a custom crush operation dedicated to traditional-method wines. The special equipment, time, and labor it takes to make sparkling makes the process too pricey for smaller producers. "Plus, there's trepidation from the technical standpoint," says Davis, "so I ensure the wines are made correctly, so that in three years, they don't fizzle."

Producers make their base wines, then Radiant develops the yeast for them, blends the dosage, riddles, freezes, disgorges, doses, and bottles them. Davis has more than 40 clients. "It's sort of like the field of dreams. If you build it, they will come. Andrew built it, and we all came," says Terry Culton, director of winemaking and vineyards at Domaine Willamette.

Granville, Flâneur, Corollary, Lytle-Barnett—"In the past decade or so, there's been a steady growth reflective of Radiant's impact," says Heide. With the launch of Arabilis' sparkling custom crush, production continues to grow. And with the sale of Davis' company to the Willamette's Vinovate Custom Wine Services this year, Radiant now has the capacity to make the base wines, too, and to scale up operations even more.

"Every wine region in the world has a little sparkling, but none have challenged the supremacy of Champagne," says Davis. "Oregon can. We're in our nascency. But we're now on the second wave. We are starting to see 10-year releases. That's proof of concept."

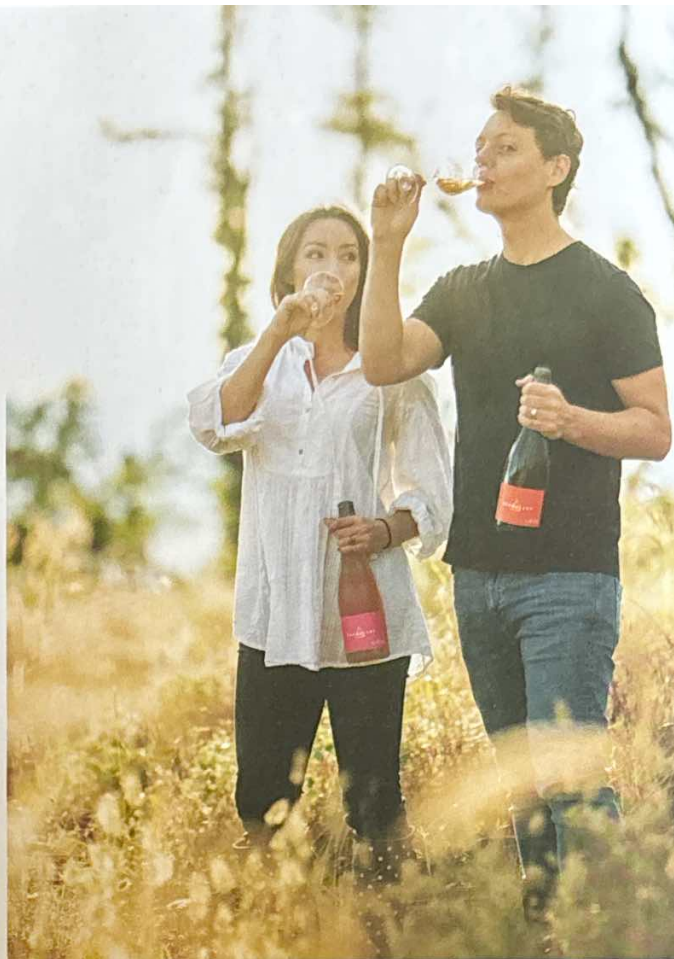


With Willamette Valley sparkling at this watershed moment, what will the future bring? Up until now, winemaking has largely focused on Oregon's characteristic vintage variation, and the discoveries that each season brings. "I can tell you everybody I worked with from every vintage, and probably the weather day by day without looking at my notes. That's because it is inherently about creating this wine from this moment in time," says Argyle's current head winemaker, Kate Payne Brown. Her 2019 Vintage Brut, for example, shows the lemon-lime zing of a cooler year, with layers of flowers and earth that might otherwise be masked by the riper fruit of a warmer vintage, such as 2018. "Blending to create something new and expressive of that vintage—that's what gets me up in the morning."



Andrew Davis, winemaker
at Lytle-Barnett and
founder of Radiant
Sparkling Wine Company.

Clockwise from
top left: Granville
Wine Co.'s Basalt;
Corollary Wines'
Jeanne Feldkamp
and Dan Diephouse;
Argyle's head
winemaker Kate
Payne Brown; Argyle
Brut; Argyle Giving
Tree vineyard in the
Willamette Valley.



Yet, with climate change, vintages can swing wildly from heat-dome 2021 to 2022. Estate wineries can address the inconsistency by fine-tuning the pick. "If we have a block that's too far along, we'll choose a block further down the hill that's in a cooler swale. We have to be elastic because it's Mother Nature," says Culton. Domaine Willamette's 2021 Brut Rosé is heady with the aroma of wild strawberries. To achieve it, Culton blends a number of different Pinot Noir clones.

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—MICHAEL LUNDEEN

That's the climate-smart strategy behind Jeanne Feldkamp and Dan Diephouse's new Eola-Amity vineyard for their label, Corollary Wines. "We have Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and Pinot Blanc," says Diephouse, "and we put in as much clonal diversity as we could." They were convinced by their experience with the mixed-clone Chardonnay they source from X-Omni Vineyard for their Blanc de Blancs, a wine that strikes a balance between lushness and snap. "That vineyard is dead-on, no matter the weather. So for resilience in the face of climate change, we have seven clones of Chardonnay and 17 different of Pinot Noir, so we'll be able to try all of those and build knowledge for everybody."

As the scene matures, more Willamette wineries might also adopt a survival skill from Champagne: holding back wines to blend with newer ones for non-vintage bottlings. Though much of the fruit for sparkling wines was harvested before smoke from the 2020 wildfires tainted the grapes, says McMahon, if producers had had reserve wines for blending, they could have made more bubbles that year to offset the loss of their still wines. "That's why Champagne has non-vintage. They had a bank of wine for insurance against spring freezes back in the day." Arabilis will release its first non-vintage sparkling in 2026. "It's just another element for blending, and it adds a house character."

For inspiration, the McMahons can look to Lundeen Wines, where Michael Lundeen hand-riddles and -disgorges both vintage and non-vintage bottlings. "The light bulb went on for me about building in layers and textures with non-vintage in 2015," says Lundeen. "Since then, it's been Chardonnay in barrel or puncheon on the lees, which allows me to get fabulous secondary characteristics and lots of autolysis." About 10 percent reserve Chardonnay blended with a Pinot Noir base, Lundeen's Willamette Valley Brut evokes a classic NV Champagne, with more of an orchard-fruit character than the high-toned citrus of other bruts here. Containing 50 percent reserve wines aged up to six years, his Brut Reserve balances mushrooms and mousse with a cooling salinity. "Not many producers here have explored the luxurious palate potential of this method," he says.

Because it's so expensive to make, Willamette Valley sparkling has historically come at an "ultra-premium price point," says Heide. Yet, she is starting to see affordable, high-quality bottles. "Corollary is a good example of a winery that has committed to a range," she says. "They have single vineyard designations and longer tirage wines, but they also do things I can put on the glass-pour list." With a lush, Pinot-driven mid-palate that finishes in pith and pineapple, Corollary's 2021 Cuvée One is a lot of wine for \$50. "I can't wait to see more experience from growers and winemakers making sure they work together to grow fruit specifically for sparkling wine," says Heide.

Yet, vintage or non-vintage, pricey or mid-range, the bubbles produced here will continue to exhibit the Willamette's "fabulous natural acidity" and "gobs of fruit," as Lundeen describes them. The wines are catching on. "It used to be difficult for American consumers to think about domestic traditional-method wine," he says. "Now they are seeking it out."

Indeed, sparkling wine sales nearly doubled in Oregon between 2022 and 2023, growing to up to 10 percent of overall purchases. McMahon compares the expansion to that of another, fairly new sparkling region, England, where sales since 2018 have grown by nearly 200 percent to almost 7 million bottles. "We produce .1 percent of Champagne's output. But with the momentum we have now, I'm hoping we can get over a million cases a year out of this valley instead of the 150,000 we're making now. I do think, like the U.K., we can get there quickly. Champagne is so big. Moët & Chandon alone makes 70 million cases. We're just a small player," he concludes, "but we're a strong player in terms of quality." ■