

## Navigating the World of Bubbles...

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Do you feel special when someone hands you a glass of bubbly wine in a pretty flute? It is festive and fun...and totally confusing when you are tasked with the job of purchasing sparkling wine for a holiday party, dinner or just because. To make your selection easier, let us look at some sparkling wine basics to enable you to buy with a measure of confidence.

First, you are asked to buy 'Champagne' because that term is just like every tissue is called a 'Kleenex.' To cull the herd of production styles of wine, we will limit this to sparkling wine crafted by the time honored 'traditional method' (there is also sparkling wine made by tank method – Prosecco, for example – and others by infusing with carbonation, but, these, in my opinion, while less expensive, can be less satisfying products).

While still wine is made by vintage (whatever the growing year gives you is what goes into the bottle), sparkling wine is made by formula. Using the traditional method of production, winemaking begins with just ripe grapes that are fermented and a base wine made from that vintage. Each sparkling house will have many iterations of base wines (varying vintages, different vineyard sites, high vs. low elevation grown fruit, different blends, etc.) and will use these to craft their house style base wine each year. This base wine is then put into bottles (the same bottles that the sparkling wine is later sold) along with the tirage (sugar and yeast, yeast nutrients and a clarification agent) for the secondary fermentation. The amount of sugar added at this step depends upon the degree of effervescence required and is what creates those lovely bubbles in the glass.

The bottles are sealed with crown caps (like beer bottle caps), placed on their sides to wait for fermentation to complete, and then the winemaker chooses if the wines will age on the lees and for what length of time. If Cava is being produced, a minimum of 9 months is required but more typical is 15 to 18 months at which point the effects of autolysis becomes detectable. (Autolysis is the

enzymatic breakdown of dead yeast cells which adds the yeasty, bread dough, brioche, hazelnut character and a creamy texture.) The length of time depends upon the style of sparkling (fresh fruit vs. lees-aged character) but autolysis can continue for 4 to 5 years and has been known to last for 10 years. That certainly adds to the cost of that special bottle!

After ageing on the lees, the bottles, stored on their sides, are riddled (turned toward the vertical so that the lees flocculate and eventually end up in a mass in the neck of the bottle), the necks are cooled, crown caps removed and the frozen chunks of yeast are ejected. Dosage is added (a mixture of wine and sugar) and this step will dictate the sweetness of the final wine. A cork, wire muzzle and metal capsule are then put in place.

As you can see, a 'traditional method' sparkling wine is not like buying a bottle of Pepsi or Coca Cola, products that are the same each production. The choices made during winemaking such as varietals used, tirage, dosage, lees ageing, and additions have a direct impact on the character of the wine.

If you are looking to purchase a 'traditional method' sparkling wine, you might find the following choices (this is not all inclusive but representative of what you might find on your wine shop shelves or local grocer):

- **Champagne** - from France and the region of Champagne made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier, the Champagne varietals (Note: you might also find 'California Champagne' but it's not from France and the allowed usage of the term is the result of an oversight when a treaty was signed years ago)
- **Crémant** – French sparkling wine made by the traditional method from varietals typically grown in the region of production (Alsace, Burgundy, Loire, Bordeaux, Jura, Die, Limoux, Savoie). This can include Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Franc, etc., depending on the area
- **Cava** – Spanish sparkling wine made using Macabeo, Parrallada, Xarel-lo and Chardonnay varietals
- **Sparkling Wine from USA** – made in many states and from various varietals
- **Franciacorta** – Italy - made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir varietals
- **Cap Classique** – South Africa - made from Champagne varietals, Chenin Blanc, and Pinotage

- **Sparkling Wine from Tasmania** – from Australia using Champagne varietals

If you decide upon the area of Champagne (or the pretty bottle), you need to check the style. The most notable choices:

- **NV** – non vintage which is sparkling made from a few vintages and represents the style of the house
- **Vintage** – 100% from the vintage and can be house style or a unique blend
- **Rosé** – a blend of red and white grapes
- **Blanc de Blancs** – only white grapes used
- **Blanc de Noirs** – white sparkling from red fruit with a fuller body

For French Champagne, you may also see:

- Grand Cru – all grapes are within the vineyards of Grand Cru Villages
- Premier Cru – all grapes from within Premier Cru Villages
- Prestige Cuvee – the producer's top wine which can be NV or Vintage

Note: be aware that ALL houses within these Cru Villages can call their Champagne a Grand or Premier Cru even if they are not a premium producer. It is simply a designation which is hooked to the village of production and not a guarantee of quality.

Finally, how dry, or sweet of a sparkling wine are you looking for? It seems that a great majority of the offerings are BRUT which means they are anywhere from zero to 12 g/L. These will taste dry to slightly off dry but not have a lot of sweetness showing, especially if the wine has spent time on the lees. In my experience, BRUT is what is most often purchased. If a bit more sweetness and roundness is desired, the EXTRA BRUT category is a step up providing 12 to 17 g/L.

If you decide upon a Crémant, you will definitely reduce the cost of the bottle and open yourself up to an interesting world of sparkling wine made from different varietals, although still French. Note that Alsace, Loire, and Burgundy are the main and the most famous regions. I am particularly a fan of Crémant d'Loire as I enjoy the Cabernet Franc and Chenin Blanc present in the mix of varietals.

While impossible to sing the virtues of all the many choices, the following are wines I recently used for a sparkling educational tasting along with food pairings:

**Campo Viejo Gran Reserva Cava** – Spain – Manchego Cheese, Marcona Almonds, Olives and Crusty Bread/Crackers

**Champalou Brut Vouvray (Loire) Crémant** – France – Gruyere, Salami, French Bread

**Mumm Napa Brut Reserve Sparkling** – USA – Crab and Shrimp Bisque

**Roederer Estate Brut Anderson Valley Sparkling** – USA – Lobster Mac ‘n Cheese

**Nicolas Feuillatte Reserve Exclusive Brut Champagne** – France – Triple Cream Brie with Crostini

**Martini & Rossi Asti Sparkling** – Italy – Biscotti with Yogurt Covered Almonds

All of these wines are made by the Traditional Method except for the Asti which is made by the Asti Method, a variation of the tank method, which was a fun and surprising way to end the tasting with a bit of sweetness.

So, if you feel special when someone hands you a glass of bubbly wine in a pretty flute, try exploring the vast world of bubbles. Unless you are simply looking to add orange juice (think Prosecco) to the glass, get out there and enjoy navigating the world of bubbles!