

Put Some “Bling” into Your Summer Wine

By Deborah Damery Lazear, CSW

I love “Bling”. My husband knows this as a certainty. As a wine lover, my wine bling is in the bubbles. I simply adore sparkling wine from all over the world. Nothing says “chill out” like a glass of cold sparkling wine bubbles tickling your nose.

Summer is the perfect time to branch out and try bubbly from all over the world. Sparkling wine is consumed cooler than still white wine and the high acidity pairs wonderfully with warm weather fare. All right, I confess, any time of year is great for bubbly. Heck, I consider Champagne the number one breakfast food after eggs Benedict. It even beats out chocolate much to my husband's chagrin. Sometimes one just doesn't get excited over a familiar old friend Chardonnay. While Pinot Grigio (aka Pinot Gris) is a great summer choice, too many taste like lemon water without any zing whatsoever. I put too much effort into cooking to pair it up with a ho-hum wine.

You have probably noticed that I have used the word sparkling wine several times now and Champagne only once. There is a distinct difference between the two. Men and women of the period 1789-1890 died over the word. I know, because the seat of the revolution to guard the word 'Champagne' for sparkling wine (whose grapes are grown and vinified only in Champagne) was started by Rene Lamarre in the little village of Damery, in the region of Marne, Champagne, France. My ancestors are from Damery; note my name at the top of this article. I come by my love of Champagne honestly!

Allow me to quickly explain the difference between the world's sparkling wines and Champagne. It is really not all that complicated. Champagne is from the Champagne region of France...period. All other sparklers are not and do not earn the name Champagne. California is phasing out the use of the word Champagne to bow to the wine world's opinion that a place name belongs to the place and not to the wine style. Remember California Chablis? There was nothing Chablis about it! The only similarity was that Chablis, the place in France, makes white wine and the color of the wine in California Chablis was also white! The grapes weren't even the same!

Well, maybe this differentiation is a little too simple. Allow me to elaborate. There are several methods of producing sparkling wine:

1. Charmat or Cuve Close. This refers to an inexpensive method of allowing the second fermentation of a still wine, through the introduction of additional sugar (dosage) to occur in a large sealed vat. Examples are Asti Spumante from Italy and Sekt from Germany.
2. Carbonation. The cheapest method and poorest in terms of quality. Think soda bubbles here. Still wine is chilled in large tanks into which carbon

dioxide is pumped. The wine is bottled under pressure.

3. Method Champenoise. The most complex method of all and used by the finest houses over the world. After the first fermentation in stainless steel tanks, the still wine of high acidity is blended with other still wines (some of the same year, some of older years) to create the blend. The wine is then put into bottles with



sugar and selected yeasts. The wine is bottled, capped, and the second fermentation begins. The yeast feeds off of the sugar (much like making bread), creating carbon dioxide which is trapped in the bottle. The yeasts die and drop to the bottom of the bottle UNLESS the bottles are rotated a little over a period of time to where all the sediment ends up in the upside down bottle's neck. Eventually, the wine bottle necks are passed through a freezing solution, the cap is removed, and the dead yeast shoots out leaving the remaining wine clear. However, there is a space of air left by the departing residue. Air is the enemy of wine. The gap is filled with re-

served still wine and sugar. The amount of sugar will determine the sweetness of the finished sparkling wine. The wine bottles are laid to rest in a quiet, cool place for 15 months up to many years, where they enjoy a spa-like vacation.



Let's clarify the different types of Champagne/sparkling wine and demystify the labels. Non-vintage Champagne means the contents are a blend of several years of wine and maintain the consistent style of a Champagne house like Mumm, for example. If a year is on the label, this is Vintage Champagne and all the grapes used came from the same year. It will vary in style depending on the weather and grow-

ing conditions of that year. An emerging trend is for more Champagne grape producers to bottle their own wine instead of selling their grapes to larger houses like Tattinger; look for the letters RM in tiny print on the label. You can think of these Champagnes as boutique wines. In areas other than Champagne, look for the words Method Champenoise to ensure that Champagne-like effort and care has gone into your sparkling wine production.

Another point in reading labels of sparkling wines is a few tricky words that can easily lead to a disappointing experience.

Dry sparkling wine is Brut or Extra Brut. Believe it or not, Extra Dry is actually a little sweet! See what I mean about the devil in the details. Sec, the French word for dry, is actually not dry at all; it would be a good choice

for a wedding cake wine as both are sweet.

The grapes for Champagne are Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier. Full stop. Other countries and regions of France use same or other grapes for their sparkling wine.

Many countries of the world make sparkling wine. I suggest you try them all (not on the same evening, however). Here are a few of my favorites.

Fun Fact

Do you have a client or relative who keeps you on the phone forever?
Or perhaps you have a meeting with a friend that tends to go on endlessly?
Now there is a quick and easy free solution to your dilemma.
Go to www.phonemyphone.com and put in a time and your phone number. You will be called back at the specified time. This will help get you out of that awkward situation.

Spain. The wine is known as Cava and primarily comes from the Penedes region. The grapes are parellada, xarel-lo, macabeo, subirat, and a smaller amount of chardonnay. All these grapes are white. Now you know why Freixenet doesn't taste like Champagne! It is usually made in the Method Champenoise and an excellent choice for food pairing as it has high acid. A name to look for is Mont-Marcal Cava Brut Reserva.

Italy. If you haven't heard of Prosecco, you need to get out more. This is the hot, but definitely not new, bubbly of choice for the in crowd at a summer barbeque or cocktail party. It is made from the grape of the same name. It is low in alcohol and generally dry. Yumm! Please don't turn up your nose when you see the word Moscato. Go out on a limb and buy a Moscato D'Asti, put some warm peaches in a dish, and begin the reverie.

Australia. Besides the sparkling Shiraz, which I don't recommend too quickly, Australia has some fabulous sparkling wines. Look for the words Method Champenoise and Brut; you won't be disappointed.

New Zealand. With its reputation for sensational cool weather Sauvignon Blanc, it comes as no surprise that New Zealand excels at sparkling wine. I suggest Kim Crawford Brut or anything from around Hawkes Bay.

France, Alsace. A little harder to find but worth the hunt is the Cremant d'Alsace made from Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Riesling with a little Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Delicious!

36 **France, Loire Valley.** Brut Vouvray NV is a delicate sparkling wine and a refreshing alternative to Champagne; made from Chenin Blanc grapes.

United States. First, let me clarify that California is not your only choice. One of my favorite Rose Sparkling wines comes from Gruet in New Mexico and is made of the Pinot Noir grape. Other states excelling at sparkling wines include Oregon. Look for Argyle Brut Rose Willamette Valley or Argyle Brut. Washington State, also a cool place for sparkling wine (pun intended), offers us value and quality with its Domaine Ste. Michelle NV Cuvee Brut. Massachusetts and New York State also have wonderful sparkling wines. Don't overlook Michigan, either!

California is well known for its French liaisons, and I mean that in the most respectful way. The French Champagne houses of Mumm (Mumm Cuvee Napa), Tattinger (Domaine Carneros), Moet Hennessey Lois Vuitton (Domaine Chandon), Remy Martin (Piper Sonoma), Veuve Clicquot (Pacific Echo) and Louis Roederer (Roederer Estate) are all examples of collaboration that greatly benefit the American sparkling wine consumer.

A few final tips: serve sparkling wine and Champagne a little colder than your still white wine. Open the bottle with a cloth over the cork; sparkling wine is bottled at 6 atmospheres of pressure, enough to give you a bigger black eye than Rocky ever had. Serve the wine in flutes to preserve the sparkle. If you don't finish the bottle, make sure you have a sparkling wine bottle stopper (available at any wine store for a few dollars); it will keep its bubbles for a day or two.

Yeah, like I ever have any left!

WINE PAIRING TIP OF THE SEASON

In keeping with this articles theme, I want to share with you the biggest wine pairing secret I have ever learned. Just between you and me, sparkling wine goes with almost everything! Really! Even a big steak will be just fine with a Vintage Brut Rose such as Billecart Salmon.

The best matches for Champagne include foods that are rich in the 5th taste, umami. Think of mushrooms, Parmesan cheese, roasted or sun dried tomatoes, roast chicken with the skin on it, roast veal, seared shellfish such as scallops, lobster, or shrimp, prosciutto or jamon, Thai food, and Vietnamese style dishes made with fish sauce, any dish with soy sauce, sushi, egg dishes, and peas, yes, peas.

I know the classic pairing is caviar and I sure wouldn't dispute that. Along with smoked salmon, the other hors d'oeuvre on our coffee table is always good quality potato chips. What a match!

My husband and I gave a dinner party for the 8th Annual Wall Street Journal Open the Bottle Night a few years ago. We started by drawing our guests into our inner courtyard where I, resplendent in evening gown, had my deep fryer going to make pommes frites dusted with truffle salt served hot in paper cones. What did we serve to drink? Why, Champagne of course! Enjoy!

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