

MONEY

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Santino Cascio beams: Sparkling-wine sales at his wine shop have been about 25 percent better than in December a year ago

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Last week, the 70 employees of the Gucci store at Bal Harbour Shops were preparing for their traditional Christmas Eve toast.

Sales clerks excitedly milled around displays of expensive-looking shoes, and the uniformed guard at the door whistled merrily as he bade farewell to the last customers.

But the dozen black bottles that were wheeled into the store as the guard locked the doors were not filled with still white wine, which store manager James D. Vrooman said he usually serves at Christmas festivities.

The air filled with effervescence as corks were popped and as Freixenet Cordon Negro, a Spanish sparkling wine, was poured into plastic cups.

"We had a real good, record-breaking day Saturday," Vrooman explained. He said he chose the bubbly, a "personal favorite," because "it's just got more pizzazz than regular wine. It's better for toasting success."

Vrooman could have been speaking for thousands of South Floridians, who are buying champagne — the product of a French province — and other sparkling wines in what many wine merchants said are record-breaking amounts this holiday season.

One such merchant, Bob Bezark, owner of Foremost Liquors on Alton Road in Miami Beach, used one word to describe sparkling-wine sales this season: "Amazing!"

This holiday season, Bezark said, "most everybody's going bubbly! People today want the better things in life. People work hard and they want... to enjoy life."

Champagne, it seems, fits neatly into the "Yuppie" lifestyle, along with Volvos and Braun coffee makers.

So much so that sales of sparkling wine in the United States are expected to reach a record \$1.73 billion this year, compared with sales of \$1.51 billion last year, according to Frank Walters, research director for the New York-based Impact Wine & Spirits Newsletter.

Mel Dick, president of the wine division of Miami-based Southern Wine & Spirits Inc., an import and distribution company, said that sparkling wine "is the brightest star in the wine industry in America today." In terms of sales, he added, 1984 "probably is the finest French-champagne year we've had."

"California is the largest market... for fine wine and champagne," said Dick. "New York is second, with half of that, and Florida is next with half of what New York does."

Dick said that a few weeks ago, his company flew in 100 cases of Louis Roederer Crystal after running out of that French champagne. "I spoke to France," he said, "and asked them to please release our allocation next year a lit-

tle earlier."

In the week before Christmas, Dick added, he had to call for an "emergency shipment" of 50 double-magnum bottles of Perrier-Jouet Fleur de Champagne. He said he wasn't sure how many of the double magnums — each the equivalent of four standard 750-milliliter bottles — he had sold already, "but we ordered much more than last year."

Consumption of the tiny bubbles also has been encouraged by the availability of relatively cheap, good-quality imports, according to several wine merchants. Importers and makers of sparkling wine also have been stepping up advertising.

"Given this year's bon vivant mood," reported Advertising Age, a trade publication, "marketers are escalating their media schedules."

One of Freixenet's television advertisements, seen in Miami, encourages listeners to "celebrate anywhere, anytime, anyplace with Cordon Negro."

And bubbly has become more widely available as department stores emphasize gourmet-food sections that stock champagne, according to Irving S. Kogan, director of the industry-supported Champagne News & Information Bureau in New York.

Burdines, the Miami-based department-store chain with eight Dade stores, has set up a special display in its Dadeland store of champagne and other fine wines, and of such gourmet foods as caviar and paté, to take advantage of the strong demand for such goodies, according to Trip Gagnon, Burdines' divisional merchandise manager of fine foods, restaurants and bakeries.

A sale on champagne and other fine wines, with discounts of 20 to 45 percent, began Friday at Burdines and continues through Saturday, Gagnon said.

Champagne sold very well as a Christmas gift, he said Thursday, "and we expect to do a tremendous amount of business in the next four or five days."

Burdines has sparkling and other wines in "The Market Place" sections in three of its stores in Dade and a small wine selection in a fourth. Gagnon said the chain is considering stocking wine in some of its remaining stores in Dade and is "coming up with a strong advertising and in-stock plan" in response to the strength of sales during this holiday season.

Bezark, whose store in Miami Beach stocks 77 types of sparkling wine, said the libation "is not just for the affluent and hasn't been for years now."

Even though champagne comes in a wide range of prices, it still retains its place "as a symbol of luxurious living," according to Webster's New World Dictionary.

But Amerigo Sciorio, a shoe salesman at the Gucci store in Bal Harbour, had a simple explanation for growing sales of sparkling