



**Health:**  
Exercising to avoid midwinter spread. Page C6.



**Pop Life:**  
Whitney Houston was No. 1 in sales. Page C11.



**Television:**  
Gladys Knight at the Waldorf. Page C18.

**Books:**  
A study of Reagan's persona. Page C16.

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# The Living Section

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FOOD/STYLE/ENT

## Exploring The 'Other' Sparkling Varieties

By FRANK J. PRIAL

**A**LL that glitters isn't gold, and all that bubbles sure isn't champagne. Literally hundreds of sparkling wines are made around the world — about 60 in California alone — and champagne is just one of them.

In this part of the world we tend to think of champagne as the best of the lot. Even if we're right, we owe it to ourselves to discover a few of the other wines that are out there. They range from sticky-sweet California concoctions such as cold duck to the de-

### WINE TALK

lights of an elegant Schramsberg Napa Valley blanc de blancs; from sulfurous brews such as the Soviet Union's Krim, which someone once described as an unpleasant lambrusco, to the delightful Vouvray of Marc Brédif and the new jremants from Alsace. True Champagne, made in the region



of the same name, probably constitutes less than 2 percent of the world's sparkling wine; there is even a pretty good one made in Peru. We tend to get confused because so many other sparkling wines are called champagne, the way much of the blended red wine in California is called burgundy.

The Champagne growers have fought the promiscuous use of their name around the world, with reasonable success. Only here in the United States can we get away with calling our sparkling wines champagne.

American courts decided that the French waited too long to complain. To their credit, many of the best American producers don't use the name champagne.

Spanish, Italian and German producers must be content with the names cava, Asti spumante and sekt, respectively. Until now they could console themselves with putting "methode champenoise" on each bottle if they had made the wine using the Champagne method. Recently, however, the Champagne makers of Reims and Epernay managed to convince the leaders of the European Community that an important part of the Champagne method involved making the wine in Champagne.

Truth to tell, a lot of junk gets more attention than it should because it is made according to the methode champenoise. It is undoubtedly the best way to make sparkling wine. But if the grapes are mediocre to begin with, the Champagne method can't save

the wine that will be produced. Briefly, a methode-champenoise wine is one that has been fermented in the bottle in which you buy it. The first fermentation takes place in steel tanks or oak barrels. After different vats have been blended, the wine is bottled with a small amount of sugar and yeast and given a temporary cap, usually the metal kind more commonly seen on soda bottles.

The second fermentation takes place in the bottle. The yeast converts the sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide, which, because there is no place for it to go, dissolves in the wine. When the fermentation ends, the dead yeast cells drop to the bottom of the bottle. The bottles are upended in racks, which allows the yeast cells to drift down onto the inside of the metal cap. Then, the necks of the bottles are frozen in brine, opened, and the sediment, locked in a small lump of ice, pops out. The bottle is topped up with a bit of wine and sugar; this dosage determines how dry the finished wine will be.

When the methode champenoise is applied to the best pinot noir and chardonnay grapes of the vineyards

handful of sparkling wines from most of the major producing nations:

The United States offerings, many of which didn't exist 10 years ago, are among the best in the world. Some are already famous. Before there was a Domaine Chandon, the California affiliate of Moët & Chandon, or a Piper Sonoma, the offspring of a Piper-Heidsieck and Renfield union, there was Schramsberg. It continues to be the benchmark by which other American sparkling wines are judged. Iron Horse from Sonoma County is easily one of the best.

Meanwhile, good sparkling wines are being made under the Gloria Ferrer label by the American branch of Spain's Freixenet; by Domaine Mumm, Seagram's California version of the Champagne produced by its French company; by Scharffenberger, an interesting, small Mendocino County producer, and by a surprisingly good newcomer, Maison Deutz, produced near San Luis Obispo in the central coastal region.

A couple of New York wines are Great Western's Naturel from the Finger Lakes and, from the Hudson Valley, Clinton Vineyards Seyval

other countries, the wines are reasonably priced. Look for the Cuvée Impériale Brut. Ca' del Bosco, from Franciacorta, may be the best of all the Italian sparklers, particularly the Dosage Zero, which, as its name implies, is anything but sweet. Ca' del Bosco prices are high, though — starting at about \$20 — and if there is French Champagne to be had at the same price, it's a tough call.

to the hotel thumbs his previously tried Lila, Deinhard's popular sekt. It is not a wine that will appeal to Champagne enthusiasts; it is too sweet and coarse. That is unfortunate, because the vintage Lila can be quite attractive. Most sekt is made from bulk wine purchased in Italy and France and has little in common with true German wine, besides baroque labels. One of the few other German sparkling wines worth mentioning is the Extra Trocken from Fürst von Metternich, which is said to be made entirely from riesling grapes from the Rheingau, Germany's premier winegrowing district.

Not surprisingly, the country that makes the best-loved of all sparkling wines, Champagne, produces many of its own imitators. Most of the French sparkling wines are just as forgettable as their counterparts in other countries. But there are exceptions — Bouvet Brut, for example, from Saumur. Bouvet is owned by Monmousseau in the Touraine, which in turn is owned by Taittinger, the famous Champagne house. Bouvet has a soft finish, which should appeal to people who find Champagne too acidic.

Probably the best-known French sparkling wine is made in Burgundy, which is not to say the grapes come from there, too. The regular Krieger, the Blanc de Blancs, is fairly routine. The Imperial, which costs more but is still less than \$10, is more wine for the money.

Blanc Foussy, from the Touraine, is well known and well liked in this country. It is a trifle sweet for some palates, but since most of us "talk dry and drink sweet," there is probably an even larger audience for the wine than it now enjoys.

One of the newest entrants in the sparkling wine ranks is crémant d'Alsace. Crémant is a style of wine. The name means "creamy" and refers to sparkling wines made under about half the pressure applied to regular champagne. There is a town called Cramant in Champagne, and when crémant-style champagne is made there, it all gets a bit confusing. The wine is called — you guessed it — crémant de Cramant.

In Alsace, all sparkling wine is crémant-style. It is made mostly from the pinot blanc grape, and it invariably reflects the craftsmanship of all Alsace wines. Among the best are the crémants from Dopff, Dopff & Irion and Willm.

Finally, more for amusement than anything else, we come to the only known sparkling liqueur: Moët & Chandon's Petite Liqueur, a rather unusual concoction sold in little bottles of seven ounces or so. The stuff actually does bubble in the glass. As an aperitif, it's a pleasant enough; as a conversation piece, it's even better. It usually sells for about \$14 for a three-pack.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST!

## All that sparkles sure isn't champagne: Exploring those other varieties that bubble.

on the Montagne de Reims, the result is superb wine. When the grapes are the parellada and macabeo of northeastern Spain, the results, even with the methode champenoise, are at least different. (There are plenty of mediocre grapes grown in the Champagne region, too, and the methode champenoise doesn't do much for them, either. Fortunately, little of this stuff is exported.)

Only a tiny fraction of the world's sparkling wine is made by the methode champenoise. Most are made by something called the Charmat process, after Eugene Charmat, the Frenchman who invented it in 1910. Essentially, it is a way to make large quantities of sparkling wine in a short time. Still wine is heated to age it artificially, then sugar and yeast are added and the wine ferments a second time for about 15 days. The wine is refrigerated to clarify it, then filtered and bottled. The entire process is carried out under high pressure so that the carbon dioxide produced in fermentation is dissolved in the wine, just as it is in the individual bottles in the methode champenoise.

There are variations on the Charmat process and on the methode champenoise, but the third major method of making sparkling wine is simply to pump carbon dioxide into it, just as manufacturers do in producing soft drinks. The bubbles disappear almost as soon as the bottle is opened. It doesn't matter, though, because the wine is usually poor stuff to begin with.

What follows is a guide limited to a

Naturel, made from the Seyval hybrid grape. You'll have to look hard; only a few hundred cases are made each year.

Unquestionably, the best bargains in sparkling wine come from Spain. The two biggest names are Cordoniu and Freixenet, both in the Penedès region, near Barcelona. Cordoniu's Première Cuvée and Extra and Freixenet's Carta Nevada and Cordon Negro are available everywhere, and often at astonishingly low prices. The Première Cuvée and Cordon Negro are both available for about \$5. One of the better Spanish sparkling wines is Paul Cheneau, made by the prestigious Spanish company Segura Viudas, which happens to be owned by Freixenet. At about \$5, it, too, is a good value for relatively little money.

Cordoniu and Freixenet are among the biggest individual sparkling-wine producers. Italy, however, leads the world in overall sparkling-wine consumption. Most of what the Italians drink is sweetish Asti spumante. As Jane MacQuitty writes in her "Pocket Guide to Champagne and Sparkling Wines" (Simon & Schuster, 1986), "The Italians are spumante crazy." That is no reason for the rest of us to be spumante crazy — particularly since only a handful of the Italian sparkling wines match their American or French or Spanish counterparts.

The Berlucchi label on a sparkling wine is a sign of quality. Since the northern Italian company brought its prices into line with competitors from