



Save some room for the bubbly this holiday

Ours is the culture that brought the world Coca-Cola. We introduced whiskey to soda. We even stuffed bubbles into organic apple juice. So it would stand to reason that we would be crazy about sparkling wine, right?

Well, I was as shocked as you might be to learn that as of 2014, bubbles account for only a 5.2 percent share of the U.S. wine market.

I suspect this has something to do with the perception that sparkling wine is just for special occasions, but I submit that our lives are made up of more than 5.2 percent special occasions. Get a front-row parking spot? Special occasion. Pass your recent cholesterol test? Special

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occasion. Survive a Justin Bieber concert your tween-aged daughter dragged you to? That deserves a magnum.

There are plenty of options in every price bracket from almost everywhere in the world that can fill a newfound need to celebrate now that you have permission. Here's a quick breakdown.

Champagne: The most famous sparkling wine, and usually the most expensive, it can be called Champagne legally only if it comes from the region of Champagne, France. It can be rosé or white. Dominant grapes are chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier.

Blanc de blancs means it is white wine made from white grapes.

Blanc de noirs means white wine from black grapes.

If your Champagne says nothing about blanc or noir, it is likely a blend of white and black grapes and can make white or rosé wine depending on vinification.

Franciacorta: Essentially the Champagne of Italy, this wine comes from the hills in Lombardy where winemakers have been adhering to the same strict rules of production that exist in Champagne since 1961. Made in the "traditional method" (meaning it undergoes its second fermentation in the bottle), Franciacorta producers use chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot bianco grapes.

California sparkling wine: Sparkling wines are made almost everywhere in California with varying levels of quality and refinement. The best tend to come from cooler climates such as Sonoma and Marin counties, or in higher elevation parts of Napa where chardonnay and pinot noir can grow. On the higher end, look for the word "brut" on the label (which means dry) and "traditional method." Schramsberg is one of the best.

New Mexico sparkling: You could have knocked me over with a feather when I first tried Gruet sparkling wine from New Mexico. It really is good and well less than \$20 a bottle.

Prosecco: From northeastern Italy, Prosecco is made from the glera grape where it is made bubbly with the "Charmat method" in which the second fermentation takes place in a tank rather than in the individual bottles. It's a cheaper process, so the wine is cheaper, usually less than \$20. Easy drinking with floral aromas and a bit of green apple, which is characteristic of the glera grape.

Cava: In Catalonia Spain, near Barcelona, sparkling wine is made from the macabeo, parellada, and xarello grapes.

The Cava name often is associated with mass-market, inexpensive fizz.

But there is a growing contingency of producers who, disenchanted with that type of marketing, have formed their own appellation in Penedés to focus on more artisanal sparkling. Look for these producers: Raventos i Blanc, Albet i Noya, Mas Comptal, Loxarel, Colet, or Mas Bertran.

French Crémant: Champagne isn't the only region in France that makes sparkling wine, they're just the only ones that get to use that name. The other



regions call their sparkling “crémant.” Alsace makes beautiful dry sparkling from riesling, pinot blanc, and the other white grapes that grow so well there. Crémant de Bourgogne from Burgundy uses the region’s pinot noir and chardonnay. And Crémant de Loire relies on the chenin blanc grape which gives delicate floral qualities. Bordeaux, Jura, Limoux (in Languedoc), and Savoie also make stunning crémants, all of which must be made using the traditional method of secondary fermentation in the bottle—which makes smaller, more persistent bubbles.

Sekt: Germany and Austria make sparkling wine which is called sekt but they treat the wine quite differently. In Germany, it’s usually tank-fermented from riesling, pinot blanc or pinot gris, whereas in Austria sekt is made in the traditional method (bottle fermented) from gruner veltliner or welschriesling; the latter being more quality conscious.

The sweeties: Much as I love my best friend, she prefers sweeter wines. And that’s ok, no judgment here. However, since she doesn’t drink much and I’m usually left with half bottles, I’ve had to elevate her sweet sparkling game so I, the wine-hyena, can finish what’s left over. From Asti there are two producers whose Moscatto d’Asti I stock for her: La Spinetta and Vietti. Both are fantastic examples of how delicate sweetness can bring out bright fruit flavors and honey-suckle flowers.

Near Asti you’ll find a red sweet sparkler called Brachetto d’Acqui which can be a refreshing pairing with a chocolate desert.

Demi-sec or doux: To find sweetness in French sparklers, look for the words demi-sec or doux. Doux means soft or sweet; demi-sec means half-dry or semi-dry. Just like a partly cloudy day means it’s mostly sunshine, a wine that is partly dry is mostly sweet (32-50 grams of sugar per liter).

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