



## Food Drink

### Champagne :: NEEDS TITLE

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To begin with, one should learn the correct terminology. When referring to champagne, the word *dry* refers to the level of sweetness. Therefore *Extra Dry* counter-intuitively means extra sweet. *Brut* means the least sweet Champagne. It is the most popular style. Typically, champagne makers save their best grapes for this category. *Cuvée* identifies Champagne made from the first pressing of the best grapes. In terms of the grapes used, *Blanc de blanc* refers to champagne made from only white grapes, usually *Chardonnay*. *Blanc de noir* describes the use of dark-skinned grapes such as *Pinot Noir* and *Pinot Meunier*, usually in a blend. Outside of France, other grape varieties may be used.



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#### Typically French Terms

Some of the other terms we need to know include those the French think they own. *Methode champenoise* describes the method the French use to make Champagne, with the second fermentation occurring in the bottle. Only such sparkling wines produced within the Champagne District may be called Champagne. Technically, only those can be referred to as being made in the *methode champenoise*, too. Outside of the Champagne region they are called *crémant* or *methode traditionnelle*.

#### More Terminology

The Italians say *metodo classico* to describe the process they use to make a sparkling wine like champagne. Asti and Spumante can be made this way, or they can be made the same way as Prosecco (with the second fermentation in vats, not the bottle) called *metodo italiano*.

Instead of the same process (known as the Charmat process), is used to produce a less expensive sparkling wine, but the *methode champenoise* can also be used to make traditional Cava, which has its own district. Spanish bubbly from outside that district are sometimes (erroneously) called cava, too.

Instead of Extra Dry, the sweetest Cava is called *Dulce*, but the Brut usage appears to be universal, as is the term sparkling wine. In fact, the term *sparkling wine* is so broad that even some wineries outside of France now use the French term *crémant* to

describe their *methode champenoise* wines.



## Bubbly From Around the World

Are we confused yet? Let me bottom-line it for you. The most important thing to remember is that vintners from around the world produce various forms of sparkling white or *rosé* wines under many different names and prices. Once everyone is done staking out their turf and terms, there is still a delicious array of sparkling wines to enjoy. Let's get too it!

Now that we know what we're talking about, (HA!) here are some sparkling wines from around the world that are tried and true. **Do Lugar Brut**, is a prosecco so reminiscent of good dry champagne I was surprised it wasn't French! It isn't Italian either. I tasted it in Brazil! Unfortunately, I don't believe it is available in the US. Also in Brazil, I tasted a **Tributo Brut** champagne-style sparkling wine from Marco Luigi vineyards. Its dry, fruity effervescence keeps me looking for another bottle.

**Ode Panos Brut**, from Greece is a dry reasonably priced (\$20) bubbly with an apple nose and taste.



## Italy, Australia & Spain

**Banfi Rosa Regale** (\$20) from one of my favorite Italian wine regions - Piedmont - is a sweet red that goes especially well with bitter chocolate. In the same region of Italy, the **Bottega Winery** makes a charming Prosecco. Then there is a spumanti with my favorite name, **Petalò // Vino dell'Amore** (Petal, The Wine of Love) that is a light and sweet seductress.

A rare red sparkling syrah, **Shingleback Black Bubbles**, (\$25) from Australia, is a lush dark-fruit surprise in your mouth. From that same continent is a very inexpensive **Yellow Tail** sparkling white that would do in a pinch.

I toured the Catalonia region of Northeast Spain, home of Cava, and visited the **Freixenet** (fresh-eh-net) offices and caves outside of Barcelona. A tasting there convinced me of the quality of this reasonably priced line of sparkling wines. (\$10-\$150)

More recently, a delayed lunch at Blue Hill at Stone Barn (Westchester County, NY) resulted in a complimentary glass of a Freixenet Cava called **Gordon** (\$10). I don't know if it tasted so good on its merits, or because it was free. I liked it enough to order another glass (\$12) with lunch (\$85). Gordon Cava and I were certainly keeping some rich company that day!

## USA - Sonoma & Finger Lakes

Elsewhere in the United States, **Iron Horse Russian Cuvee** from Sonoma, CA, (\$30) is the sparkling wine of choice in Washington diplomatic circles. It was originally created for a White House event. With those roots it is a cool, above reproach, and sophisticated delight.

Gruet, a New Mexico winery, makes good sparkling wines. I tasted their **Brut Rosé** (\$12) to find a berry-rich burst of flavor I'd drink again.

The Finger Lakes have many sparkling wines to try. **Lamoreaux Landing Brut** was a traditional dry and refreshing surprise. I didn't know it would be that good!

Atwater Estate Vineyards is a favorite of mine. Their wines are reliably good. Their **2006 Curvee Brut** is made the traditional way but with Riesling and Gewurztraminer grapes along with the Chardonnay. Unusually fruity, it does not disappoint.

I remember a "champagne" tasting at **Dr Frank's vineyard** in Keuka Lake one Sunday morning. They make six varieties of "methode champenoise" sparkling wine ranging from \$20 to \$35. I dutifully spit out the first glass, and almost managed the second

before I realized that it was simply too good to expectorate. The remaining glasses were savored.

Sunday morning champagne could only taste better if a handsome young man served it to me in bed!



## Long Island & Cocktails

The farthest end of Long Island produces some delightful bubbly, too. **Onabay's Blanc de Brut** (\$36) is a crisp chardonnay-based sparkling wine that is very easy on the palate.

Sparkling Pointe is remarkable as a vineyard dedicated to producing only sparkling wines. Their **Topaz Imperial**, (\$33) a light rosé, is an excellent example of such dedication paying off.

The **Old Field's Blanc de Noir** is an unusual 100% Pinot Noir sparkling wine, dry and very refreshing! In addition, each of these vineyards has other similarly priced and quality sparkling wines I have yet to taste. If you've tasted them please leave a comment below.

### When You Don't Like The Taste . . .

Sometimes an inexpensive wine works best as the primary ingredient in a cocktail. Wine cocktails are the subject of a future article, but for now, think about adding a little fruit juice, such as orange or cranberry, or a liqueur, such as triple sec or fruit brandy to sparkling wine. My personal favorite for lesser quality Champagne is **Bergamot**. Just a quarter inch of this clear liqueur in the bottom of a flute brightens any bubbly. As much as I like the flavor, it would be a shame to contaminate the best French Champagne with any such additives.



## French Champagne & Crémant

For some special occasions, going back to the roots - France - is recommended. The **Simonnet-Febvre Cremant de Bourgogne Brut Methode Traditionelle** (\$20) is a crisp uncomplicated refreshment. Any of the small vineyard champagnes are worth a shot - if you can find them. I tasted several when I toured the region. Both the **Marcel Vezien Celles sur Ource Blanc de Blanc** and the **Baslieux sous Chatillon Brut Excellence** were memorable. Unfortunately, so many of them don't get distributed here, but if you are lucky enough to find one - grab it.

For the top-of-the-line champagnes, **Krug Grande Cuvee**, about \$150 for non- vintage bottle is a good choice.

I first tasted this in the Berkshires, at **Blantyre**, a Grand Chef Relais & Châteaux inn at Lenox, Massachusetts. Krug is quietly elegant, as is Blantyre, and makes an understated and refreshing aperitif. A blend of 50 wines from 6 - 10 different years, Krug consistently delivers a full and complex taste.

## Taittinger & Mommms

**Taittinger Comtes de Champagne** at about \$200, is heavenly. I first tasted this in Reims, France, in the Taittinger cellars with Jacob Taittinger. Then, last Summer I stayed at **The Point**, another exclusive Relais & Châteaux inn on Upper Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks. Taittinger was the only champagne they served, and they had bottles chilling in each of their three bars. Even the "emergency bar" always had a bottle on ice. You have to love an Inn that has an emergency bar!



**Mumms Brut Cordon Rouge** (\$30) is always reliable. I've been known to open a split after work just for myself. It's that good!



## Moët & Chandon

Lastly, **Moët & Chandon** produce many champagnes including their premium named in honor of Dom Perignon. The Brut (\$150) is a delightfully dry entry from the acknowledged father of the Methode Champenoise. Dom Perignon is credited with this poem, which makes a great toast:

Give me health for a long time

Give me work sometime

Give me love from time to time

But give me champagne all the time.

As a final note, the declining world economy reduced the demand for higher-end sparkling wines and French champagnes, which caused

them to become a glut on the market. The move to expand the Champagne District in France, a decision made before the downturn when Champagne sales were at record heights, will also contribute to the overstock. Reduced prices and special pricing will be the result. Already, the expanded sales area - almost a separate Sparkling Wine Store - created within the New Hampshire State Liquor store is proving so successful that other **Champagne Outlets** will begin to appear elsewhere in the US. Look for softer prices and a wider selection. The time is definitely right to develop a taste for this *nectar of the gods*.

As Dom Perignon is often quoted as saying,  
*when I taste champagne I see stars!*

There are enough "stars" above to illuminate any occasion. Cheers!

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