

# Decanter

## Champagne alternatives: 25 great bottles to stock up on

It's got to be done: crack open the bubbly to add a spritz to your end-of-year occasion. And beyond Champagne, there's a world of excellent and fascinating alternative styles you can choose from, as our expert's eclectic selection of 25 shows.



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We live in a truly effervescent world and my pick of 25 sparkling wines from around the globe proves it – and not one of them is from **Champagne**. They show that compelling bubbles can be made outside the world's foremost fizz region.

My aim in selecting these wines was simple: to provide inspiration for joyful bubbles that are just a little off the beaten track.

I also wanted a global span and to include a few wines that stray from the usual grape varieties of **Chardonnay** and **Pinot Noir**, even though these stalwarts show their mettle in numerous spots here and score highly – above all, Chardonnay.

## Setting the bar

In terms of traditional-method fizz, we have to admit that Champagne continues to be the yardstick against which all others are measured. By the same token, Champagne and the methods used in its production are what everyone looks to when they aspire to make high-quality, bottle fermented sparkling wine. This means careful site and vine selection, viticulture aimed at the different acidity and ripeness parameters required of base wines for sparkling rather than still wines. It also means different regimes for pressing grapes and, in many cases, blending across grape varieties, sites and vintages.

Why all this technical stuff? The production of fine fizz is a very involved process, and really the opposite of the much-vaunted 'low-intervention winemaking' so many now ascribe to. Making fine sparkling wine is the result of an infinite matrix of decisions – and requires immense expertise and experience, as well as intuition and creativity. The wines on the pages that follow show how well this process is being mastered by so many.

The most beautiful thing is that in place of Champagne's defining and celebrated Cretaceous-era chalk soils, the wines here are expressions of their place – of oceanic briskness, of Alpine altitudes, of luminous sunshine; but also of indigenous varieties. When fine sparkling wine is made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier, it remains comparable to Champagne. But what if **Chenin Blanc** is used? Or, as I was thrilled to taste, Baga from Portugal, or Zweigelt from Austria? Then the rules of the game change again and, depending on intention, site and grape variety, wildly different styles appear that are harder to compare but just as wonderful to explore and appreciate.

## Lighten the mood

So what to look for? For me, the greatest virtue of traditional-method sparkling wine is lightness. When you pop that cork you want refreshment and uplift – heaviness has no place. Let me be clear: there are some rounder, fuller-bodied wines here, some mature wines with lots of depth – yet there is no heaviness at all. The other thing I look for beyond balance, fine mousse and freshness is personality, and some of the wines in this line-up have it in abundance.

And one last thing: some of the wines clearly fall into the aperitif-spectrum, ideal for whetting the appetite and getting the juices to flow. Others, however, call for food. So let some of these wines be your dinner companions – see how well they deal with spice, with richer foods, with cheese, with dishes that combine savoury flavours with fruit. There is nothing to lose and much to discover, so go off-piste on an effervescent world tour this festive season.

# Champagne alternatives: 25 top sparkling wines from around the globe



Domaine Carneros, Le Rêve Blanc de Blancs Brut, Napa Valley, California, USA 2013

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With 10 years of age, this is vivid with honey and camomile on the nose. This is from Champagne Taittinger's Californian outpost, where vineyards are cooled by Pacific breezes, yet the sunshine is undeniable...

Points 94



Racines, Grande Reserve Chardonnay Extra Brut, Santa Barbara, California, USA 2018

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From one of the coolest and sunniest areas on the Californian coast, few wines come with such pedigree as this collaboration between Rodolphe Péters from Champagne and both the owner and winemaker of...

Points 94



Ferrari, Perlé Trentodoc Brut, Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy 2017

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White nougat with toasted almonds and fresh sponge cake dominate the nose of this always-reliable Italian stalwart from the Alpine heights of Trentino. Made from estate-grown fruit only, this is an elegant sparkle...

Points 93



## Ca' del Bosco, Vintage Collection Satèn Brut, Franciacorta, Lombardy, Italy 2018

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Everything about this is subtle: the creamy nose, gentle body, smooth mousse, silky mouthfeel. No wonder, since this is a so-called Satèn, made with slightly lower pressure to result in sheer creaminess. Oak...

Points 93



## Graham Beck, Blanc de Blancs Brut, Robertson, South Africa 2018

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Half of this classy blanc de blancs was fermented in 10-year-old small barrels, the other half in stainless steel. Malolactic fermentation was avoided and the wines were blended to then spend four years on lees...

Points 93



## House of Arras, Brut Elite Cuvée 1501, Tasmania, Australia NV

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Made from grapes harvested across Tasmania with 2015 being the base vintage and some base wine fermented in oak, this is slightly reduced at the outset. But boy does it open up to reveal hints of pistachio, clear...

Points 93



## No1 Family Estate, Cuvée Virginie Extra Brut, Marlborough, New Zealand 2016

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Daniel Le Brun is an expat Champenois transplanted to Marlborough in New Zealand. This wine is a 'proud tribute' to his daughter Virginie. Freshly baked shortcrust pastry marries with oyster shell on the nose,...

Points 93



## Foreau Domaine du Clos Naudin, Brut, Vouvray, Loire, France 2014

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Traditional-method fizz from Chenin Blanc can be tricky, but Foreau shows everyone else how it is done. A slight camomile lift shows evolution on the nose while bright, juicy yellow apple speaks of...

Points 93



## Roederer Estate, Quartet Brut, Mendocino County, California, USA NV

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Owned by Champagne Roederer, this northern Californian sparkler comes with calibre. It opens on notions of creamy plum while lively bubbles showcase the cool briskness of the Pacific coast along with...

Points 90





## Errazuriz, Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature, Aconcagua Costa, Aconcagua Valley, Chile NV

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Made from Chardonnay grapes grown just 12km from the cold Pacific, this needs a bit of swirling to get rid of initial reduction, but underneath that a world of tropical fruit opens up, aligned to Chardonnay's corn...

Points 92



## Ferghettina, Extra Brut, Franciacorta, Lombardy, Italy 2015

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After spending six years on lees, this is as fresh as a daisy on the nose: bright, citric with classy creaminess – but not a wrinkle. The palate is light and lively with very fine bubbles persisting gently. The low dosag...

Points 92



## Altemasi, Trentodoc Millesimato Brut, Trentino Alto-Adige, Italy 2019

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The name Altemasi is derived from the high-altitude farms that grow the grapes that go into this cooperative's blend. Made from 100% Chardonnay grown at up to 650m, this is vividly fresh with ripe, juicy...

Points 92



## Domaine Hugo, Hugo Brut Nature, Wiltshire, England, United Kingdom 2020

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Made from a co-fermented field blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Meunier and Pinot Gris grown biodynamically in Wiltshire, this Bramley and Golden Delicious apple scented wine is creamy, elegant, fruity an...

Points 91



## Hundred Hills, Blanc de Blancs Brut, Oxfordshire, England, United Kingdom 2019

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Harvested in late October 2019 from a single parcel of Chardonnay vines, this is from an English relative newcomer in Oxfordshire. Buttery roundness is there from the off, as is ripe, crunchy yellow apple and a...

Points 91



## La Taille aux Loups, Triple Zéro Brut Nature, Loire, France NV

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This crémant was harvested at full ripeness, fermented spontaneously and bottled with residual sugar so the second fermentation in bottle stems from these natural sugars. 'Triple zero' means there was no...

Points 92



## Il Cascinone, Alasia Riserva Brut, Alta Langa, Piedmont, Italy 2018

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Made by the Araldica co-op, this traditional-method 100% Pinot Noir sparkler is from the historic Il Cascinone estate in the Langhe hills above Acqui Terme. The grapes were grown up to 400m and this spent...

Points 91



## Charles Fox, Reserve Brut, Elgin, South Africa NV

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With more than two years on lees and 25% of reserve wines, this opens with a honeyed nose alongside mellow notes of Red Delicious apple that signal some evolution. The palate, likewise, has a waxy note of age that...

Points 91



## Domaine André et Mireille Tissot, Indigène Crémant du Jura, Jura, France NV

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Additions of 5% each of Trousseau and Poulsard really place this in the Jura, and what is more, the sugar used to start the second fermentation consisted of sweet vin de paille. The first notion on the nose is melted...

Points 90





## Bernard-Massard, Crémant de Luxembourg Millésimé Brut, Moselle, Luxembourg 2017

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The fruitiness and verve of this light-bodied yet concentrated sparkler from Luxembourg will surprise you. This is all about juicy stone fruit, think Mirabelle plums and pale peaches, backed with gentle sponge...

Points 90



## Jansz, Vintage Rosé Brut, Pipers River, Tasmania, Australia 2017

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This 100% Pinot Noir fizz is picked in 'the finest blocks' of the Jansz vineyards, in northern Tasmania, with views of the Bass Strait. Proper Tassie briskness defines this wine, but so does exquisite creaminess...

Points 93



## Luis Pato, Vinha Pan Espumante Brut Nature, Bairrada, Portugal 2018

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The pale pink hue signals that this was made from Baga, and Luis Pato is the king of this grape variety in Portugal's Bairrada region. After four years on lees and with no additions of sulphur dioxide, the nose is...

Points 92



## Langham, Rosé Extra Brut, Dorset, England, United Kingdom NV

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From south-facing slopes on chalk subsoil and based mostly on the 2019 vintage with 18% of reserve wines, this fragrant Dorset fizz typifies Langham's rounded yet brisk style. With some base wines fermented i...

Points 91



## Loimer, Reserve Brut Rosé, Niederösterreich, Austria NV

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If any country has upped its game in the sparkling stakes, it is Austria, and Kamptal star winemaker Fred Loimer had a key role to play. This is his ever reliable, ever refreshing Reserve Brut Rosé (with a dosage of...

Points 91



## Henners, Rosé Brut, East Sussex, England, United Kingdom NV

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This pale pink English sparkler from Pinot Noir and Meunier is immediately evocative of ozone and sea spray with gentle notions of redcurrant. The mousse is very brisk and the style is bracingly,...

Points 90



## Raventós i Blanc, de Nit Rosé Extra Brut, Conca del Riu Anoia, Penedès, Spain 2021

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There is Cava and then there are the wines made by Raventós i Blanc. This unusually elegant pink sparkler gets its super-pale hue from an addition of Monastrell from almost 50-year-old vines; some of the...

Points 90