

Life

Last: All that sparkles beyond Champagne

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The small town of Valdobbiadene, surrounded by vineyards, a zone of production of the traditional Italian white sparkling wine Prosecco. Files PHOTO BY OKFOTO /Getty Images/iStockphoto

Between now and New Year's Eve, consumption of sparkling wines will triple its normal sales volumes as the entertaining season ramps up. I regard sparkling wines as the perfect start to a dinner party; the bubbles invigorate the palate and stimulate the appetite, a fizzy hint of good things to come. I'm like a dog that hears the can opener when I hear sparkling wine being opened; it elicits a Pavlovian response as I rush to the kitchen in fear that I might miss out on something tasty. Often the beverage in question is Champagne but the king of sparkling wines faces a lot of usurpers these days – the focus of this column.

The Champenois may not have been the first to discover how a secondary fermentation induced natural bubbles in wine, but they certainly perfected it. Like sourdough bread, the presence of yeast induces a second fermentation, and then it's simply a matter of letting nature take its course. Winemakers around the globe discovered that you can make sparkling wine from virtually any combination of grapes, although not always to great success. As a general rule of thumb, grapes that are high in natural acidity – such as cool climate chardonnay and pinot noir – are best suited to the production of sparkling wine.

The term “Champagne” is protected in the EU as it's more than just a style of wine, it's a place. Virtually all of France's wine regions produce sparkling wines made in the same method, demarked as *crémant*. As such, you will see the term *crémant* followed by the region. For example, *Crémant de Bourgogne* on a label indicates the wine is made in the same method as Champagne, in this case from Burgundy (Bourgogne). In other parts of Europe, the term is translated to “traditional method” although you will see terms such as *Sekt* (Germany), *Franciacorta* (Italy), and *Cava* (Spain), for example, from countries that have their sparkling wine regions and styles.

In the new world, it's effectively a free-for-all all, although most sparkling wine producers respect the Champagne name, and the ones that don't are typically nasty. Several Champagne producers, such as Moët and Roederer, produce sparkling wines in California, and Champagne houses are purchasing and planting vineyards in the south of England, and there are some surprisingly good examples, thanks in large part to climate change.

As a category, sparkling wine sales have experienced double-digit growth since 2021, according to a new report by International Wine and Spirits Research. Prosecco sales have skyrocketed as well, hitting \$3.2 billion in sales in 2022 alone. The frothy Italian wine is still somewhat misunderstood so let's clear that up. Most Prosecco is made in a large, closed tank with the bubbles occurring when the fermentation process creates CO₂, and the gas has nowhere to go. It's bottled under pressure to keep the bubbles intact, a more inexpensive method than the traditional style. It's important to consider that not all Proseccos are created equal, in fact far from it. The best ones, generally speaking, are produced in the mountainous subregion of Valdobbiadene (also a town), mainly from glera grapes although other varietals are permitted. The large-scale commercial examples are typically semi-sweet, whereas many of the premium examples are almost bone dry. My favourite style is called col fondo and, like Champagne, the secondary fermentation occurs in the bottle. In many cases, the spent yeast sediment is simply left in the bottle (unlike Champagne), giving them a slightly funky component. In Emilia Romagna, they produce Lambrusco, a fruity sparkling red wine that can be sweet or almost fully dry. It is typically served chilled with a panini, a combination that always transports me to the culinary capital of Italy.

Spain's contribution to the sparkling wine world is Cava. Produced in the Penedes region just outside of Barcelona, it's made in the traditional method and is generally considered to be the most affordable alternative to Champagne. They make a lot of it, about 250 million bottles a year, and my experience has taught me that it's worth spending a little more to get one of the better examples. At their best, they can rival Champagne, and very good Champagne at that.

Not to be outdone, Italy has Franciacorta, produced in the traditional method in the Lombardy region of northern Italy. Chardonnay is the main grape there, typically supported by pinot bianco and pinot noir, and like high-quality Cava, the best examples can give Champagne a run for the money.

As a food wine, sparklers extend beyond the traditional oysters and caviar realm. The main consideration is acidity as virtually all sparkling wines have lots of it, and I've induced heartburn on more than one occasion when I've been unable to say no when presented with an array of good fizz. Food will help this, try things like an assortment of shellfish as well as other fishy treats like sardines and anchovies. Cheese should not be overlooked either, most notably soft-ripened cheese such as brie or Delice de Bourgogne, a beautiful soft cheese from Burgundy. You don't have to stop there, try seafood risotto with a good bottle from Franciacorta or maybe some bouillabaisse with a nice Crémant de Limoux from the south of France.

Here's a small list of some of my favourite sparkling wine producers, by category:

Cava: Hands down, Raventos i Blanc. Technically they are no longer part of the Cava DO as they opted out, creating a new DO with higher quality standards (called Conca del Riu Anoia). I've been to this winery and was blown away by their meticulous attention to quality and detail. They use all indigenous, organically grown grapes and you can find their de Nit Rosé and Blanc de Blanc for about \$40 a bottle.

Lambrusco: There are a dozen or so available here, try Paltrinieri, Lini, and Tomato Wheel, all three are on the dry side and under \$30.

Cremant: I like the Cremant de Bourgogne from Bailly Lapierre, around \$30. It's creamy with lemon curd and pear notes. Great value.