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Last: Champagne lookalikes that won't break the bank

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Grapes entering the winery at Raventos i Blanc. Courtesy, Raventos i Blanc

I'm on record as saying that if I could afford to drink Champagne every day, I would, so it's probably just as well that I can't, because anything truly special can lose its lustre when taken for granted. As such, I'm always looking for a good Champagne stand-in, something that delivers that yeasty, fizzy array of stone fruits and citrus that refreshes the palate and stimulates the appetite.

I don't care for Prosecco, unless it has Aperol in it, so I'll get that out of the way right now. Unlike Champagne, which undergoes its secondary fermentation on the bottle, Prosecco is made in a large, pressurized tank, keeping it affordable, light and fizzy, and millions of people love it. It's also sweet, carrying between six and 32 grams of residual sugar, depending on the style. Brut and extra dry Champagne carry between 0 to six

grams per litre, with enough acidity to take a layer of Carnauba wax off your car. That's what I happen to like, it wakes up the palate and puts a spring in my step, something I increasingly need as I get older. As I've limited my Champagne budget to special occasions, like weekends, it's good to have a stable of more affordable alternatives to put some spring in your midweek step.

One of my favourite Champagne alternatives is Crémant – French wines that are made in the same method as Champagne (known as method traditionnelle) from the traditional grapes in any specific region. A Crémant de Alsace, for example, will typically include riesling, pinot, blanc, pinot gris, and any other combination of all the permitted grapes within that specific appellation (AOC). Almost every major wine region in France produces Crémant of some description, and the best ones can come very close to the Champagne experience for about half the price. Does that mean you are going to get something that tastes like Krug for \$30? Sadly, no, but there is a lot of Crémant that will more than rival your big brand entry-level Champers, to be sure.



J.L. Denois is based in Limoux in the Aude region of southwest France. Limoux is known for its Blanquette di Limoux, a method traditionnelle wine made from the local mauzac grape, along with the permitted additions of chardonnay and chenin blanc. I was there many years ago and was underwhelmed by most of the Limoux wines we tried, but there has been a quality shift over the last decade, as is exemplified by the wines of J.L. Denois. Based in the medieval village of Roquetaillade, Jean-Louis came from a sixth-generation Champagne family but opted for the lofty climes of Limoux, where land was considerably cheaper, knowing full well that it was possible to make world-class wines there. He makes exceptional Crémant, as well as a great range of still wines, most notably from pinot noir and chardonnay. Jancis Robinson, the world's most famous wine writer, was quoted as saying his Crémant was "a little fruitier, more opulent, and less obviously lees-aged than the best champagnes but infinitely better than cheap champagne", and I couldn't agree more. As a side note, if you are missing Napa Valley style chardonnay, I suggest you check out his Chardonnay Sainte Marie – rich and opulent with just a touch of that buttery vanilla/oak note that can overwhelm some Napa chards. I can also recommend the Crémant from Maison Rosier (also based in Limoux), and the Crémant de Bourgogne from Bailley Lapierre, all in the \$30 to \$45 range. I am also very

fond of Crémant de Loire, made from the chenin blanc grape, and you can find an excellent one from Domaine des Aubuisières for about \$28.

Spain is another great source for affordable sparkling wines, predominantly from the Cava DO in Penedes, situated just outside of Barcelona. The indigenous trio of grapes for Cava include macabeo, xarel-lo and parellada, although chardonnay can be employed as well. Cava is made in the traditional method, with the second fermentation occurring in the bottle. My hands-down favourite producer is Raventos i Blanc, technically not Cava as they opted out of that DO a few years ago, when they proposed a new DO, Conca del Riu Anoia. It adheres to a higher standard of quality, and their wines are truly world-class, rivalling Champagne for about \$42 a bottle for their Blanc de Blanc (\$48 for their rosé, also exceptional). I have sung the praises of this winery many times over the years, and this multi-generational, family-run bodega is a must-see if you're visiting that corner of Spain.

I'm also fond of cocktails that include bubbles in the mix, such as the French 75, a delightful tippie made from 1 ounce of gin, a ½ ounce of fresh lemon juice, ½ ounce of simple syrup, and 3 ounces of sparkling wine, garnished with a twist of lemon. Cheers!

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