

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Six top champagne and sparkling wines to celebrate summer

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Philip Rich nominates six cheery choices from his favourite champagne and sparkling wine producers.



The gold rush of the 1850s left a surprising legacy. Demand for luxury products in the cashed-up colony of Australia resulted in the country having the highest per capita consumption of champagne in the world. As Champagne's sixth-largest export market, Australia is still one of its most important. With 6.5 million bottles imported in 2014, more than double that of a decade earlier, our thirst for the region's bottle-fermented sparkling wine appears unquenchable.

There are two types of champagne. The first are those made by the 300 or so maisons de champagnes, houses such as Moet et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Bollinger and Pol Roger, which may own vineyards but purchase fruit from the region's 15,000-plus growers. The second are the vigneron or grower-producers, who make wine only from grapes they grow themselves.

Imports of big house champagnes, driven by heavy discounting and strong brand recognition, have increased by a million bottles over the past two years. Grower champagne sales in Australia by contrast are minuscule, sitting at fewer than 90,000 bottles last year. This suggests that we are far less adventurous than Champagne's other top export countries. Growing your own grapes is no guarantee of quality of course, but some really exciting, artisanal wines are being made in Champagne, and they should be on the shopping list of anyone interested in premium, quality-end bubbles.

Remember, too, that sparkling wine does not have to be confined to a celebratory drink before a meal; it can also be a surprisingly versatile menu accompaniment. Try the Krug Grande Cuvee with quail, for example, for a whole new taste sensation.

The following Christmas and New Year recommendations include some of my favourite producers. I have even managed to find a Spanish cava that, if you're willing to be adventurous, will surprise you.

Delamotte Blanc de Blancs Brut NV, \$120

One of the oldest houses in Champagne, founded in 1760, Delamotte and its neighbour Salon are run by Didier Depond, whose focus is on making superb chardonnay-based wines. Sourced from grand cru vineyards in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger and Cramant, the 100 per cent chardonnay blanc de blancs spends a minimum four years on yeast lees and often has some declassified Salon fruit in the blend.

Cedric Bouchard Roses de Jeanne Cote de Val Vilaine, \$120

Cedric Bouchard's wines sum up everything that is both good and interesting about grower champagne. This pinot noir from a single vineyard with the 2012 vintage as its base was made with minimal interference – no fining, filtration or dosage. There are aromas of small red fruits and a little undergrowth, and the palate is vinous, pure, long and beautifully balanced.

Arras EJ Carr Late Disgorged 2002, \$130

A blend of 58.4 per cent chardonnay and 41.6 per cent pinot noir sourced from four Tasmanian subregions – the upper and lower Derwent, Pipers River and Huon Estuary – Arras's flagship EJ Carr remains the benchmark against which all other Australian bottled fermented sparkling wine should be judged. With its complex aromas of toast and grilled nuts, this wine has terrific depth and finishes long.

Krug Grande Cuveé, \$350

My favourite grand marque in the LVMH portfolio, which includes Dom Perignon and Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame, Krug Grande Cuveé is the greatest non-vintage champagne, or multi-vintage as Krug calls it. A blend of about 120 wines from 10 or more different vintages and from all three champagne varieties – chardonnay, pinot meunier and pinot noir – this tour de force is rich and powerful yet seamless, balanced and very long.

Raventós i Blanc Gran Reserva De La Finca 2010, \$70

In 1872, Josep Raventós Fatjó made the first cava and in 1984 his descendent founded the Raventós i Blanc estate in Penedes, Spain. This delicious, complex and world-class sparkling wine is made from a blend of xarel-lo, macabeo, parellada, chardonnay and pinot noir that spends at least 36 months on lees. It is nutty, gently honeyed and very well balanced.

Egly-Ouriet Brut Rose Grand Cru, \$190

While Jacques Selosse remains the darling of sommeliers around the world, my favourite grower-producer is Selosse's great friend Francis Egly. His great brut rose is a blend of 65 per cent pinot noir and 35 per cent chardonnay that spends 52 months on lees, remarkable for non-vintage. It has aromas of small red fruits, brioche and dried flowers, while the palate is creamy, silky and long.

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