

A toast to champagne and sparkling wines

By Bill Garlough Special to The Beacon News

In December, we travel across the ocean to discuss one of nature's gifts, Champagne! Champagne is a wine region in France, so only wines from this area may be properly called Champagne. Any "champagne" produced outside this region in France should be referred to as Sparkling Wine.

No other beverage in the world symbolizes a celebration better than Champagne/Sparkling wine. These beverages help usher in the New Year as well as weddings, birthdays, promotions and any other special occasions. This time of year is when approximately 80 percent of this beverage is consumed. At holiday parties, my catering company likes to set up a sparkling station near the front door, greeting guests with a festive glass of bubbly.

Wine speak

The Champagne region in France is located about 90 miles northeast of Paris. In the late 17th century, French Champagnes were formally recognized as a new style of wine. Champagne's unique effervescence came about due to the cooler climate of northern France. Grapes from this region generally had not fully ripened nor totally fermented in the Fall when wines are traditionally placed in barrels. Over the winter, the champagne was dormant, then began fermenting once again in the Spring. This led to a fizzy beverage that was cloudy, due to the spent yeast floating in the barrels. At the time, this was considered an inferior product.

The French in the Champagne region created a new process to clarify their beverage. Instead of traditional barrel aging and storage, champagne was the first wine to be stored and aged in individual bottles with corks. This new process, Methode Champenois, (still in use today) involves inverting the bottles in racks and gently turning the bottles (riddling), to help the yeast collect in the neck of the bottle.

Next, the neck of the bottle is submerged in a brine solution that freezes the yeast section. The bottle is popped to expel the plug of yeast (disgorgement), resulting in a clear beverage. The champagne is then topped off with still (non-fermented) wine held in reserve for this purpose. A small amount of yeast and sugar are added to the bottle, then corked. This starts the second fermentation process. As the yeast consumes the sugar, a small amount of alcohol is created, as well as carbon dioxide. This allows the bottle to regain its fizz.

Today there are about 100 Champagne Houses in the Champagne region that are supplied with grapes or grape juice from over 15,000 local growers. Given the cooler climate, faster ripening grape varieties are used exclusively in this region; Chardonnay (used exclusively in Blanc de Blancs), Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier (used with Chardonnay in Blanc de Noirs and Roses). There are three different methods to produce Champagne; the traditional Methode Champenois where wines ferment in individual bottles, the Charmat Process where wines are fermented in large steel vats and, third, the Artificial Carbonation process where wine is injected with carbon dioxide - which is the most inexpensive approach (and can lead to headaches). Quality Champagnes cost more due to the winery's use of higher quality grapes, the blending of aged, still wines and the cost of storing the bottled Champagne for years before release.

There are three different styles of Champagne or Sparkling wines, ranging from light to medium to full body (based on the amount of time the yeast is left in contact with the wine). Also, sparkling wine's sweetness levels ranges from Brut (dry) to Extra Dry (semi-sweet) to Doux (sweet).

Food and wine pairings

As discussed, the holidays are when the majority of Sparkling wines are consumed. They tend to be food friendly due to their higher acidity levels. This refreshing beverage is an ideal aperitif (lighter style is best) or can be used throughout a meal (heavier, more yeasty styles). They tend to match well with spicy and salty dishes. When served



as an aperitif, my catering company tends to pair the lighter style Sparklings with sushi, smoked salmon canapés, garlicky shrimp crostini, spicy chicken sate and grilled ahi tuna skewers with a wasabi aioli. They also pair well with goat cheese and semi-soft white cheeses that offer mild flavors.

Sparkling wines have been a house favorite for years. Personal favorites from California that I recommend include Schramsberg and Domaine Carneros, which we just visited this past October. On the French side, a smaller House that is receiving great accolades is Charles Ellner, whose Brut Champagne Seduction (\$65) and Brut Reserve (\$40) offer tremendous value for the money. Included in the following are suggestions from local merchants of Champagnes and Sparkling wines and their retail prices, which may vary:

\$10 range

Pierre Delize Non-Vintage (NV) Blanc de Blancs - France - \$7

Domaine Ste. Michelle (NV) Brut Columbia Valley - Washington State - \$12

Jaume Serra Cristalino Brut Nature - Spanish Sparkler - \$10

Rotari Brut - Italian Sparkling (not from the Asti region) - \$12

Daniel Pardiac Brut Blanc de Blancs - France - \$12

\$25 - 40 ranges

Roederer Estate (NV) Brut - Anderson Valley, CA - \$22

Domaine Carneros Brut Carneros - Napa Valley, CA - \$25

Schramsberg Brut Blanc de Noir - Napa/Sonoma Counties, CA - \$30

Joseph Perrier Brut - France - \$26

Bollinger NV Brut - France - \$40

Charles Ellner Brut Reserve - France - \$40

Bob Kovacs of The Wine Seller in Geneva reminded me of Winston Churchill's famous quote, "Champagne, in defeat you need it - in victory you deserve it!"

Happy Holidays and Cheers!

Bill Garlough is an Aurora resident, Level 1 Master Sommelier and owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville. He can be reached through his website at www.mychef.com or by email winepairings@mychef.com.

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