

Put some 'sparkle' in your holidays

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December is a festive and magical time of the year, when family and friends reconnect and celebrate the year's milestones. Given this celebratory mood, it is not surprising that 80% of Champagne and Sparkling wine is consumed during the holidays.

Last December, my column reviewed French Champagne. This year, let's discuss some alternatives and a fun way to serve them.

Due to its upscale retro feel, "Champagne" cocktails are again in vogue. A "Champagne" cocktail is typically a blend of a sparkler with fruit juice (and possibly a liquor).



French Champagne is treasured for its delicate flavor, complexity and balance. Unfortunately, this will be lost when blended with other ingredients, so enjoy French Champagne on its own. As Italian Proseccos and Spanish Cavas do not have the cache of French Champagne, they are more affordable and ideal for a mixed cocktail beverage. Quality options are available in the \$10.00 – \$16.00 range.

Italian Sparklers are known as Spumante (means foaming). Probably the best known comes from the Asti region and are referred to as Asti Spumante. Another wine region on the rise is the Veneto, home of Prosecco. Prosecco is named after the primary grape used to produce this sparkler (also used are small amount of Pinot Blanco and Pinot Grigio). The best quality comes from the di Valdobbiadene area (look for this on the label as an indication of high quality). These dry, fruity sparklers pair well with pasta and prosciutto dishes.

Bill's Picks	
Italian Sparklers	
Zardetto Prosecco	\$12.00
Nino Franco Rustico Prosecco	\$12.00
Mionetto Prosecco di Valdobbiadene	\$16.00
Riondo Prosecco – Vino Frizzante	\$12.00
Spanish Sparklers – Cavas	
Cristalino	\$ 7.00
de Marques Gelida	\$13.00
Juvé & Camps	\$12.00

There are two basic styles, the full sparkler Proseccos and the slightly bubbly Frizzante. They are easy to identify as the full sparkler style has the traditional foil cap and wine basket while the Frizzantes have a string at the cork and have no foil cap. As Frizzantes have less fizz, it is more wine-like which allows the citrus, pear and apple fruit flavors to come through.

The traditional full sparkler Proseccos tend to be preferred for "Champagne" cocktails. The classic example is a Bellini, a blend of sparkling wine and white peach juice.

Spanish sparklers are known as Cavas, and are the full sparkling style. They tend to be more rustic than French Champagne, with lively effervescence and simple flavors. These dry, earthy sparklers pair well with garlicky seafood dishes. Spain's most famous sparkler region is the Penedès. While Chardonnay grapes are becoming more popular in the production of Cavas, (the only white varietal allowed in France's Champagne region), Cavas unique flavors come from their use of native whites, such as Macabeo and Parellada. Cavas use a similar description system as the French for rating sweetness levels, from Brut (dry) to Dry or Seco (slightly sweet) to Sweet (very sweet). Cavas' full sparkling character is ideal for champagne cocktails.

Below is a recipe for a festive, sparkling "Champagne" cocktail, sure to brighten your holiday gatherings. Made with healthful pomegranate juice, packed with antioxidants, this tasty cocktail has all the panache of an upscale pomegranate martini without the wallop. This colorful, sparkling beverage is perfect for a cheery holiday toast.

Pomegranate - Ginger "Champagne" Cocktail

Serves Six

- 1 Cup Pomegranate Juice
- 1 Tbsp White Sugar
- 1 ¼ " Thick Slice of Fresh Ginger
- 6 Tbsp Fresh Orange Juice
- 1-1/2 Tbsp Cointreau or Triple Sec
- 1 Bottle Brut Sparkler (Prosecco or Cava), Chilled

Mix first three ingredients in a saucepan. Gently boil, stirring occasionally, until mixture is reduced to a syrup, approximately 1/3 cup. Cool.

Remove the slice of ginger from the chilled pomegranate syrup. Pour the syrup, orange juice and Cointreau into a pitcher and gently stir. Add the well chilled brut sparkler and stir gently to distribute the pomegranate mixture. Serve immediately in champagne style flutes.

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