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Sparkling Wine - How Bubbles of the World Are Created (And Enjoyed)

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"In victory, you deserve Champagne, in defeat, you need it." - Napoleon Bonaparte

Champagne was not only made popular by such great quotes, but also by celebrity endorsements or excesses. It's no secret that Agent 007 James Bond always had a strong penchant for Bollinger Champagne (and vodka). And it has been reported that Marilyn Monroe once filled up her tub with 350 bottles of Champagne, and took a long, luxurious bath in it.

Champagne, the dry sparkling wine from the northeastern French region (east of Paris) bearing the same name, has long been considered the ultimate beverage of choice to raise a toast or to celebrate a special occasion. Its image as a celebratory drink and the high price of Champagne coupled with North Americans' preference for sweeter style drinks have sent the image and sales spiraling down over the years. Fortunately, with the proliferation of inexpensive and both dry and off-dry sparkling wines from almost every wine-producing region of the world, bubbly is slowly regaining some of its lost popularity.

Gone are the days when sparkling wine was only drunk to mark a special occasion or to pair with luxurious delicacies such as caviar. Sparkling wine makes an excellent aperitif on its own or with simple hors d'oeuvres, seafood entrees or sushi, or it can be enjoyed with dessert if the wine is off-dry or sweet. It does not need to be a Moët & Chandon Cuvée Dom Pérignon, Bollinger Grande Année or other expensive bubbly. Some of the finest bubbly of the world are now produced inexpensively from New World wine making regions and other Old World regions such as Italy, Spain and Eastern Europe countries.

And as wineries try demystifying table wines by simplifying labels - first and foremost by identifying grape varieties as opposed to strictly provenance - sparkling wine marketers are also working hard to make bubbly more consumer and food friendly, that can be enjoyed any day.

Not all bubbly is champagne

Champagne's popularity has made the name synonymous with sparkling wine, but not all sparkling wine is Champagne. Only sparkling wine produced from specific Champagne regions, for example, Reims and Épernay, produced by the traditional method using only Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and/or Pinot Meunier can be labeled as Champagne. (There are other production criteria, however, these are the major ones.) Other sparkling wines from France, but outside of Champagne, produced using the traditional method are referred to as Crémant, while in Spain they are known as Cava.

The traditional method, most often referred to as *méthode champenoise* or *méthode traditionnelle*, requires that bubbles be produced naturally within each bottle by a second fermentation, known as *prise de mousse*, which is initiated through the addition of a *liqueur de tirage*, a mixture of sugar and yeast, to a still wine. The still wine is referred to as the base wine, or *cuvée*, and it consists of a blend of many different wines carefully blended by the cellar master, or *chef de cave*. The *cuvée* can often be a blend of hundreds of different wines. If all component wines are from a single vintage, the final sparkling wine is vintage dated. Wineries that choose to make a consistent style year after year will blend wines from two or more vintages to produce a non-vintage, or multi-vintage, sparkling wine.

During bottle fermentation, yeast consumes sugar to convert it into alcohol and carbon dioxide gas, just as in any alcoholic fermentation; however, the gas remains trapped inside the bottle, dissolved in the wine. The pressure inside the bottle can reach up to 6 bars, approximately 90 pounds per square inch, or psi - the equivalent of three times the pressure in car tires.

The wine is allowed to ferment for several weeks and to mature very slowly at cool temperatures, between 50° and 54° F (10° and 12° C), with bottles in the horizontal position, or *sur latte*. This extended contact with the spent yeast cells from fermentation, a process known as yeast autolysis, is what gives sparkling wine its yeasty, nutty aromas and complex flavors. It can last a few weeks to several years depending on the desired flavor profile - and cellar master's patience. Following the long sojourn in bottle, the dead yeast cells are allowed to drop and collect in a special crown cap closure, known as the *bidule*, through a labor-intensive method known as riddling.

Riddling, or *remuage*, is the process of twisting, turning and tilting bottles from a horizontal to a quasi-vertical position on a riddling rack, or *pupitre*, to allow the spent yeast cells to collect in the bidule, a process that takes approximately three weeks. The cellar master may choose to further age the sparkling wine by transferring bottles in their vertical position, or *sur pointe*, to a holding container.

When the wine has reached its optimum and desired flavor profile, the cellar master removes the spent yeast deposit from each bottle by a process known as disgorging, or *dégorgement*. The bottle is held vertically, pointing down, and with a disgorging key, the crown cap and bidule are removed whilst the bottle is brought to a horizontal position. This allows the sediment to fly out of the neck of the bottle leaving the wine crystal clear, if done properly. Often the process is made more effective by first freezing the neck of the bottle in a brine solution to freeze the sediments.

The last critical step, the *dosage*, involves adding a small volume of *cuvée* to which a little sugar is added to balance the wine's acidity and to achieve the desired style, from bone dry to sweet. The French refer to this *cuvée* solution as the *liqueur d'expédition*, and often contains a distilled spirit such as Cognac.

Champagne is a cool-climate grape growing area and, as such, grapes do not reach high sugar levels as in warmer climates and have higher acidity, hence the need to balance with sugar. The lower sugar level yields a base wine with typically 10.0% to 11.0% alc./vol. Bottle fermentation adds another 1.5% for a total of 11.5% to 12.5% alc./vol. for the finished wine.

The final step involves inserting a cork partway (that's what gives the cork its distinctive mushroom shape once removed) in the bottle and securing it with a wire cage.

Most sparkling wines are ready to drink once finished and can last up to two or three years in the bottle; however, the best bubbly of the world, namely those produced in the traditional method, can live many more years with appropriate cellaring.

This laborious process and long aging period explains the high price of sparkling wines produced in the traditional method.

Other bubbly of the world

The quality of sparkling wine is judged by aroma and flavor complexity and size of bubbles; the smaller the bubbles, the higher the quality. Bottle fermentation, as in the traditional method, yields the smallest bubbles; however, such sparkling wine is labor-intensive and costly to produce.

The most common and cost-effective alternative to the traditional method is the Charmat or Cuve Close (sealed tank) method, which is used to produce many of the world's inexpensive but good-quality bubbly. Bubbly produced with patience and care using this method can rival some of the great Champagnes although the method is commonly used for rapid commercialization of cheaper sparklings. Bubbles in these are markedly bigger and aromas and flavors are not as intense, but they provide excellent value. Flavor intensity and complexity, and quality in general, can be improved through longer aging of the wine on the lees. Asti Spumante, the famous low-alcohol (approximately 8% alc./vol.) sweet sparkling wine from Piedmont (Italy), Germany's Sekt, and Ontario's sparkling Icewine are examples of sparkling wines produced using the Charmat method or a variant.

The Charmat method consists in conducting the second fermentation in bulk in pressurized, sealed stainless steel tanks, and bypasses the need for bottle fermentation, riddling and disgorgement. The wine is then refrigerated to stop fermentation, filtered, a dosage is added, and then bottled under pressure so as not to lose any precious carbon dioxide gas.

A less common method of making sparkling wine has gained great popularity in Russia and Ukraine for mass production of good quality, inexpensive bubbly. A variant of the Charmat process, the Russian or continuous method uses a series (e.g. 5) of pressurized tanks linked sequentially. The first tank contains the *cuvée* and tirage (sugar and yeast solution). As fermentation starts, wine is channeled through the second and third tanks each containing wood shavings to accumulate dead yeast cells (lees) and to allow autolysis to take place. Wine is then channeled through the fourth and fifth tanks where it clarifies prior to being bottled. Although wine is in contact with the lees for a longer period than in the Charmat method, the continuous method usually takes less than a month and therefore yields wine of inferior quality.

Another less common method is the transfer or racking method whereby wine fermented in the bottle is transferred under refrigeration to a bulk transfer tank. Dosage is added and the wine is then bottled under pressure.

The advantage of all the above methods is that they eliminate the labor-intensive steps of riddling and disgorging.

Styles of bubbly

The most popular choices of grape varieties in France for sparkling wine are Chardonnay, Pinot Noir or Pinot Meunier, or a blend of any of these. Other popular varieties include Chenin Blanc, Muscat and Riesling for whites, and Syrah (Shiraz) for reds, but there are no fast and hard rules. Rosé sparkling wine is usually made from red grapes using a very short maceration period to extract a little red color, although a small percentage of red wine can be added to a white sparkling wine to achieve a desired color, albeit with a very different flavor profile.

A white sparkling wine made strictly from a white grape variety, such as Chardonnay, is known as a *blanc de blancs* whereas a white sparkling wine from a red grape variety, such as Pinot Noir, is known as a *blanc de noirs*.

Other than color, sparkling wines are most often classified according to the amount of residual sugar or relative dryness. For example, a Brut sparkling wine can have up to 15 g/L of residual sugar while an Extra Brut has typically less than 6 g/L. Countries have different designations and requirements relative to residual sugar content; and different countries use different terminology that can be quite confusing.

Appreciating bubbly

The sparkling wine production methods described above should help you better appreciate the difference between a bubbly priced at \$12 vs \$50 or even \$200 or more.

Discover the pleasures of sparkling wine by enjoying it any day of the week, and experimenting with different food pairings until you discover what pleases your palate most. So start enjoying it now, unlike John Maynard Keynes, one the most important figures in the entire history of economics, who once said, "My only regret in life is that I did not drink more Champagne."

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Article Source: http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Daniel_Pambianchi

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