Instant Expert

Sparkling wine

The civilized way to pop a cork is so gently it barely sighs. But we say let the cork fly. There’s no need to be stuffy with bubbly. It’s time sparkling wine moved beyond the special occasion—it’s one of the most versatile food wines, after all. So here’s all you need to know to choose, taste, and share the right sparkling wine tonight.

BY SARA SCHNEIDER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFERY CROSS

How to pop the cork

With style—and without serious injury

1 Remove the top of the foil capsule; it’s usually perforated, with a tab or indentation to help you get started.
2 With one thumb gently holding down the cork (to avoid spontaneous combustion), untwist the coil on the wire cage—six turns will do the trick. Remove the cage.
3 Using a towel, grip the cork with one hand and, with the other, twist the bottom of the bottle (not the cork). The cork should slowly slide out. You control how fast—and how loud the pop. >78
How the bubbles get into the bottle (in the traditional, labor-intensive—and expensive—méthode champenoise technique)

1. Once the still wine is made, more yeast, plus sugar, is added to start a second fermentation.
2. The wine is immediately bottled and sealed, so the fermentation happens under pressure and the resulting CO2 is trapped.
3. The wine sits on the lees (the spent yeast cells), picking up yeastyness and complexity—the longer the better.
4. The bottles are riddled: periodically twisted and tilted until they’re upside down, to move all the sediment into the neck.
5. The bottle necks are dipped in a cold solution to freeze the sediment. Then the crown caps are pulled off, and the plugs fly out.
6. A mixture of wine and sugar (the dosage) is added, determining sweetness; then bottles are corked and muzzled with the wire cage.

Sparkling wine contains so much acidity (the grapes are picked much greener than for still wine) that sugar is usually added, though you’re not always meant to taste it. Here are the terms to look for on labels.

- **Doux** Skip the cake and drink your dessert
- **Demi-sec** A clear match for wedding cake
- **Sec** Obviously sweet but short of dessert
- **Extra dry** Delicately sweet
- **Brut** The most common level; quite dry, but you might detect a hint of sweetness
- **Extra brut** Has the teeniest bit of sugar but tastes bone-dry
- **Brut nature** Enamel-strippingly dry and tart; no sugar added at all

**THROW A SPARKLING ROSÉ DINNER PARTY:** sunset.com/sparkling-rose
Top picks

From the impressive new wave, to the classics—and bargains!

**NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK**

*Baileyana 2005 Cuvée 1909 Blanc de Blanc* (Edna Valley; $40). Freshly baked bread with gentle pear and lemon and creamy bubbles.

*Handley 2003 Brut* (Anderson Valley; $38). Nutty and toasty, with bright, refreshing acidity carrying spicy pear and apple flavors.

*Paul Dolan Brut* (Mendocino County; $27). Tart green apple delivered with an appealing, earthy yeasiness.

*Rock Wall 2010 Blanc de Blanc* (California; $18). Crisp apple and pear plus delicate florals and a hint of litchi.

*Soter 2006 Brut Rosé* (Yamhill-Carlton District; $58). A gorgeous sparkler with wild red berries and bubbles that won’t quit.

**OLD FAVES**

*Iron Horse 2006 “Russian Cuvée” Brut* (Green Valley of Russian River Valley; $38). Toasted apple-pie spice followed by Pinot-driven flavors: wild strawberry, watermelon, and tangerine zest.

*J Brut Rosé* (Russian River Valley; $28). Rich and toasty, with tangy red fruit—raspberries, cranberries—and a resiny underbrush layer.

*J. Schram 2004 by Schramsberg* (North Coast; $100). In the event you have a Benjamin burning a hole in your pocket, this is your wine—rich and complex with apple, pear, spice, and earthy minerality (from six years on the lees).


**THE REAL DEAL: 5 UNDER $25**

*Gloria Ferrer “Va de Vi” Ultra Cuvée* (Sonoma County; $22). A whisper of sugar carries apple, pear, peach, berry, and bitter orange.

*Gruet Blanc de Noirs* (New Mexico; $14). A cherry orchard in the rain, with a lemon-lime finish.

*Mumm Napa Brut Prestige* (Napa Valley; $22). Delicate white blossoms and earthy yeast play around apple, berry, and bright lemon flavors.

*Piper Sonoma “Select Cuvée” Blanc de Blancs* (Sonoma County; $15). Lemon crème brûlée and buttered toast round out Asian pear and green apple that pop with tiny bubbles.

*Scharffenberger Brut Excellence* (Mendocino County; $19). Think toast spread with apple butter here, with a pithy, herbal finish.

**PERFECT OCCASION EQUATIONS**

*Drinking at* Seafood-omelet brunch

*Soter Brut Rosé*  
*Après-ski fireside chili*

*Drinking at* Oscar party

*J. Schram*  
*Seaside truffled popcorn*

*Drinking at* Chinese take-out night

*Iron Horse “Russian Cuvée”*  
*Oscar party truffled popcorn*

*Drinking at* Soter 2006 Brut Rosé

*Gloria Ferrer “Va de Vi”*  
*Chinese take-out night*
**Wine in the West**

**TALK THE TALK**
When the server brings the flutes, and your friends start firing questions, know your stuff.

**Why don’t West Coast labels say Champagne?** The United States has agreed to stop using foreign place-names for products not made in those places. A few wineries that were making bubbly here early on (Korbel, for instance) were grandfathered in and can still use “California Champagne.”

**Does the shape of the glass really matter?** Yes. Serving bubbly in retro coupes (squat and wide) is bad form; the wine goes flat fast. Tall, narrow flutes preserve the bubbles—aka mousse—better.

**How do you swirl bubbly in a flute?** Don’t. The bubbles are doing the work of getting the aromas to your nose. (Do still sniff, though.)

**Does the size of the bubbles matter?** The smaller the better. Fine, creamy bubbles are created by years spent on the lees in the bottle. If that second fermentation was done in a large tank or (gasp) in a CO2 tank, the mousse will be clumsier.

**Just how many bubbles are there in a bottle?** None, until the cork is popped; then around 56 million.

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**Bubble bars**
6 places where sparkling wines take center stage

**SEATTLE**
**Frank’s Oyster House & Champagne Parlor** Tucked into the quiet Ravenna neighborhood, Frank’s feels like a secret. But it’s the place for splurging on headliner Champagnes or discovering interesting international sparklers by the reasonably priced glass (prosecco from Italy or crémants—sparklers from somewhere in France other than the Champagne region). All are great with fresh oysters from Taylor Shellsfish Farms and dishes filled with produce from Helsing Junction Farm CSA.

$$$$; 2616 N.E. 55th St.; 206/525-0220.

**PORTLAND**
**Ambonnay Champagne Bar** Positioned in the southeast warehouse district’s Olympic Mills building, Ambonnay might be the stop-and-sip spot for diners wait-listed at the hot charc-eaterie Olympic Provisions, just down the hall, but it’s a worthy destination of its own. The sparkling-only wine list starts with bottles from Champagne’s Grand Cru village of Ambonnay (look for an ornamental “A”), and roams the globe: Austria, Italy, Spain, California, and (of course) Oregon. You can ask for the bubbles to be served in big-bowled Pinot Noir glasses, which release amazing aromas.

$$; 107 S.E. Washington St.; 503/575-4861.

**HEALDSBURG, CA**
**JCB Tasting Room** Yes, you’re in a Sonoma County wine tasting room, but the bubbles here are French—specifically, crémants from Burgundy. The Boisset family produces wines from both Old World and New; the setting here reflects the dual style, with equal measures of Baccarat crystal and Lucite furnishings, so mod festive you’ll crave something sparkling. Go for the flight: JCB N° 21, JCB N° 69 Rosé, and Perle d’Or.

Tastings from $4; 320 Center St.; 707/473-9707.

**PASADENA**
**Pop Champagne & Dessert Bar** In Old Town Pasadena, appease your bubble cravings with the French-heavy 28 sparklers by the glass and many more by the bottle (a full 20 of them vintage). Can’t decide on just one? Order up a tasting flight ($14) or think outside the flute with a specialty sparkling cocktail like the Almond Joy, made with almond liqueur and sparkling wine. $$$; 33 E. Union St.; 626/795-1295.

**SCOTTSDALE, AZ**
**Narcisse Champagne & Tea Lounge** At Narcisse, French mirrors face off against dangling glass bubbles—with plenty of pretty people clinking flutes in between. The real toast is the wine list: more than 70 bubbly by the flute, including a great selection of demi-sec sparklers, whose sweetness plays well with a brownie topped with peanut butter mousse.

$$; 15257 N. Scottsdale Rd.; 480/588-2244.

**DENVER**
**Corridor 44** Sparklers come 120 by the bottle and 20 by the glass at Corridor 44. Named for the length of its hallway, this bar echoes its featured wine with effervescence decor: undulating white leather booths with crystal above and zebra print below—downright conducive to a flight of French sparklers with caviar, oysters, or chocolate truffles. $$; 1433 Larimer Square; 303/893-0044.
5 sparkling wine customs that must die

Have fun, but please, stop the madness

1. **The pyramid**
   Dramatic? Maybe, to a certain generation. But wine’s for drinking, not watching, and the wide glasses are bubble killers.

2. **The wedding cake**
   Mix sweets and dry wine, and you might as well be sucking on a lemon. For the nuptial toast, make it sec or demi-sec.

3. **The mimosa**
   Sure, it justifies drinking before noon, but OJ gives sparklers all the nuance of Fanta. Be brave. Sip just the bubbles.

4. **The locker-room spray**
   We’d be for it, if the winners drank the bubbles. But if you’re going to bathe in a beverage, please use Gatorade.

5. **The mason jar**
   Serving sparklers in canning jars was fun for five minutes in the ’80s. Get over it.