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- Local Farmers Making a Difference
- Hot New Restaurants
- Nifty Kitchen Gadgets
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[editorial]



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# A SPARKLING TAKE ON CHAMPAGNE

by Perrine Prieur of Perrine's Wine Shop



Perrine Prieur

I have learned that there are many misconceptions about champagne. Many people do not realize that sparkling wine is most commonly produced, distributed, and consumed in the United States, while champagne is actually produced and distributed from the region of Champagne in France, the most northerly wine region about 90 miles northeast of Paris. The cool climate, coupled with the chalk-based soil, generates highly acidic grapes, creating favorable conditions for producing champagne.

Champagne gained prominence in the sixteenth century, when royalty would drink sparkling wine during the anointment of French kings. It became known as *the nectar of the kings*, associating power and luxury with its consumption. As this celebratory wine grew in popularity amongst French and English royalty, the monasteries in the Champagne region in France continued to oversee the construction of sparkling wine and cultivate new techniques during the production process.

Within this region of France, there are three main grapes that are developed and used for the production of champagne: Pinot Noir (black), Pinot Meunier (black) and Chardonnay (white). The black grapes are grown primarily in Vallée de la Marne and the white grapes, are grown mainly in Côte des Blancs. Most champagnes are a mix of both black and white grapes. However, there are some *blanc de blanc* (white to white) champagnes, made with 100% Chardonnay, and some *blanc de noirs* (white to black) champagnes.

Once these grapes have been blended and fermented to create a beautiful bottle of wine, the product enters a second round of fermentation with the addition of yeast and sugar. The bottle is left to age anywhere from 18 to 36 months or longer, and sealed with a top similar to a beer bottle cap. The bottle is laid flat and the yeast settles to the bottom of the container. After the bottle has appropriately aged, the fermented wine is then placed at a downward angle in a rack and rotated, either manually or mechanically, causing the yeast to move to the neck of the bottle.

The neck of the bottle is then frozen so that the yeast is suspended at the smallest part of the bottle. The cap is removed and the frozen yeast is forced out due to the gas that has developed in the liquid. The lost wine is replaced with sweetened wine and syrup, which determines the

style of the champagne. The dosage of sugar added to the sparkling wine determines the level of *brut*, or dryness. Although there are five levels of brut, the most popular type is itself called Brut, a very dry champagne containing less than 15 grams of sugar per liter.

Bottles are finished off by being corked, wired shut, and stored for six months. Although there is no right or wrong combination of grape blends and sugar amounts, there are certain harvests that help create vintage bottles from high-quality grapes and favorable weather conditions, such as the vintage bottles from the mid 1990s, when the harvests in Champagne were in perfect condition.

There are several household names that have created advances in the production of champagne. In 1688, Dom Pérignon managed the cellars and wine production for the Abbey of Hautvillers. Although Pérignon was not the inventor of sparkling wine, his contributions have paved the way for innovation in production. He was the first to develop the wire collar, securing the cork to withstand the pressure from fermentation. Veuve Cliquot, another pioneer, created the *pupitre*, a rack used to hold the champagne during the final stages of fermentation, allowing the yeast sediments to gather at the neck of the bottle.

Although I do enjoy some of the more popular houses of champagne, I recommend taking a chance on some of the sparkling wines from smaller vineyards, which are just as delicious and interesting. For example, Schramsberg, produced in Napa Valley, is known for a variety of delectable sparkling wines, including Brut Rosé and Blanc de Noir. Another wonderful California sparkling wine is Iron Horse, produced at an exceptional vineyard in Sonoma County. In fact, this sparkling wine has been served at the White House for the past five consecutive presidential administrations.

Although there are a few misconceptions about champagne and its origin, I have learned one thing over the years: picking a good bottle of champagne all comes down to the sweetness you prefer and the price you wish to spend; because you really cannot go wrong with a bottle of champagne, right?

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