

Stirling Wines: Champagne and Sparkling Wine

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Introduction

Perhaps the best introduction to the subject of champagne that I can think of is in the words of the late Lily Bollinger: "I drink it when I'm happy and when I'm sad. Sometimes I drink it when I'm alone. When I have company I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I'm not hungry and I drink it when I am. Otherwise I never touch it, unless I'm thirsty."

With the seasonal festivities just round the corner, one's mind turns to bubbles and, in the light of the straightened circumstances of the global economy, to sparkling wine as well as champagne. Although nothing quite reaches the towering heights of the very best champagnes (with prices to match), there are some great sparklers out there that are as good as regular champagne and much better value for money.

How to add the bubbles

There are three main ways to make sparkling wine. All of them are designed to add bubbles of CO₂ to a base (normally white) wine. Grapes destined for sparkling wines are usually picked earlier, at lower sugar levels, than grapes for still wine and yields are typically higher for sparkling wines than still wines. This combination of high acidity and low sugar leads to base wines which are remarkably unpalatable in their still state.

The simplest way to add the fizz is direct injection, known in French as *la pompe bicyclette* - **the bicycle pump**. In this method, carbonation of wine is achieved in much the same way as for soft drinks: CO₂ is pumped from cylinders into a tank of wine, which is then bottled under pressure. This results in a wine which has many, large bubbles when the bottle is first opened which fade very rapidly. This is the cheapest way of making sparkling wine - and it shows.

The most expensive way is the so-called **traditional method**. This used to be widely called the champagne method or *méthode champenoise*. But the authorities in Champagne managed to register this as a trade mark with the EU and now the process is variously known as the traditional method, classic method,

méthode traditionnelle, and *méthode classique*. This is the most meticulous way of making wine sparkle; the grapes that go into the wines vary considerably around the world but the basic techniques do not.

The process starts with a base wine that is typically very, very acidic and often low in natural sugar. In Northern Europe it is often chaptalized i.e. extra sugar is added to give sufficient substrate for the yeast to increase the alcohol content by up to an extra 1.5% to reach 10.5%-11%. The wines are generally fermented in stainless steel.

Next come the bubbles. The base wine is turned into sparkling wine by secondary fermentation. The wine is filled into bottles, a mixture of wine sugar and yeast (*liqueur de tirage*) is added, and the bottle is sealed, typically with a crown cap. The yeast turns the sugar into alcohol (bringing the ABV up to 12%) & CO₂. The yeast die, fall to bottom of bottle and decompose. Although it sounds a bit messy, this so-called autolysis is a very important part of achieving the right flavour profile and quality sparkling wine its yeasty nose.

Most quality wines are aged for at least a year to enable the secondary fermentation to complete and for the flavour profiles to harmonize. When the secondary fermentation is complete, the bottle is slowly inverted & turned over the course of several weeks, so that all the sediment settles on top of the cap (a process known as *remuage*). After all the sediment has settled, the neck of the bottle is frozen, the cap is removed and the frozen plug pops out. The bottle is then refilled with a mixture of wine and sugar (the so-called *liqueur de dosage*) and corked. Nearly all quality sparklers, whether sweet or dry, contain some sugar to balance the intense natural acidity. For instance Brut Champagne can contain up to 6g sugar/litre. In general, the warmer the climate, the less sugar required to counter the acidity, and the longer a wine is aged on lees, the less sugar it needs.

The third major method is the **Charmat process or tank method**. This very common method was developed by Eugene Charmat in the early years of the 20th century in Bordeaux. The big difference compared to the traditional method is that the secondary fermentation takes place in a pressurized bulk tank i.e.

the wine has the bubbles in it before it is bottled. It is much cheaper, faster, and less labour intensive than the traditional method; but the wines taste more like still wines with bubbles, rather than having the complexity that comes from the interaction with the yeast. Nevertheless this method can produce very enjoyable everyday sparklers such as Prosecco.

European Sparklers

There is an enormous variety of sparkling wine produced in Europe. Much of it is characterless and relies on high levels of residual sugar to mask the inadequacies of the base wine. However, there are a few gems which make great quaffing wines and some of which can match the quality of entry level champagne.

Cava is the name for Spanish sparkling wines made using the traditional method. The word originates in Catalonia, which produces most but not all Cava, where it means 'cellar'. Total production is about a third that of Champagne. However, there are a number of big differences compared to champagne. Firstly, the grape mix is different, with a blend of local grapes: Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada. The wine is aged for a shorter time and has a lower pressure of dissolved CO₂. These wines are less expensive and have their fans but I find them too overtly fruity and lacking in character.

Sekt is the word used in German-speaking countries to describe sparkling wine. Most of it is dirt cheap, with about 90% based on non-German base wine. However, Deutscher Sekt is made solely from German base wine and here there are small quantities of fine elegant sparkling wine. Although most of it never makes it past the German borders.

Spumante is the Italian word for sparkling wine. The best known of these is Asti (Spumante), made from the moscato bianco grape, which tends to be mass-produced, off-dry and to be avoided. However, there are two styles of Italian sparkling wine which I can thoroughly recommend.

Italian wines made according to the traditional method are labelled '**metodo classico**' and the most famous area for production is **Franciacorta** which lies in the province of Brescia in Lombardia. The area has warm days in summer but a nearby lake provides cooler nights to preserve acidity. The wines are made from a mixture of chardonnay, pinot blanc, pinot noir, and pinot gris grapes (the first two being classic champagne grapes). Yields are lower than in champagne. However, although the quality from the top producers is high, the combination of a warmer

climate and the softer nature of the pinot blanc and pinot gris grapes means that the wines never have quite the same 'attack' as champagne

Top producers include: Cà del Bosco, Bellavista, and Cavalleri. The Donna Annamaria Clementi bottling from Cà del Bosco earns particularly favourable reviews.



Prosecco is a white grape native to the Veneto region in North East Italy. It is the base for the sparkling wine called Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene from the town of Conegliano. The area has a coolish climate near to alpine province of Belluno and the wines are made using the less expensive Charmat process. Although, it could never be described as a great wine, it produces very good value-for-money quaffing wine with a characteristic note of pears that goes down particularly well on a summer's afternoon. Go for dry (labelled with the French word brut) by preference. The subzone of Cartize, even cooler than the rest of the zone, is held to be superior to the normal DOC production. Bisol and Carpenè Malvolti are among the top producers.



Crémant is the term used in France for dry sparkling wines made outside Champagne but using the traditional method. The term was adopted in the late 1980s when the expression *méthode champenoise* was outlawed by the European Union (and replaced by *méthode traditionnelle*). The grape mix varies from region to region but the rules are similar to champagne,

with slightly lower permitted yields but also slightly shorter ageing.

Crémant d'Alsace makes up about 10% of the region's production. Pinots Blanc, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Riesling are the main grapes. The wines are well made but tend to be high in acidity and light in body. I wouldn't decline a glass but I wouldn't seek it out either.

Crémant de Bourgogne is made in the Burgundy area and can be as good as entry level champagne, at a much better price point. Typically, the grape mix is the same as for champagne with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay the main building blocks. There are two main areas in Burgundy that produce Crémant: in the North around Auxerre near Chablis and in the South in the Côte Chalonnaise and the Mâconnais. The climatic difference between these two sub-regions means that the northern wines tend to be lighter and more acidic. Crémant from Southern Burgundy is more full-bodied and a good alternative to bigger styles of champagne. Look out for producers such as Albert Sounit and Veuve Ambal, both of which features in the leading French Guide the Guide Hachette, and Luquet which won a top rating in the most recent 2009 edition



Crémant de Loire covers the Anjou-Saumur and Touraine regions of the Loire Valley. Chenin Blanc is the most important grape variety used which gives it a very distinctive flavour profile compared to the Pinot and Chardonnay based Crémant de Bourgogne. The technical quality of the wines is high and several producers are offshoots of Champagne houses: Langlois Chateau from Bollinger, Gratien & Meyer from Alfred Gratien, and the Bouvet-Ladubay was originally owned by Taittinger but was recently sold to the Indian group United Spirits. Personally, I find that the fruit character of the Chenin Blanc grape, which I adore in still wines, is a bit too much in a sparkling wine.

Last-but-not-least in an Old World context is **England**. No, that's not a mis-print. Two of the things that make Champagne special are its chalky sub-soil and northerly climate. Well, the Downs of Southern

England are part of the same great crescent of chalk that stretches from Burgundy through Chablis and Champagne to the White Cliffs of Dover and beyond. And with global warming, the climate of Southern England increasingly resembles the climate of champagne as it was 10 years ago. Now most English wine does not really do it for me – it's still not warm enough to consistently ripen grapes other than German hybrids. However, it's perfect for sparklers. Two producers in particular are producing wine that matches lighter-bodied champagnes. Nyetimber has 260 acres planted with the three Champagne varieties, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, regularly wins awards and gold medals, and is widely listed in London restaurants. Ridgeview has also planted the three classic champagne varieties and follows the rules of the CIVC (*Comité Interprofessionnel du vin de Champagne*) the champagne trade association. They too are regular award winners, particularly their Merret Bloomsbury. Tasted blind, both wines are indistinguishable from champagne.



New World Sparklers

As I described above, quality sparkling wine tends to come from very acidic base wine and much of the New World is simply too warm to produce the required acidity. However, there are a number of cool-climate sub regions which are producing very good value-for-money sparklers.

Jacob's Creek is Australia's biggest wine brand and is owned by French giant Pernod Ricard. Despite the vast quantities produced, they do a very good job of providing consistently good quality. In particular, they produce a Vintage Reserve Chardonnay Pinot Noir that makes a very good base for buck's fizz and other champagne cocktails. Tasmania has the coolest climate in Australia and this is where Jansz produce a high quality sparkler.

In 1986, Moët & Chandon established a winery in the relatively cool-climate Yarra valley of Australia where they make sparkling wine from the classic champagne varieties. As you would expect from their parentage, the wines are very high quality and in my previous incarnation as a wine merchant, Green Point was my 'house' sparkling wine.

Moët & Chandon/LVMH also own Cloudy Bay in New Zealand. This estate is most famous for its Sauvignon Blanc but they also make an excellent champagne-style sparkling wine called Pelorus. The original investment in Cloudy Bay was made by Veuve Clicquot when it was an independent company. And perhaps it my imagination but I think Pelorus is closer in style to Veuve Clicquot and Green Point closer to Moët & Chandon.



When Pernod Ricard bought Allied Domecq in 2005, part of the portfolio was Montana Wines, who make 50% of all the wine produced in New Zealand. Montana's sparkling label is Lindauer, which is another source of good value sparklers.

In general, I find California too warm for quality sparkling wine. Even the wines of top producer like Schramsberg have a bit too much overt fruit for my palate. However, this fruit intensity is a better match for rosé styles.

Champagne - what makes it special?

At its simplest, champagne is a sparkling wine made from grapes grown in a specified area in Northern France.

There are three permitted grape varieties: pinot noir (which gives body), pinot meunier (which gives fruit) and chardonnay (which gives elegance). This makes

champagne is one of the few examples in the world of a white wine that is made from red grapes. The first critical factor is that the Champagne region is right at the northern climatic limit of where it is possible to reliably ripen grapes. As a result, the base wine is very, very acidic. Another feature of champagne is that yields per hectare of land are very high compared to other fine wine regions. Current regulations permit production in good years of up to 15,500kg/hectare which equates to just under 100HI/hectare, compared to 40HI/ha that is typical in other regions.

As is the case for most sparkling wine, the wines are generally fermented in stainless steel but some of the luxury cuvées are fermented in oak barrels, notably for Krug and Bollinger, and this produces very full-bodied wines.

As described above, the base wine is turned into sparkling wine by a secondary fermentation. In champagne the autolysis of the dead yeast is particularly important in giving champagne its characteristic biscuity aromas.

Champagne is aged for a minimum of 15 months to enable the secondary fermentation to complete and for the flavour profiles to harmonize. Most champagne sees only 15 months of ageing but vintage champagne must be aged for 3 years and some de luxe champagnes are aged up to 10 years. In general, the longer the ageing, the smaller the bubbles.

Finally, the sediment is removed, the so-called *liqueur de dosage* is added and the bottle is corked. Nearly all champagne, whether sweet or dry, contains some sugar to balance the intense natural acidity. For example even Brut Champagne can contain up to 6g sugar/litre.

The final particularity of champagne is that most champagne is non-vintage (NV). Because champagne is an area of marginal production for grapes, the weather and hence the quantity and quality of grapes can vary enormously from one year to the next. The actual liquid that goes into the secondary fermentation is typically a vertical blend of wines across vintages and the wine is labelled NV. The major firms will typically use between 10% and 50% of wines from previous vintages to ensure consistency across the years. In good vintages (at least in theory only in good vintages), the best wines are bottled as vintage champagne, with only wines from that year going into the blend. Furthermore, all the major houses have ultra-premium products, known as de luxe or prestige cuvées.

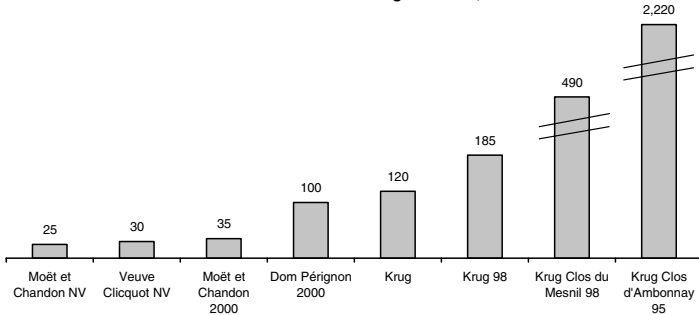
Champagne thus encompasses a very wide range of price points. In the case of the market leader Moët et Chandon, this stretches from the eponymous mother brand, through Dom Pérignon, up to single vineyard bottlings of Krug such as the recently released Krug Clos d'Ambonnay at over £2,000/bottle. I must admit that I have never been able to bring myself to buy any of the very top cuvées but I live in hope of an invitation to an extravagant tasting!

style and are perfect apéritif drinks. One of my favourites comes from Billecart Salmon.



The Wine Society in the UK also do a very nice Blanc de Blancs, supplied for them by Alfred Gratien. This wine is fermented in oak barrels and is little heavier than the Billecart, but still a wonderfully elegant drink.

Moët et Chandon Pricing Structure, £



The most famous representatives of champagne are the large champagne houses who own well-known brands such as Moët et Chandon and Laurent Perrier. However, the big producers do not in general own the land. Only 11% of the champagne vineyards are owned by the champagne houses. The rest is owned by over 15,000 growers. This makes access to sufficient quantity of high quality grapes critical to success, especially since the bought-in grapes make up approx 75% of the costs of making champagne. As well as the big houses who produce 70% of volume and 90% of exports, there are two other major types of producers: *récoltants-manipulants* owner-producers (i.e. growers who make champagne under their own label) and the co-operatives (e.g. CVC who own the Nicholas Feuillatte brand)

Non Vintage

The trick to quality in champagne is to be big enough to be able to blend out vintage variations and differences in the quality of the crop from any one plot of land but still be small enough either to own a high proportion of your own vineyards or to exert very tight quality control on your suppliers.

Geographic exclusivity and decades of investment in advertising and publicity have enabled Champagne houses to charge a significant premium compared to other sparkling wines. For example, the major houses are able to charge 2-3x more for champagne than their own sparkling wines. Much of this economic surplus has accrued to the grape growers who own 89% of the land, such that champagne vineyards are now worth €1m/ha, compared to €5,000/ha for neighbouring agricultural land, a factor of 200x!

Two houses who consistently produce champagnes in a lighter style are Perrier-Jouët (which is now owned by Pernod Ricard) and Pol Roger (which was Winston Churchill's favourite champagne, after whom Pol Roger have named their luxury cuvée). Another personal favourite is Charles Heidsieck, which got top marks in a recent tasting of NV champagnes by Jancis Robinson. The founder of this house was the original Champagne Charlie, reputedly responsible for establishing champagne in the USA in the mid 19th Century; but now it is owned by Rémy Cointreau. Jacquesson also get consistently good scores.

Non Vintage – Blanc de Blancs

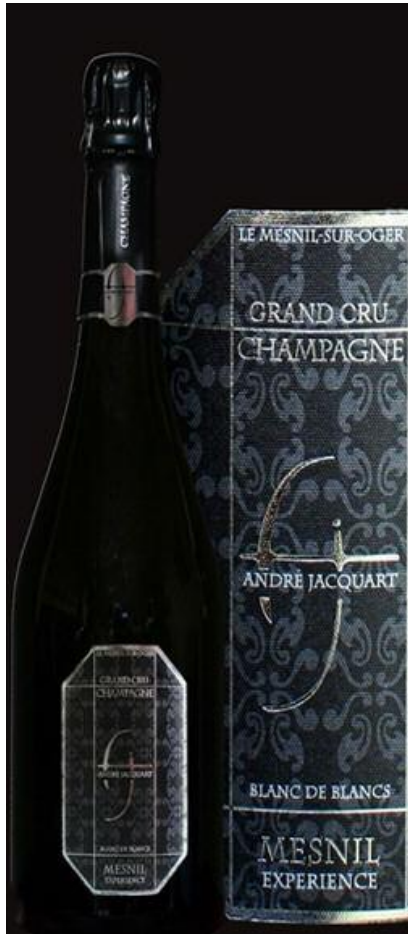
As mentioned above, most champagne is non-vintage and a blend of the three grape varieties. But some wines are made only from Chardonnay and labelled Blanc de Blancs. These wines are slightly lighter in

One notch up the champagne hierarchy are NV champagnes from grand cru grapes. Champagne has a so-called *échelle des crus* (scale of growths) where the 319 villages in champagne receive a score from 80-100. Most villages have a score below 90. 40 villages have scores between 90 & 99 and are designated premier cru. 17 out of the 319 villages in champagne receive a 100 score and are designated grand cru.

Grand cru champagnes are less expensive than vintage champagne but often receive extended ageing and offer very good value for money. A number of current favourites include Hommage à François Hémard from the house of Henri Giraud. This wine is from the village of Aÿ which is home to Bollinger and is famous for full-bodied wines from the Pinot Noir grape



Mesnil-sur-Ogier is the most famous village for Chardonnay grapes. And this is the source of grapes for a recent discovery from the small house of André Jacquart. The wine is very elegant, but has a wonderful intensity of flavour. It is ready for drinking now but will probably get even better with about 5 years cellaring.



Finally, the medium-sized house of Taittinger also does a grand cru NV called Prélude, which is now the pouring champagne in British Airways First Class.



Selosse is an unusual house in many ways. Anselme Selosse (the house is named after his father Jacques) is a biodynamic producer (think extreme organic – homeopathy for vines), which is rare in champagne but common in the upper echelons of Burgundy (DRC, Leroy, etc.). He ages his NV wines for 3 years rather than the 15 month minimum and ferments in oak which makes for full-bodied complex wines – over-powering to some palates but I love them. The only problem is that when I discovered these wines several years ago they were approx £40/bottle and now they are closer to £80



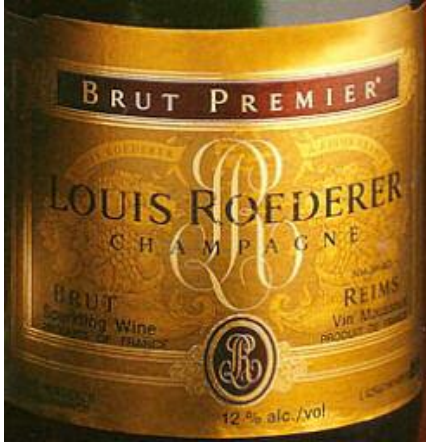
There are also wonderful wines coming from grower-producers like Larmandier-Bernier, Egly-Ouriet, Pierre Gimonet, Pierre Moncuit and Pierre Peter. Most good wine merchants and an increasing number of restaurants will stock one of these names. If you see these names, buy their champagnes with confidence.

Vintage Champagne

As described above, in good vintages (at least in theory only in good vintages), the best wines are bottled as vintage champagne, with only wines from that year going into the blend.

In this context I must mention two houses who produce top-class NV champagnes but I think their vintages are worth the extra money – Roederer & Bollinger. Both houses make full-bodied wine, with a predominance of full-bodied Pinot Noir in the blend. Both houses also have illustrious histories. Roederer's deluxe cuvée is Cristal which was created for the

Russian Imperial court at the end of the 19th century. Bollinger was founded in 1829 by Jacques Bollinger who came from Germany to settle in France in common with Messrs Krug, Heidsieck, Mumm and Roederer. It's intriguing to think that a drink that we view as quintessentially French owes a great deal to this wave of German entrepreneurs.



Bollinger's vintage champagne goes under the name Grande Année (great vintage).



In terms of value-for money it's hard to beat Henriot. This is another old house (founded in 1808), which for many years was run by Joseph Henriot who used to be head of Veuve Clicquot.

Deluxe Cuvées

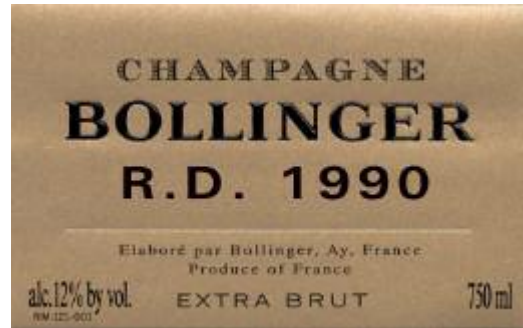
Further up the scale from vintage come the so-called deluxe or prestige cuvées. Perhaps the most famous of these is Dom Pérignon from Moët et Chandon which was launched in 1928 using the 1921 vintage. Production of this cuvée is now rumoured to run into millions of bottles per annum. Although it is still a very good wine, I believe that there is better value elsewhere.

Krug is also owned by Moët et Chandon but still operates independently in terms of production, although all selling and marketing takes place through the leviathan LVMH. Their flagship wine is the Grande Cuvée which they describe rather coyly as multi-

vintage rather non-vintage. Krug was for many years the epitome of champagne and perceived as a notch above the rest. However, in recent years, the critics have commented on increased variability with some releases perceived as too young and not sufficiently integrated. Nevertheless, vintage Krug remains an awesome drink – like a top quality Montrachet with bubbles – so powerful that it almost demands to be drunk with food rather than as an apéritif.



Bollinger's top cuvée (almost) is RD (Récemment dégorgé) i.e. it was held on the lees for most of its life and only recently had the lees removed. In terms of blending, R.D. is a Grand Année, but a Grand Année that has aged in the Bollinger cellars for a longer period: a minimum of eight years and up to 20-25 years. This slow maturation gives great complexity and very, very small bubbles which truly caress the tongue.



Roederer's top cuvée is Cristal which is perhaps the most approachable of the prestige cuvées. Unfortunately, its notoriety among rappers, City Traders and oligarchs has driven prices through the roof unless the Credit Crunch brings prices closer to reality.

Salon is a small house that is part of mid-sized Laurent Perrier. They only make a blanc de blanc style (this is another wine from Le Mesnil) and ferment their wines in stainless steel which gives it a lighter style than the other prestige cuvées. Salon only release vintages approx 3 times per decade and it is a wine that demands ageing. They recently released their 1996 vintage after 10 years of ageing in their cellars

and my local wine merchant (and fellow champagne nut) insists that I do not touch it for another 10 years.



Stratospheric

Finally come three wines which sell for stratospheric prices.

Vieilles Vignes Françaises (Old French Vines) is Bollinger's most expensive cuvée. It is a blanc de noirs i.e. no chardonnay in the blend and is made from two small plots of ungrafted rootstock. The total area of vines used for this rare Champagne is less than half a hectare and the Vieilles Vignes refers to how the vines are trained rather than the age of the rootstock. The vineyards are severely pruned, and thus produce 35% less juice per vine, creating a "super rich wine". Annual production varies between 3,000 and 5,000 bottles. This is the cheapest of the three at approx £400/bottle.



Krug's top cuvée used to be Clos du Mesnil. This is a 100% chardonnay blanc de blancs from a single vineyard in the village of Mesnil-sur-Oger which sells for £600/bottle.



However, Clos du Mesnil has been replaced by Clos d'Ambonnay (over £2,000/bottle) as the most expensive wine in Champagne. It is produced from a single walled vineyard in the village of Ambonnay and uses only Pinot Noir grapes. The Clos d'Ambonnay is a mere third of the size of the Clos du Mesnil – perhaps that's why it is three times as expensive.

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