

Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

What makes Champagne Champagne

Certain conditions must be met to make Champagne. The grapes must be grown on the poor chalky soils of Champagne and made in that same region northwest of Paris. This, perhaps, is the most important qualification for the wine.

Champagne shouldn't be possible. The region is at the northernmost reaches of grape-growing latitudes. The winters are cold with late frosts that endanger the budding vine. The sun shines in Champagne a mere 1,650 hours per growing season, compared to Bordeaux's 2,069. With these conditions, the grapes—chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier—struggle to ripen and, even when they do, make rather acidic wines. This acid, though, is key to a base wine.

The base wine must then be made sparkling in the bottle by a secondary fermentation. The bubbles of Champagne are created by adding a bit of yeast and sugar syrup, or *liqueur de tirage*, to the still wine in a bottle, and the bottle is capped. The yeast eats the sugar and produces a bit of alcohol and much carbon dioxide. Because of the closed environment, the gas cannot escape and dissolves into the wine.

The carbonation, combined with the acid, heightens the crisp nature of the Champagne. This sharpness is counterbalanced by mandatory lees aging. After the yeasts of the secondary fermentation have done their work creating bubbles, they die. Their bodies, or cells, remain in the wine and disintegrate in self-created enzymes. This autolytic action makes chemicals that soften the wine's harsh acids and creates a breadly, yeasty creaminess.

Champagnes are classified by various attributes. Most are non-vintaged, shortened on the label to NV, since consistency of product in a difficult growing environment is important. (A better term would be multi-vintaged since a number of vintages are blended to achieve an established flavor style.) In good years, producers may vintage date some of their product, but these wines come at a premium. Champagne classification is based on the grapes used. *Blanc de Blancs* (white of whites) refers to Champagne made exclusively from white grapes and almost always Chardonnay. *Blanc de Noirs* (white of blacks) is made from pinot noir and pinot meunier only. Rosé is most often made by blending a bit of dry, still red wine into the finished Champagne. Contrary to popular belief, few rosé Champagnes are sweet.

Producers always note sweetness levels on Champagne. In order from least sweet (driest) to sweetest, they are *Brut Nature*, *Extra Brut*, *Brut*, *Extra Sec* (extra dry), *Sec*, *Demi-Sec*, and *Doux*. Even though these categories overlap in exact sweetness, any wine that has the word *brut* on it will be dry. The sweeter styles are great with foods, yet they are hard to find on a store shelf since they are not à la mode.

How do you know if it's true Champagne? Most directly, the label will state Champagne (capitalized) followed by the words *appellation d'origine contrôlée* or letters AOC. While the name Champagne is protected by law in France, and the law is voluntarily followed by most wineries world-round, there are a few producers that skirt the rule. Korbel's California Champagne comes to mind; the word *California* is a giveaway that the wine is not truly Champagne, though. Since 1994, the term *méthode champenoise*, which refers to the secondary fermentation in the bottle, can no longer be used on European wines not hail-

ing from Champagne. Allowed terms to describe the same process are *méthode traditionnelle* or *méthode classique*.

There are other terms to describe other sparkling wines, since not all that bubbles is Champagne. *Crémant* is a term for sparkling wines from other regions of France. The word *Crémant* is followed by the area of production, e.g. *Crémant d'Alsace*. *Méthode traditionnelle* is employed. *Cava* is a Spanish sparkling wine made mainly from Xarel-lo, Parellada, and Macabeo grapes. Like Champagne and *crémants*, *méthode traditionnelle* is used. The Italian wine Franciacorta from Lombardy is made in the same way from chardonnay and pinot noir.

Prosecco, the Italian sparkling wine, is from Northeast Italy near Venice. The grape is *glera* and the method of bubble production is a secondary fermentation in vats. This is known as *méthode Charmat*, or tank method. The process is less expensive and creates a coarser bubble than *méthode traditionnelle*. Flavors of tank method wines are fruit driven and lack the toasty, yeasty, complex notes of Champagne. Fully sparkling Asti DOCG wines are also made in a tank from moscato grapes. There is a time and place for each of these wines on the table.

Champagne will see you from soup to nuts. Try a crisp *Blanc de Blancs* to get the party started and pique the appetite. A burly *Blanc de Noirs* will handle a steak, roast or game birds with aplomb. Berry-driven *rosé* pairs well with fresh fruit and simple unfrosted cakes. And when and why to drink Champagne? Drink it all the time—drawing breath in the morning is reason enough.

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