

the Belle of Bubbles

Champagne steps into the spotlight as a wine not solely meant for special occasions.

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR

Despite the drink's beguiling bubbles, historically Champagne has been somewhat sidelined because of its status as a wine reserved mainly for celebration. Unique characteristics—fizziness and subtle flavors—make it special, but that same standing relegates it mostly to weddings, New Year's celebrations and black-tie affairs. Over the past few years, however, the quintessential queen of festive occasions has widened her range and begun to make a welcome appearance at more everyday affairs like dinner parties, wine and food tastings, and "just-because" moments.

A Sparkling Reputation

Pradeep Raman, executive assistant manager of food and beverage at Montage Beverly Hills, welcomes Champagne's growing profile and passionately extols its myriad charms. "Champagne consumption is like a universal language that is understood, consumed and appreciated by one and all," he says.

Seth Box, director of education for Moët Hennessy USA, feels that Champagne's growing popularity is a result of people becoming more knowledgeable about its distinct ability to accompany an unlimited spectrum of foods and occasions. "People are coming to understand that it is a fantastic accompaniment to a multitude of cuisines," he explains. "That it may be enjoyed with food or without, at brunch, for an aperitif, before and during dinner all the way through the night, certainly helps explain the growing popularity of Champagne."

Adding to Champagne's allure is its rarefied production process and exclusive moniker. The name Champagne, though often used by wineries throughout the world to denote any sparkling wine, actually belongs legitimately (and legally) only to bubbly made in the Champagne region of France. In fact, even sparkling wine that is produced in France but made outside the coveted Champagne region must be labeled "mousseux" or "cremant" rather than Champagne.

The process for making genuine Champagne is equally as exacting, with to-the-letter rules and stringent requirements. Only three grapes can make up the majority of the wine: chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier (with only fractional amounts of several other grape varieties allowed). By law, all Champagne grapes must be picked by hand. Furthermore, by law, nonvintage (meaning grapes harvested from a mix of years) Champagne must age for a minimum of 15 months and vintage (grapes harvested from a



Champagne enhances dinners at Montage Beverly Hills.





Montage Deer Valley guests can indulge in meals or light bites alongside Champagnes such as Veuve Clicquot.



CHAMPAGNE VARIETIES

There are three Champagne varieties: Blanc de blancs, meaning “white from white,” is made from chardonnay grapes; blanc de noirs, meaning “white from black,” is made from the black grapes of pinot noir and/or pinot meunier; and rose, which is made either by blending red and white base wines together or fermenting pinot noir or pinot meunier grapes on the skins. Rose is the rarest type and represents only 4 percent of total Champagne production.

While each style offers its own unique flavor profile, Seth Box, director of education for Moët Hennessy USA, says his favorite is rose. “It’s the quintessential marriage of Champagne and red wine—sophistication, rarity, hedonism and delicacy,” he explains. “I am also of the mind that it is the best food wine on the planet.”



Champagne is just as food-friendly as other wines, pairing nicely with a range of dishes, including foie gras (left), chocolate (center) and fish (right).

single banner year) Champagne must age at least three years. Few other wines are subject to such rigid and strictly enforced standards.

Raman values the rigorous process authentic Champagnes endure. “The sparkling wine made in the Champagne region certainly has an edge over other sparkling [wines] because of the complexity of the process and the end result,” he explains. “The special taste is a direct reflection of the techniques and the weather conditions, in addition to the expertise of the Champagne maker.

“It’s like a consumer knows what to expect when buying a Ferrari,” Raman adds. “Champagne is like the Ferrari of sparkling wines.”

Box also feels that Champagne’s painstaking production process and exclusive locale give it the upper hand: “While there are some amazing sparkling wines made outside of Champagne, I would argue that the unique location, climate

and stringent regulations mean the most average bottle of Champagne will be far superior to the equivalent bottle of sparkling wine.”

Toast to Every Meal

Champagne is just as food-friendly as either red or white wine, according to Box. “Champagne loves salt and fat ... and its beautiful little bubbles serve much in the same way tannin does in red wines to cleanse the palate between bites,” he explains. Sommeliers and chefs have discovered in recent years that those bubbles, along with the wine’s natural acidity, make it a perfect accompaniment to foie gras—perhaps one of the most decadent examples of wine and food pairings.

Not many wines could elevate popcorn to the sublime, but Dave Wallace, beverage manager at Montage Deer Valley, says it’s actually his favorite food for Champagne pairing: “The butter, the toasty [taste] of the kernels, the salt ... all bring

out every aspect of the wine, bubbles and all,” he explains. Wallace also echoes Box’s sentiment that Champagne deserves its ever-expanding spotlight. “Champagne is actually an amazing food wine. There are notes of tropical fruit, toast, brioche, berries, figs, nuts, bread, apple, citrus and the list goes on. Champagne is truly complex and has so much to offer.”

Champagne’s wide sweetness spectrum, which has six different tiers, also makes it an ideal partner for a variety of foods. Sweetness ranges from extra brut (the least sweet), to sec (medium sweet) and doux (the sweetest). Brut, the most popular style, pairs well with most foods, ranging from salty snacks like Wallace’s choice of popcorn or nuts to pasta (with cream- or mushroom-based sauces rather than tomato-based sauces) and seafood, particularly lobster. Doux can be paired with dessert but shouldn’t be coupled with anything more sugary than the Champagne

itself—angel food cake and bittersweet chocolates are both good matches.

Everyday cocktails are also transformed with the addition of the French import. Beyond the common mimosa, Champagne acts as a delicious substitute for club soda in classic mojitos and sangria gets a refresher with the addition of bubbles. Unlike in traditional sangria recipes where the wine sits with the other ingredients for an extended period of time, Champagne should be the last ingredient added to Champagne sangria, poured over fruit and other desired ingredients immediately before enjoying in order to preserve its signature fizz.

Its versatility as a meal companion and a cocktail ingredient as well as its celebratory air make Champagne truly worthy of its status as the belle of bubbles. There is something inexplicably captivating about Champagne that gives it an allure that outshines even the loftiest Bordeaux or smoothest chardonnay. “I often see people with beautiful bottles of red or white wine and ask if they would consider spending the same amount on a bottle of Champagne,” Box says. “The most common response is that they are not celebrating anything. My answer to this is to find more to celebrate in life.” **M**



Fruit adds a fresh twist to a sparkling beverage.

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Champagne is like the Ferrari of sparkling wines.”*

—PRADEEP RAMAN



A stunning view and a glass of Champagne make any day a special occasion at Montage Laguna Beach.

CHAMPAGNE, EXPLAINED

For those who are still adjusting to the concept of everyday Champagne, here are some guidelines to ensure that each glass is one to celebrate.

STORING: As befits the diva of wines, Champagne is highly sensitive to bright light (more so than most wines, which is why Champagnes are typically released in dark bottles) and temperature fluctuations. The best storage temperature is between 50 and 55 degrees Fahrenheit. If a wine cellar or wine refrigerator isn’t readily available, a dark, dry spot in the back of a closet will provide adequate conditions.

SERVING: The ideal temperature for drinking Champagne is between 40 and 45 degrees Fahrenheit—anything cooler will mask the wine’s subtle flavors. To achieve the right temperature, leave the bottle in the fridge for a couple of hours prior to drinking or put it in a metal bucket that is half filled with ice and half filled with cold water for 20 to 30 minutes.

OPENING: Although the popping sound has become an iconic part of uncorking, simply pushing off the cork is not actually the best way to open Champagne. The most efficient way to preserve the bubbles (and avoid a mess) is to gently remove the wire cage that covers the cork and then twist the bottle while holding the cork in place. This method will help ensure pressure is released slowly—and safely.

IMBIBING: Some Champagne aficionados say the best way to ruin an excellent bottle of Champagne is by serving it in the wrong glass, but there remains quite a bit of debate on what constitutes the perfect Champagne glass. Purists will insist that it be served in a tall, thin, narrow glass—the logic being that the less the wine is exposed to air, the longer the bubbles will last. Others suggest that imbibers experiment and make their own decisions. Regardless of glass choice, tilting the glass at an angle while pouring will help to preserve the most bubbles.