

Champagne and Other Sparkling Wines

Lecture 7

You might think that sparkling wine began with the Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon or that it was invented by the French. Both are myths!

WINES FOR THIS LECTURE:

- A nonvintage (NV) Champagne
- A Cava
- A Prosecco
- A California sparkling wine
- A Moscato d'Asti
- A Brachetto



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Sparkling wine is among the most celebrated and least understood types of wine. While in the United States the tendency is to call all sparkling white wine “Champagne,” Champagne is only one of the many forms that elegant, delicious sparkling wines can take. A better understanding of these forms will help you select and enjoy the right sparkler for any occasion.

Part of the reason the word “Champagne” has become shorthand for sparkling wine is the pervasive myth of Dom Pérignon as its inventor. In truth, carbon dioxide bubbles are a natural by-product of fermentation, and throughout history most winemakers—including Pérignon—struggled to get bubbles out of their wines. Although we don’t know who first decided to capitalize on wine’s natural effervescence, we do know that the British were the first to create bottles strong enough to contain its high pressure without exploding, and the French were the first to use them commercially.

Champagne is the best known of all sparkling wines, named for the region of France where it originates, about 90 miles northeast of Paris. It sets

the benchmark for all sparkling wines—the other reason “Champagne” is shorthand. There are over 17,000 growers of Champagne grapes and about 250 Champagne houses, called *négociants-manipulants* (NM), who actually produce the wine. Growers who make their own Champagne are called *récoltants-manipulants* (RM).

Most Champagne is made with two red grapes and one white grape: Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and Chardonnay. Champagnes that predominate in

**All Champagne
is sparkling
wine, but not all
sparkling wine is
Champagne.**

red grapes will be fuller in body and more aromatic; Champagnes made mostly or only with Chardonnay (called Blanc des Blancs) have a leaner structure, lighter body, higher acidity, and more neutral aromatics.

Most Champagnes are fermented in stainless steel, but oak is used by a few houses. The first fermentation produces a bubble-free wine called *vin clair*. The winemaker then blends *vins clairs*

from different grapes, regions, and vintages into a *cuvée*. Then a sugar-yeast solution is added to the *cuvée*, the *cuvée* is bottled, and the bottles are closed with crown caps and laid down to age for a minimum of 15 months. During aging, the sugar-yeast solution produces alcohol and bubbles; the longer the bottle ages, the smaller the bubbles get, and the higher the Champagne's quality. The wine also goes through **autolysis**, wherein the dead yeast releases toasty, biscuity flavors into the wine. After aging, the winemaker uses the riddling process to draw the dead yeast into the neck of the bottle and remove it. A wine-sugar solution called the **dosage** may then be added to sweeten the Champagne. Finally, the crown cap is replaced with a caged cork, and the Champagne is ready to be sold.

Most of the world's sparkling wines are made by this method, called the **traditional method** or the *methode champenoise*, but two wines produced from the same grape varieties in the same method can be very different in character, depending on where the grapes are grown. New World sparklers are most often made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir by the traditional method, although they are often not aged as long as the Old World versions. And just as with still wine, wines from warmer climates have more upfront

fruit character. Cava, a Spanish sparkling wine, is traditionally made from Macabeo, Parellada, and Xarel-lo grapes and shows aromas of lemon and earth. It is also made by the traditional method, but its aging requirements are much shorter than Champagne's, which gives it more youthful, upfront fruitiness.

Instead of the traditional method, Italy's Prosecco, Moscato d'Asti, and Brachetto are made by the **tank method**, or Charmat method, where the second fermentation is done in a stainless steel tank, not a bottle, with little lees contact. This produces larger bubbles, more fruit character, lower acid, and less autolysis. Prosecco and Moscato d'Asti are particularly fragrant and fruity—even floral. Brachetto is a rosé that smells of strawberries and raspberries. Some of these wines are fully sparkling, called *spumante* in Italian, but some are only slightly sparkling, a style called *frizzante*.

No matter which sparkling wine you choose, be careful not to overchill it, which can mute some of the more subtle flavors. Sparkling wines are best served at 45°F (or 7°C), significantly warmer than most refrigerators. An ice bucket that is half ice, half water is the best method to chill sparkling wine quickly. Never put a sparkling wine in the freezer—it could explode!

You should also be cautious when opening a sparkling wine to prevent injuries from flying corks. Consult the lecture video for the best method. ■

Sabering Champagne

According to legend, the Champenois celebrated one of Napoleon's victories by offering the cavalry bottles of Champagne. It is difficult to open a bottle while on horseback, so the cavalrymen hacked off the ends of the bottles with their swords.

While that sounds like it takes a lot of strength, it is actually physics. The point where the bottle's seam meets the lip is the weakest point on the bottle. A strong, sharp tap there with the back of a sword blade or chef's knife will crack the bottle's neck, sending the cork and broken section of neck flying.

While an impressive feat, sabering requires attention to safety and lots of practice. Do not try this without experienced, in-person guidance!

Important Terms

autolysis: The breakdown of dead yeast inside a bottle of sparkling wine, which lends the wine toast and/or biscuit aromas.

dosage: A wine-sugar solution added to sparkling wine after riddling to adjust the wine's sweetness.

négociant-manipulant: A Champagne house that makes wine but do not grow grapes itself.

récoltant-manipulant: A Champagne house that makes wine from grapes they grow itself.

tank method (a.k.a. Charmat method): Sparkling wine that undergoes its second fermentation in stainless steel tanks.

traditional method (a.k.a. *methode champenoise*): Sparkling wine that undergoes its second fermentation in bottles.

Tasting Notes

In this tasting, we try two each of the three noble white grape varieties. The differences among the grapes will be on display, and we see noticeable effects of both climate and winemaking style on each grape.

	NV Champagne	Cava	California Sparkling Wine
Grape	Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay	Macabeo, Parellada, Xarel-lo, sometimes Chardonnay	Primarily Chardonnay and Pinot Noir
Region	Champagne, France	Penedès, Spain	California
Method	Traditional	Traditional	Traditional
Color			
Aromas			
Acid/Sweetness			
Bubbles			
Body			
Finish/Length			

	Prosecco	Moscato d'Asti	Brachetto
Grape	Prosecco	Moscato Bianco	Brachetto
Region	Veneto, Italy	Asti, Italy	Asti, Italy
Method	Tank	Tank	Tank
Color			
Aromas			
Acid/Sweetness			
Bubbles			
Body			
Finish/Length			

Piper Heidsieck Brut

\$45.99

750ml



Vintage	NI (5 pts.)	FI (25 pts.)	FC (10 pts.)	B (5 pts.)	L (5 pts.)	Sum	+ 50	Final

Sparkling Sweetness Level: Dry, Off-dry, Semi-sweet, Sweet

Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

Nose Intensity(NI)	Fruit Intensity(FI)	Flavor Characteristics(FC)	Balance(B)	Length(L)		
1- Light	1-10 None	1-2 Undrinkable	1- Off	1- None		
2- Average	11-15 Soft	3-4 Ordinary	2- Slightly Off	2- Fades Quickly		
3- Pleasant	16-18 Ample	5-6 Good	3- Proportional	3- Lingering (30 secs)		
4- Inviting	19-20 Abundant	7-8 Very Good	4- Harmonious	4- Lengthy (up to 1 minute)		
5- Highly Aromatic	21-23 Bountiful	9-10 Outstanding	5- Perfect	5- Everlasting (> 1 minute)		
24-25 Powerful						
95-100 Classic	90-94 Outstanding	85-89 Very Good	80-84 Good	76-79 Average	71-75 Below Average	65-70 Poor

Date Tasted: _____

Notes: _____

Santi Nello Prosecco Valdobbiadene

\$13.99

750ml



Product Highlights

- A fun sparkler that blends floral, peach and citrus notes with just a hint of almond.
- Product of Botter, founded in 1928 as a negotiant in Veneto.
- Grapes are grown on steep hillsides where it's difficult to even stand, on the sunny parts of the hills between 50 and 500 meters above sea level.
- Climate of newly certified Prosecco DOC is mild year-round, with warm summers and heavy rainfall just a few days a year.

Review

Valdobbiadene, Veneto, Italy- A delicate bouquet of fresh, fruity tones of golden apples and flowers, nuanced with flavors of peach and citrus. Almond notes echo on the elegant aftertaste. Sourced from the finest area for Prosecco. Perfect as an aperitif or for gatherings.

Taste Profile

Dry, Apple, Citrus, Floral, Light-bodied

Vintage	NI (5 pts.)	FI (25 pts.)	FC (10 pts.)	B (5 pts.)	L (5 pts.)	Sum	+ 50	Final

Sparkling Sweetness Level: Dry, Off-dry, Semi-sweet, Sweet

Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

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24-25 Powerful				
95-100 Classic	90-94 Outstanding	85-89 Very Good	80-84 Good	76-79 Average
				71-75 Below Average
				65-70 Poor

Freixenet Cordon Negro Brut

\$6.27

750ml



Review

Spain- Crisp, clean and well-balanced. This wine is medium-bodied with a palate of apple, pear and bright citrus flavors with a moderately long finish and a crisp touch of ginger.

Vintage	NI (5 pts.)	FI (25 pts.)	FC (10 pts.)	B (5 pts.)	L (5 pts.)	Sum	+ 50	Final

Sparkling Sweetness Level: Dry, Off-dry, Semi-sweet, Sweet

Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

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95-100 Classic	90-94 Outstanding	85-89 Very Good	80-84 Good	76-79 Average	71-75 Below Average	65-70 Poor

Date Tasted: _____

Notes:

Villa Lanata Moscato d'Asti

\$15.99

750ml



Product Highlights

- Fragrant, fruity, lightly sparkling and delightful with desserts or as an aperitif

Review

Asti, Piedmont, Italy- A delightfully fresh and spritzy wine, sweetly scented with spring flowers, and gushing with white peach and lemon flavors. This low alcohol beauty is the perfect selection for Sunday brunch, wedding toasts, or with light desserts.

Taste Profile

Sweet, Floral, Lemon, Medium-bodied

Vintage	NI (5 pts.)	FI (25 pts.)	FC (10 pts.)	B (5 pts.)	L (5 pts.)	Sum	+ 50	Final

Sparkling Sweetness Level: Dry, Off-dry, Semi-sweet, Sweet

Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

Nose Intensity(NI) 1- Light 2- Average 3- Pleasant 4- Inviting 5- Highly Aromatic	Fruit Intensity(FI) 1-10 None 11-15 Soft 16-18 Ample 19-20 Abundant 21-23 Bountiful 24-25 Powerful	Flavor Characteristics(FC) 1-2 Undrinkable 3-4 Ordinary 5-6 Good 7-8 Very Good 9-10 Outstanding	Balance(B) 1- Off 2- Slightly Off 3- Proportional 4- Harmonious 5- Perfect	Length(L) 1- None 2- Fades Quickly 3- Lingering (30 secs) 4- Lengthy (up to 1 minute) 5- Everlasting (> 1 minute)		
95-100 Classic	90-94 Outstanding	85-89 Very Good	80-84 Good	76-79 Average	71-75 Below Average	65-70 Poor

Date Tasted: _____

Notes: _____



Review

Piedmont, Italy, " has a delicate bouquet of rose petals and offers sensuous flavors of fresh raspberries and strawberries. Its effervescence is softer than that of champagne, yet it yields a persistent and delicate pink froth. "

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Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

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Date Tasted: _____

Notes: _____

Piper Sonoma Brut

\$14.99

750ml



Review

Sonoma- A fruit-forward sparkler with lovely lemon-lime citrus flavors with some nice gingery spice characteristic. The finish is refreshing, initiating you to take another sip.

Taste Profile

Dry, Citrus, Medium-bodied

Vintage	NI (5 pts.)	FI (25 pts.)	FC (10 pts.)	B (5 pts.)	L (5 pts.)	Sum	+ 50	Final

Sparkling Sweetness Level: Dry, Off-dry, Semi-sweet, Sweet

Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

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24-25 Powerful						
95-100 Classic	90-94 Outstanding	85-89 Very Good	80-84 Good	76-79 Average	71-75 Below Average	65-70 Poor

Date Tasted: _____

Notes: _____

Montaudon Brut

\$32.99

750ml



Rating

Wine Spectator - 92

Product Highlights

- From the well known Champagne house of Montaudon, these toasty bubbles never fail to impress.
- Fantastic luxury Champagne, full-bodied style that would appeal to almost any Champagne enthusiast.

Review

Champagne, France- "A distinctive, memorable Champagne in a mature style, this is deep gold in color, expansively doughy, flinty and nutty in aroma and flavor and has a super smooth texture backed by firm acidity. The finish seems to last for minutes."

Taste Profile

Dry, Citrus, Peach, Medium-bodied

Vintage	NI (5 pts.)	FI (25 pts.)	FC (10 pts.)	B (5 pts.)	L (5 pts.)	Sum	+ 50	Final

Sparkling Sweetness Level: Dry, Off-dry, Semi-sweet, Sweet

Flavors: Apple, Citrus, Peach, Strawberry, Other: _____

Toast: High, Medium, Low, None

Body: Light, Medium, Full

Fizziness: High, Medium, Low

Nose Intensity(NI)	Fruit Intensity(FI)	Flavor Characteristics(FC)	Balance(B)	Length(L)		
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