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Bubbly Adds to Holiday Festivities

By Jim Hammond*For the Journal*

WINE COUNTRY: Champagne. Whenever I see the word, I think of Gigi and her delight upon discovering its unique intoxicating effect while singing "The Night They Invented Champagne." From the moment I saw the musical "Gigi," I couldn't wait to try my first glass— even though it would be many years.

Champagne, of course, comes from the Champagne region of France, where the techniques for creating a sparkling wine originated. The man often credited with inventing it, Dom Perignon, ironically tried to squash the bubbles for years before giving in. His technique of selective harvesting and blending is still used today by the house of Moët & Chandon.

The blending of different grapes before the second fermentation is called the "cuvee," which also can mean the first pressing of the grapes; it's a very elastic term.

Champagne, in northeastern France, has a very short growing season before the harvest. The low sugar content keeps the alcohol low, and the youthful acids help preserve the wine until the second fermentation increases the alcoholic content and makes those wonderful bubbles.

The original bottles were too weak to contain the volatile brew, and until the vintners started using the much stronger English bottles, it was an adventure going down the racks of bubbly, never knowing when you'd be showered with wine and glass.

Fizzy processes

The method that evolved is called Méthode Champenoise. Don't try to pronounce that with a mouthful of crackers.

The key feature of this method versus the "bulk" and "transfer" processes is performing the second fermentation in the bottle. The actual wording often used to differentiate the Méthode Champenoise is "fermented in this bottle," rather than "fermented in the bottle," which identifies the transfer process. Talk about splitting hairs.

Méthode Champenoise is a more time-consuming and expensive process, but most wine experts rate the results superior.

Sparkling wines and champagne seem to be made for the holidays and celebrations. A few helpful hints will ensure your holidays sparkle instead of fizzle out. The range of dryness associated with champagne and sparkling wines from driest to sweetest is brut, extra dry and sec. Extra dry is actually less dry than brut, and sec, which usually means dry, is the sweetest. It makes you wonder if the

winemakers did this on purpose to confuse the uninitiated.

The cuvee classification gives a sparkling winemaker the advantage of creating a signature taste for its wines year after year. Once you find one suited to your taste, you can usually rely on its consistency, at least within champagne houses of France.

On the other hand, a vintage-dated sparkling wine is offered when there were exceptional grapes for a particular year. It also adds to the cost.

All of the quality domestic winemakers use the term sparkling wine, as the name champagne should only be used by wines from Champagne, France. Some cheap domestics do call their wines champagne, thus providing the wine buyer a label to avoid. That is, unless you want to launch your new boat and consider real champagne too good to waste on the ship's bow.

Opening tips

The proper technique for opening your sparkling wine is a wonderful ceremony.

Make sure the wine is properly chilled first unless you like the sight of overflowing wine. Use care when removing the foil and wire as some corks can't wait to exit the bottle.

It's also a good idea to avoid pointing the neck in the direction of innocent bystanders.

Hold the cork firmly and twist the bottle; you'll have more leverage that way. A soft pop is what you're looking for, not a concussive POP that causes the cat to hide under the table.

New Mexico's own Gruet is often rated one of the best in the United States and competes with champagnes for top honors. It is also one of your best holiday season buys.

Now you are ready to enjoy one of life's great joys. So raise a glass of cheer as you toast the old year passing, and wishes for a great 2007. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book.

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