

Bubble Bath

Choose a sparkling wine for the holidays the way you'd make up a guest list—by personality. Here are a dozen characters to consider • By Richard Nalley



THE PARTY BOY

**MARQUES DE GELIDA 2004 CAVA
BRUT EXCLUSIVE RESERVA (\$15)**

You can't miss this Spanish sparkler's splashy, abstract-art, pumpkin-yellow and white plastic "label" that wraps the whole bottle, but you might be surprised by what's inside. This is an affordable wine you can pour for a group without apologies—or put in your Kir Royale. A blend of classic Catalan grapes plus Chardonnay, it is firm-bodied, dry, and assertive, with a whistle-clean lick of citrus and a fruity character that falls somewhere in the realm of ripe blueberries.



THE SURE BET

**ROEDERER ESTATE NV BRUT,
ANDERSON VALLEY (\$22)**

While Moët and Mumm set up their U.S. operations in tourist-rich Napa Valley, Champagne Roederer followed the cool-climate grapes north to then-obscure Mendocino County—and established a new American benchmark for sparkling wine. This, the winery's cornerstone bottling, is affordable, reliable, sold everywhere, and, best of all, a treat to drink: fresh, lively, and chock-full of juicy yellow apple and pear flavors.



THE SWEET TOOTH

**ZARDETTO 2007 PROSECCO
"ZETA," CONEGLIANO (\$23)**

A top example of the popular soft, fizzy Italian wines from Italy's Veneto. ("Prosecco" is also the name of the grape variety used.) The Zeta carries



a lively touch of sweetness overlaying its crisp, acidic keel, which makes it wonderful with lightly sweet desserts or as an aperitif with salty hors d'oeuvres. It has enough aromatic exoticism to supply interest all by itself: musky-Muscat-y, with notes of anise; Asian spices; and something fruity, like dried fig. The classic base for a Bellini, it'll also put some shimmy in your Mimosa.



THE WILD CARD

**MAJELLA 2005 SPARKLING
SHIRAZ, COONAWARRA (\$30)**

What pours into your glass after you pop the silver bottle cap takes you aback at first glance: Deep-red and issuing a purple-tinged froth, it resembles red wine scooped straight from the fermenter. The second surprise is that it not only tastes pretty darn good but—despite its big-bodied Shiraz richness—it is balanced, even restrained; there is nothing coarse or jammy about it. Not something you'd want every day, perhaps, but after a few whiffs of its oak-inflected wild berry perfume, you see why this has become a sommelier/wine nut cult item.



THE ALL-AMERICAN

**SCHRAMSBERG 2005 BLANC
DE BLANCS, CALIFORNIA (\$36)**

Tucked away in the northwestern slopes of Napa Valley, venerable Schramsberg—Jack and Jamie Davies revived this century-old winery in 1965—is making its best sparkling wine these days. This all-Chardonnay bottling ("white from whites," in the French phrase) shows the result of years spent



figuring things out: It is blended from Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, and Marin County grapes, vinified in various ways (some barrel-fermented, some steel-fermented). It comes together in a seamless, youthful, very lively sparkler with a broad palate of appley, citrusy fruitiness. Not the lofty, sip-and-discuss side of blanc de blancs, but the pour-me-another side.



THE AMERICAN ARTISAN

SOTER 2004 BRUT ROSÉ, BEACON HILL, OREGON (\$50)

Cerebral, pioneering winemaker (Etude) Tony Soter has moved from Napa Valley to the Willamette Valley and, among other things, turned his hand to producing some of the New World's most distinctive and impressive sparkling wines. Made from painfully low-yielding Chardonnay and Pinot Noir vines and bottled drier than most French Champagnes, this salmon-rose-colored beauty is rich and flavorful—think strawberries in cream—but with a strikingly lean, clean, palate-refreshing vibrancy.



GOING GREEN

POMMERY NV "WINTERTIME" BLANC DE NOIRS, CHAMPAGNE (\$55)

Pommery went "green" back in the 1990s, doing the unflashy work required to achieve an ISO 14001 certification for environmental management, and the winery continues to innovate under new ownership (it is now part of Vranken-Pommery Monopole). Pommery's "seasonal" Champagne collection, recently debuted in the U.S.,

sounds a bit more gimmicky, but the "Wintertime" is straight-ahead good drinking, blended entirely from black grapes and meant to match up with hearty dishes like choucroute or chicken stuffed with morels: a luscious, rich, medium-gold, fruity, white peachlike wine leaning toward the sweeter end of the brut spectrum.



FARMERS' MARKET

HENRI GOUTORBE NV CUVÉE PRESTIGE BRUT, CHAMPAGNE (\$60)

Squint very hard, and you will notice that the teeny numbers on this Champagne label are preceded by "RM" ("Récoltant-Manipulant"), meaning that it is the grape-grower's own wine. (The big houses, which buy and combine grapes and wines from all over the region, display an NM, meaning Négociant-Manipulant, before their label numbers.) These "grower Champagnes," with their very particular flavors, are much in vogue in wine circles, but I have never tasted one more stop-and-linger-on-that-sip delicious than this one. Rich, sappy, custardy even in the midpalate—but dry—it achieves a kind of sophisticated confectionary satisfaction, like those fine European jams with ethereal, directly translated flavors of ripe fruits but little actual sugar sweetness.



THE NEW KID

BOLLINGER NV ROSÉ, CHAMPAGNE (\$100)

One only hopes that the legendary grande dame of the house, Mme. Lily Bollinger, would have approved of this new wine. She apparently had misgivings about putting

Shop around—the price differences on sparkling wine at holiday time can be pretty breathtaking.

WINES & SPIRITS

the family name on a rosé Champagne, which in the early 20th century was associated with bawdy houses. Banish the thought: Bollinger's first-ever nonvintage rosé is sexy (and pricey) but definitively high-toned. A pale, salmony color the French call "partridge eye," this is toasty, elegant, and robust.



THE LIGHT TOUCH TAITTINGER 1998 COMTES DE CHAMPAGNE, BLANC DE BLANCS (\$150)

Thibaud, Count of Champagne, is said to have brought Chardonnay to Champagne on his return—via Cyprus—from the Crusades, and the Taittinger family not

only owns the old crusader's palace, dating from 1240, but is among the handful of winemakers who most notably amplify his grape's legacy. Even from a sunny, ripe vintage like 1998, what strikes you about this all-Chardonnay wine is its pinpoint elegance, a refined texture and closely woven harmony that comes in part from nine to ten years of cellar age before it hits the market. But graceful does not mean shy or retiring; this is an impressive mouthful all the way back.



THE KEEPER DOM PÉRIGNON 2000, CHAMPAGNE (\$170)

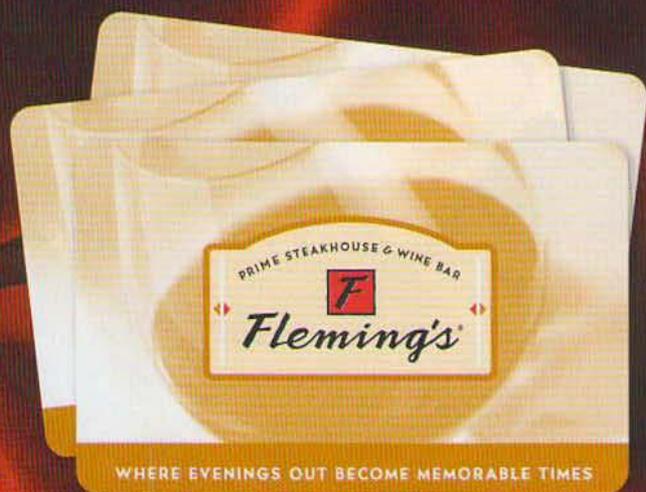
To highlight subtleties in the previous vintage, 1999, Dom Pérignon's cellar master, Richard Geoffroy, put together meals with an eclectic series of dishes and tastes (squid ink risotto, black molé, cigars), each of which skillfully teased out some aspect of the wine's character. Not surprisingly, there was a lot going on in a mouthful of Dom. But absent Geoffroy and his chef, you will just have to wait it out for the 2000—even at eight years old, it still tastes mighty young. Full-bodied and smooth, it slides down very pleasurably right now, but to savor the classic, full-on nutty, honey, toasted bread, and dried-fruit panoply, I'm guessing 2012 and on.



THE MULTIVINTAGE KRUG NV GRANDE CUVÉE, CHAMPAGNE (\$175)

Many nonvintage Champagnes are essentially "vintage" wines in disguise, made almost entirely from lesser lots of current harvests, with a modest touch of reserve wine to steer the blend toward the house style. Krug gives the older wines much greater prominence, employing six to ten different years' reserves in this bottling, according to the winery. Integrated into the already distinctive Krug style—all base wines fermented in small oak casks and the finished wine aged for at least six years before release—it creates Champagne as high-wire act, a balanced tension between a dry, taut crispness and a mellow, juicy, full-flavored fruitiness. Do not drink this Champagne too quickly, or too cold.

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Sparkling Thoughts

Prices

It pays to shop around. Holiday sparkling wine prices often seem arbitrary—and even during the rest of the year, the price spreads on bubbly can be pretty breathtaking. On a spin around Wine-Searcher.com this fall I discovered, for example, that the Taittinger Champagne *Prélude* (\$95 suggested retail price) was being offered at \$39.90 at a store in California, \$99.26 at one in New Jersey, and elsewhere at nearly every price in between. The 2000 Dom Pérignon was selling for between \$120 and \$190 at various retailers on that same day. This presents a wonderful opportunity if you live in a state that allows interstate wine shipments.

Stemware

If you've ever taken a wine course, you know that it is Very Important to drink sparkling wine only out of flutes or high-sided glasses, preferably ones with a slightly closed lip to preserve the wine's aromas and train of tiny bubbles—which your teacher probably couldn't resist referring to as "mousse." All true, all true.

And yet...there is something beguilingly romantic about the traditional Champagne coupe, those shallow, saucer-y round glasses your parents always brought out for parties. The unhistorical—though not uninteresting—tale that the original coupe was modeled on the breasts of Marie Antoinette (or, as some have it, Madame de Pompadour) says worlds about its association with sensuality and courtly glamour. (That the coupe was actually invented a century earlier in England is a regrettable fact, easily brushed aside.) If you are lingering over a grand Champagne at a fine meal, by all means, go with the high-sided glass. Otherwise, cradling a coupe on your upturned palm is and always will be more chic and celebratory—more fiat-out joy-promoting—than sipping from a flute like a beakless stork. If you are concerned about the Champagne going flat, drink faster.

Choosing

It's a question of personal taste, budget, and ultimate purpose. For a business gift, there's no need to spend a lot of time cogitating: A Champagne—the sparkling wine from the Champagne region of France—still carries the full payload of prestige, and that goes double

for vintage bottlings. But for a sprawling party, there are other tasty and far less expensive options. And—not to shock you—some people actually prefer the richer, generally less acidic balance of many top American sparkling wines, while to others, a lean, Old World edge of crispness is the glory of the thing. Your call.

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