

# Safety First

Opening sparkling wine should be pop-free.

So many of the traditions and habits of winedom are hoary vestiges of a lost and forgotten world, such as placing the cork next to the table host so they may make certain the vintage and brand are correct. Once upon a time, thieves and counterfeiters were too stupid to use the same cork when they re-filled a bottle, but there's no reason other than ritual that we continue the habit today.

There's nothing vestigial about the way we open bubbly bottles, however. The rules of Champagne and sparkling wine opening are written in stone for a very simple reason: safety!

A bottle of Champagne has the same internal pressure as a tire on a 16-wheeled truck speeding down the highway; the cork can hurtle across a room, or shatter glass, if the bottle happens to go "Pop." Sure, race car drivers like their Champagnes to pop, but they shake the bottle up and squirt it on each other; we shouldn't follow that example.

Proper sparkling wine service has three goals: to uncork the bottle safely, to keep the wine from squirting out and to make customers feel comfortable and safe while this happens. The process is straightforward.

First, the server shows the wine label to the customer and states its name before opening

to ensure it is the correct bottle. While house service styles may differ, the safest way to open a Champagne or sparkling wine bottle is to hold it in your hands, *never* pointing the cork at anyone or anything breakable.

Next is the foil capsule. The foil on sparkling wine bottles usually has a pull tab. My advice: Ignore it and just cut the capsule below the bottom lip of the opening with your knife. Put the capsule in your pocket.

And now comes the important part: Never, ever—*ever*—remove the cage. By removing the cage, you leave the cork exposed. If the wine blows its top, you might just bounce that cork into your guests' soup, or worse.

Instead, grip the cage and, keeping your thumb firmly on top of it, twist the cage so that it's loose around the bottle. Now, grip the cage even more firmly and, holding the bottle at a 45-degree angle and being careful where the cork is pointed (nobody's head), grip the bottom of the bottle with your other hand. You then should be able to move the bottle without the cage and cork moving; essentially using the cage as a grip, letting the wine pressure push the cork gently out as you rotate the bottle an inch or two.

The bottle should sigh, not pop. Popping means that some wine might bubble out, and that's wasting the customer's money. You should have a serviette handy to wipe the top of the bottle before pouring a taste for your customer. Some wine servers prefer to drape a serviette over the cage during the opening, believing it helps with the grip.

Finally, when you pour sparkling wine, remember that most people like their bubbly to be very cold, so don't pour too much in the glass. This also gives you an excuse to return and offer a bit more brilliant, *safe* service. ●

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## Step by Step

1. Present the bottle to the guest, stating the wine's vintage and brand.
2. Using your knife, cut the foil capsule below the bottom lip of the bottle opening; remove the capsule and place it in your pocket.
3. With your thumb firmly on top of the cage, grip it and twist to loosen. Do not remove the cage.
4. With one hand gripping the cage and the other on the bottom of the bottle, hold the bottle at a 45-degree angle. Rotate the bottle one or two inches without moving the cage and cork; the wine pressure will gently push the cork out of the bottle.
5. Wipe the top of the bottle with a serviette and pour a taste for the guest.