

into the wine, ready to be released once the cork was popped.

One of the greatest influences on early Champagne viticulture was the Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon. (Yes. *That* Dom Pérignon). In the early 1700s, Pérignon began perfecting techniques for vineyard management, harvest and fermentation. The popular myth that he “invented sparkling wine” has more to do with his work to perfect the process. He too was looking to rid his wine of bubbles. Yet his experiments with yeast and sugars led to the principles of producing modern sparkling wine in the region.

It was the Benedictine monks of Saint Hilaire that first bottled the sparkling wine Blanquette de Limoux near Carcassonne in 1531. In 1662, English scientist Christopher Merret presented the Royal Society with what he called the méthode champenoise process of creating sparkling champagne wines. It wasn't until the Duke of Orléans began serving sparkling champagne at his Palais-Royal in the mid-1700s that bubbles really caught on. Moët & Chandon, Louis Roederer, Piper-Heidsieck and Taittinger all emerged shortly after.

Brut Force

Sparkling wines come in a varying levels of dryness. From sweeter to dryer, the categories are demi-sec, sec, extra dry and brut. There are also the dryer categories of extra brut and zero dosage

which are much less common. Brut is the standard for most champagnes.

The grape component defines the name. Anything called “Champagne” will be made predominately from chardonnay, and either or both pinot noir and pinot meunier. “Blanc de Blanc” is made exclusively from chardonnay. While “Blanc de Noir” consists only of pinot noir.

A good champagne will be defined by its toasty mouth-feel and crisp acidity. This makes it a perfect match with many dishes, including Thai and Indian. There are many impressive champagnes on the market starting in the \$45 range. The **Montaudon Non-Vintage Brut** offers a soft, feminine-style champagne (\$52). The **Delamotte Brut** has a little more weight, with classic hints of toast and green apple (\$56).

Only sparkling wine produced in the region of Champagne can bear the name.

Another interesting category in the Champagne world is “Grower’s Champagne”. These are houses that don't necessarily have the volume and growing contracts to sell to the big boys. Instead, they produce their champagne independently and sell direct to the market. This is a great way to excellent value. Leaders in this category are **Ayala** who make a brilliant **Zero Dosage Brut Nature** (\$70). A new and very

impressive producer is **Pehu Simonet**. Their Selection Brut Grand Cru has complex notes of citrus and apple pie crust. At \$75 it is a bargain compared to the larger producers.

Champagne Alternatives

Of course there are bubbles to fit every occasion and budget. If you don't want to drink like Bond and his Bollinger, try some inexpensive alternatives. Prosecco is probably the most popular alternative sparkling wine. From Italy's Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia regions, it is a more fruit-forward, easy-drinking alternative. Look for the **Adami Garbel Brut Prosecco**, a lively, versatile value (\$24). **Carpenè Malvolti** are one of the pioneers in the region. Their Extra Dry and Rosé are a zesty, fruit-forward treat (\$23).

Spain produces more than 18 million bottles of sparkling a year, second only to Champagne. My personal favourite, the **Zeta Cava Brut Rosé** (\$20), is bursting with wild strawberry and pomegranate notes. Perfect with Christmas dinner. Another bubble of note is the **Graham Beck Brut** from South Africa. A blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, it is the closest I have tasted to a decent champagne without being from Champagne.



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