

tasting corner

# West Coast Sparklers

California sparkling winemakers use the traditional Champagne method and grapes to create world-class, value-driven wines

By Joseph Campanale, CWE



The Domaine Carneros château



Napa Valley Region of California

Mumm Napa vineyards

When attending a function at Buckingham Palace, guests are handed a crystal flute filled with a generous amount of effervescent wine to begin the festivities. Dom Perignon? Salon? Billecart-Salmon? Krug? Which Champagne could be worthy of the Queen's tastebuds? Actually, it's not a Champagne at all. Since June 2003, Mumm Napa Valley has been the official gala wine at Buckingham.

In California, the sparkling wines are of higher quality and popularity than ever before. According to Mumm Napa winemaker Ludovic Dervin, "Our biggest problem is producing enough wine. It's hard to find new vineyards and grapes. If we could produce more wine, we'd definitely sell it."

## A Varied Past

The first California sparkling wines were vinified by Los Angeles mayor Benjamin Wilson in 1855. Less than fifty years later, California sparklers won honorable mention at the Paris exposition in 1900. Later on, two world wars and Prohibition left America without a taste for fine wine and, by the 1950s, California sparkling wine was nothing more than sweet, low-quality fizz.

But the industry has made a remarkably quick turn-around. In 1965, Jack Davies and his wife Jamie, who remain leaders in the California sparkling wine arena, established Schramsberg, the first post-Prohibition, quality-oriented sparkling wine venture. Eight years later, Moët & Chandon purchased vineyards in Napa to establish Domain Chandon, and a flurry of foreign investment followed, mostly from French Champagne houses and makers of Spanish Cava. In the last ten years,

the number of producers has remained relatively stagnant, but quality is on the rise.

"California sparkling wine producers have a great product and a great story; both make the sale for me," said Gregory Dal Piaz of Astor Wines in New York City.

## Current State of Affairs

According to the Wine Institute, consumption of sparkling wine in the U.S. has risen from 10.5 million nine-liter cases in 2001 to 14.6 in 2006. Shipments of California-produced méthode champenoise wines went from 2,204 nine-liter cases to 2,379 during the same period.

Most of the wine labeled as California "Champagne" retails for under \$10 per bottle. These wines are generally made in the Charmat (tank) method. The best value wines are in the \$10-20 range, such as the \$15 Gloria Ferrer Brut Rosé. Many of these are made according to the transfer method, or traditional Champagne method, and often with traditional Champagne grapes: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Pinot Meunier plantings are limited.

At the highest end, traditional method produced wines are made from the traditional Champagne grapes and are priced at \$25 to \$40, some near \$100, such as Schramsberg's \$80 Reserve and the \$90 J. Schram.

Many California producers choose not to use the term "Champagne" out of principal and some avid Champagne drinkers may find it troubling to pay such high prices for a domestic wine. According to George Bursick, J Vineyards winemaker, "Our consumer is probably going to be more of a California wine consumer and appellations

## French Champagne Houses Set Up Shop in California

Starting in the 1980s, a flood of French foreign investment poured into the California sparkling wine industry. Six French Champagne houses came to California to set up subsidiary businesses. According to Charles Curtis MW of Moët Hennessy, "It's important to maintain a focus on the premium end of the spectrum and to improve people's awareness of those styles. The main challenge (for California sparklers owned by Champagne houses) is to differentiate themselves from French Champagne. Sparkling wines in California are not simply a knock-off of French Champagne. They have their own unique style." Below is a list of these houses.

**Domaine Carneros (Taittinger)**— Only produces three wines: Le Rêve Blanc de Blancs, Brut and Brut Rosé. The house style is fresh and elegant with a bright acidity. 60,000 cases.

**Domain Chandon (Moët-Hennessy)**— The house does not produce any vintage-dated bottlings but does have a wide range of non-vintage including Blanc de Noirs, Blanc de Blanc, Brut and Riche. A broad, lush style with increasing quality in the past few years. Also produces the Etoile label. 412,500 cases.

**Mumm Napa Valley (Seagram's)**— The Napa Valley DVX is flagship of the brand and among the best that California has to offer. The other wines are sound if not very exciting except for the non-vintage Blanc de Blancs, which is distinctly Old World with mineral notes and a creamy finish. 150,000 cases.

**Piper Sonoma (Piper-Heidsieck)**— No longer French-owned, Judy Jordan of the J wine company purchased Piper Sonoma in 1997. No winery actually still exists and, although the wines are produced on contract in high volumes, Piper Sonoma manages to maintain a high caliber of quality.

**Roederer Estate (Maison Deutz)**— One of the top producers in California, their wines are comparable to very good Champagne and follow the Louis Roederer's house style; no malolactic fermentation is performed. The Anderson Valley L'Ermitage is a wine that benefits from bottle aging. The other wines, Anderson Valley Brut and Brut Rosé, are non-vintage, best drunk immediately and are impressive out of a magnum.

**Scharffenberger (now called Pacific Echo, originally bought by Pommery and currently owned by the LVMH group)**— Although all wines undergo 100% malolactic fermentation, they remain fresh, crisp and rather light-bodied. They are at their best when consumed young.

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such as Russian River Valley actually mean something to him.”

Stephen Mancini, wine and spirits director at Union Square Café, advises educating one's staff to promote and sell these wines. He explained, “In this category, the best way to sell California Sparkling wines is by selection and training. Choose wines that are comparable to Champagne, the benchmark, and train your staff so they know them and are excited about them.”

The best California sparkling wine regions are the more maritime climates – the prime areas for production of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes: Carneros, Sonoma and Mendocino. Santa Maria Valley is also a promising region. California sparkling wine purchases should be made based on the producer over provenance, as reliable ones will source the best fruit from varied regions.

Producers claim they pick their grapes at the same ripeness level – 10% potential alcohol – as in vintage Champagne. According to Hugh Davies, winemaker of Schramsberg, “The best years in Champagne are when they chaptalize the least. Here, we are not allowed to chaptalize at all.” (*Chaptalization, also known as “sugaring,” is the process of adding sugar to the grape juice, known as “must,” prior to or during fermentation so that the wine will gain the proper alcohol content.*)

Most producers choose to make vintage-labeled wine annually. “We don't have weather problems like in France. And, here, the consumer expects every year to be a vintage year. That's our challenge. We defined ourselves as always having a year on that label,” said Bursick.

### Style, Inside and Out

Generally, California sparkling wines have a more robust fruit-forward and full-bodied style than a comparable Old-World sparkler. Ambitious producers can attain autolytic character (bread, dough and yeast notes) from extended aging but the minerality of a French Champagne is rarely present.

Sparkling rosé wines are on the upward trend. As recently as five years ago, most producers did not make rosés, but the trend for pink bubbly has meant a drastic production shift. There has also been a “drying out” of California sparklers as modern drinkers demand less residual sugar and more of a “brut” style.

What's on the outside of the bottle counts just as much as what's inside with U.S. con-

### Is it Champagne if it's not from Champagne?

Although bubbly is usually referred to as sparkling wine when produced outside of the Champagne region of France, according to Tom Stevenson in *World Encyclopedia of Champagne and Sparkling Wine*, “It is perfectly legal to sell domestically produced sparkling wine as Champagne in the U.S. because the term has been used to describe American sparkling wine from very early days and is thus defined as a generic name under Federal Law...although you will not see ‘Champagne’ on any bottles of this wine exported to EU countries.” And, *The Oxford Companion to the Wines of North America* states that “Champagne is a word used generically and legally in the U.S. as a synonym for sparkling wine to the great annoyance of Francophiles and European wine purists everywhere.”

sumers. “It's not only the quality of the wine, it's also the image, the razzle-dazzle factor. Yes, quality has to be there but the packaging, POS and marketing of the wine is even more important in the sparkling wine category than in still wines,” said Bursick.

### The Future of Sparklers

In the future, growth in this category will most likely be slow and steady. Sparkling winemaking is capital intensive because of high equipment costs and the additional ageing required. To further complicate matters, the current rage for Pinot Noir has meant that practically all of the fruit is spoken for, especially from highly sought-after appellations such as Carneros.

Charles Curtis MW, director of wine and spirit education for Moët Hennessy USA, explained, “The premium areas are pretty much all planted. The challenge will be the integrity of producers to buy good fruit. Overall consumption is increasing, but more so in value-added categories such as reserves, rosés, and prestige cuvée bottlings. The potential for growth (in these categories) is enormous.” He added, “It used to be that people picked up anything with bubbles, but now consumers are much more knowledgeable, much more aspirational.”

## tasting corner



Several beverage directors we spoke with choose California sparkling wines for their versatility with hard-to-pair cuisines. The bubbles, acidity and small amounts of residual sugar make them great partners with anything from hot dogs to haute dishes. Here are some of our favorites (all prices are suggested retail):

■ **Domaine Carneros by Taittinger 2003**

Pale golden color with a consistent profusion of pinhead-sized bubbles. Green apple, lemon, ripe pears, white peaches, light caramel and nutty notes add complexity. Drink now or let age for 3-5 years. \$35

■ **Domaine Chandon Blanc de Noirs NV**

A pale salmon color, this wine has consistent profusion of tiny bubbles. Vanilla scented red fruits such as red currants and strawberries on the nose. Added complexity on the palate with cassis and slight yeasty flavors. Very competitive price for this quality. \$20

■ **Domaine Chandon Etoile Rosé NV**

Medium salmon color; intense, complex nose with concentrated notes of red plum, French toast, cocoa, nutmeg and ripe cherry. Will compliment rich, creamy dishes or not-too-sweet desserts. \$38

■ **Gloria Ferrer Blanc de Blancs 2003**

Medium lemon color with a consistent flow of minuscule bubbles. Asian pear, orange blossom and toast are prevalent on the nose. Ripe pears and white chocolate flavors with bright acidity and a balanced, dry finish. \$15

■ **Gloria Ferrer Carneros Cuvée 1996**

Over seven years of aging creates complex notes of toast, pastry and nuts. Full bodied with a creamy mousse and long finish. An oxidative, complex and yeasty wine that will not benefit from additional aging but compares with a very aged Champagne. \$50

■ **Iron Horse Classic Vintage Brut 2001**

Bold and rich and with bread dough, puff pastry, ripe pears, peaches and cream notes. Bright acidity and an especially creamy mousse. \$31

■ **J Vintage Brut 2002**

With fruit sourced from the Russian River Valley, this wine is lush, full-bodied and a little on the sweet side, yet balanced with fruit-forward notes of green pear, melon, lime and vanilla. Excellent as an apéritif or to pair with spicy cuisine. \$35

■ **Mumm Napa DVX 2000**

Golden yellow with minuscule bubbles. Harmonious, rich and full-bodied with flavors of wild strawberry, red apples, white flowers, roasted nut, biscuits, cream and white chocolate. Luscious yet well-balanced and youthful. \$45

■ **Schramsberg J Schram 1999**

Complex yet balanced with notes of red apples, raspberries, pineapple, orange marmalade, crisp green apples, fresh puff pastry and rich, creamy autolytic notes. A powerful yet still youthful wine. \$90

■ **Schramsberg Mirabelle Brut Rosé NV**

Bright pink with minuscule bubbles. Fresh youthful fruit flavors of raspberry, watermelon, sour cherry and freshly baked bread. On the palate it's incredibly balanced with strawberry and tropical fruit notes. A standout fresh-style rosé. \$24

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