

AWASH IN QUALITY BUBBLES



PRICE ISN'T THE ONLY REASON TO PASS OVER CHAMPAGNE IN FAVOR OF FRANCE'S OTHER SPARKLING WINES

BY KRISTEN BIELER



Champagne will always be King, and there is no use pretending otherwise, says Martin Sinkoff, Director of Marketing/Fine Wines, Frederick Wildman & Sons: “Champagne is the sun, everything else orbits around it. All other sparkling wine is by nature an alternative to Champagne—an opportunity to enjoy effervescence that is more affordable.” Yet as the cost of great Champagne continues to climb—it can be hard to find any bottle less than \$35—alternatives are exactly what the market demands. The explosive growth of Prosecco and Cava illustrates the American thirst for affordable bubbly.

But one needn't leave France to find characterful, delicious *and* well-priced sparkling wine. Crémants—wines made like Champagne, with the secondary fermentation taking place in the bottle—are the most common of the high-quality of-

ferings. Within their competitive set—Prosecco, Cava and California sparkling wines—crémants are the obvious choice, says Sinkoff: “Crémants have the purity of a French wine. If you are looking for a lean, elegant sparkling wine that is not \$50, Crémant de Bourgogne is your best bet.” Wildman imports J.J. Vincent Crémant de Bourgogne, a stunning wine crafted by a small family winery in limestone-rich southern Burgundy.

With a similar climate, terroir and the same grapes as Champagne (Pinot Noir and Chardonnay), Burgundy crafts crémants that can taste uncannily like Champagne, with complex honeyed notes and a rich texture.

Reformed Champagne snob Liz Willette of importer/distributor Grand Cru Selections was shocked when she tasted Parigot Crémant de Bourgogne for the first time in 2008. “I had dismissed this wine for years, but when I was blinded on it, I

was blown away—it tasted like a southern Champagne.” Willette immediately added it to her portfolio, and it's now one of her best-selling wines, retailing for around \$23. “This is as good as it gets for something that is not Champagne. The thing about crémants is they are well-priced but they can have real complexity, unlike more simple sparklers like Prosecco.”

LESS EXPENSIVE, BETTER WINE?

Leaving Champagne's borders isn't about sacrificing quality in exchange for value, says Valerie Antoine, French Brand Manager at Winebow. “When people buy Champagne, they aren't looking at price—they frequently pay more for brand recognition so they don't look cheap when they bring a bottle to a friend's house. Perception is everything with Champagne.”

Antoine sells more French sparkling wine than Champagne, mostly to som-



BURGUNDY

Crémant de Bourgogne can taste uncannily like Champagne, thanks in part to the comparable grape mix.



ALSACE

Alsace, the second northernmost wine region in France, makes bubbly with refreshing crispness.



LANGUEDOC

Limoux was using the *méthode traditionnelle* to make sparkling wine a century before Champagne.



LOIRE VALLEY

In the Loire Valley, Chenin Blanc typically forms the backbone of sparkling Vouvray.

meliers who understand the quality they offer compared to mass-volume Champagne houses. With gems in her portfolio like Champalou Vouvray Pétillant from the Loire Valley and Bottex Bugey Cerdon la Cueille, a rare lightly sparkling NV wine from Savoie (served by the glass at NYC's trendy Pearl & Ash), Antoine empowers sommeliers to list unique, discovery wines. "A growing number of industry professionals realize you will pay less and get a better French sparkling wine if look beyond Champagne," she says.

At a recent blind tasting in NYC with high-profile sommeliers and journalists, Crémant de Bourgogne Marie Ambal beat out four extremely well-known Champagnes for first place. What's more, the participants weren't able to determine which wine *wasn't* Champagne. "We want to show people that a \$25 sparkling wine can be just as good—if not better—as some of the current market choices, which are almost double the price," says importer Pierrick Bouquet.

ALSACE & LANGUEDOC

Less creamy and rich than Crémants de Bourgogne, Crémants d'Alsace are made with Pinots Gris, Blanc and Noir as well as Auxerrois, Riesling and Chardonnay—and are required to have at least three months of lees aging which gives complex toasty brioche notes. Defined by a refreshing crispness, Crémant d'Alsace is

Many wine professionals believe they are paying less and getting better quality by looking beyond Champagne.

the sparkling wine most consumed by the French, after Champagne. "Alsace is the second northernmost winegrowing region in France and is adjacent to Champagne, with a similar climate," explains Anne Laure Helfrich, brand manager (and sixth generation) at Alsace's Helfrich winery. "In Alsace, we borrow many time-honored practices from the Champenoise, yet craft distinctive wines that can rival the best of Champagne. Same quality, same celebratory bubbles, but at a friendlier price." (Prices hover around \$20 a bottle.)

While the Champenoise get all the credit for inventing *méthode traditionnelle*, it was first produced in Languedoc's Limoux region by the Monks of Abbaye de Saint Hilaire—"a hundred years before Dom Perignon did it in Champagne!" points out Gérard Bertrand, whose southern French wines offer terrific value for the money across the board. His Code Rouge, (\$29) is a brut made in honor of the monks who invented sparkling wine.

"We can get our Chardonnay riper than in Champagne," he explains. "We also use Chenin Blanc and the unique Mauzac grape which gives aromas of apple, quince and preserved fruits. Crémant de Limoux has a larger palette of aromas than Champagne, because of diverse microclimates, range of altitudes and terroirs."

BY-THE-GLASS NATURALS

Crémants are a natural fit for by-the-glass listings. "They offer the taste profile people want with some real finesse, and great margins for the restaurant," says Sinkoff.

With certain food pairings, Adrien Falcon, wine director for all Bouley restaurants in NYC, finds that crémants fit the bill better than Champagne. "David Bouley's food is really clean and pure—almost with a Japanese influence. What works are dry wines that are high in minerality and acidity with fruit and elegance, and I often find Crémant de Loire a better fit than Champagne, particularly with crudo."

FRENCH SPARKLING STAND-OUTS

JJ VINCENT CRÉMANT DE BOURGOGNE: \$23

Made from 100% Chardonnay, this is racy, minerally and bright with floral and citrus aromatics and a pleasing creaminess. (*Frederick Wildman & Sons*)



DOMAINE HUËT PÉTILLANT 2009: \$25

This biodynamic Chenin Blanc has a subtler carbonation than most; with great acidity and notes of honey and minerals, it is as ageworthy as many great Champagnes. (*The Rare Wine Company*)



LANGLOIS-CHÂTEAU CRÉMANT DE LOIRE BRUT: \$22

Succulent and rich with baked apples and spice, this unique blend of Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc yields a full-bodied, structured wine. (*Terlato Wines International*)



PARIGOT & RICHARD CRÉMANT DE BOURGOGNE: \$24

A bit of Aligoté adds a tangy, briny quality to this Chardonnay-based crémant; the palate offers an addictive balance of chalky spice, fruit and minerals. (*Grand Cru Selections*)



LUCIEN ALBRECHT CRÉMANT D'ALSACE BRUT: \$18

Founded in 1425(!), Albrecht brings together Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Riesling for this elegant wine, marked by flavors of honeysuckle and grapefruit. Look also for the Brut Rosé, made from 100% Pinot Noir. (*Pasternak Wine Imports*)



HELFRICH CRÉMANT D'ALSACE BRUT: \$20

This 100% Pinot Blanc wine is light-bodied and smooth, with a mineral intensity rounded out with lovely citrus and nut flavors, and lemony acidity. (*Advantage International*)



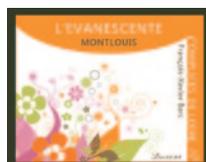
GERARD BERTRAND CRÉMANT DE LIMOUX: \$18

Primarily Chardonnay, filled out with Mauzac and Chenin Blanc, this orange- and almond-infused sparkling wine hails from high-altitude vineyards close to the Pyrenees; balanced, refreshing and medium-bodied. (*U.S. Wine Imports*)



COMPLICES DE LOIRE LEVANESCENTE MONTLOUIS: \$14

Chenin Blanc grown in limestone soils results in a layered, floral wine with a fine, frothy mousse and delicate mouthfeel. (*Winebow*)



VEUVE AMBAL CUVÉE MARIE AMBAL CRÉMANT DE BOURGOGNE: \$25

Fragrant with toast and hazelnuts, this shows flavors of Granny Smith apple and fresh spice. A blend of old-vine Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, it's aged on lees for three years, which imparts a rare complexity and texture. (*Gabriella Fine Wines*)



FRANCOIS MONTAND BRUT BLANC DE BLANCS: \$15

From a Champagne family, Francois Montand moved to the Jura region in the 1940s to make sparkling wine. A blend of Ugni Blanc, Colombard and Chardonnay, this shows vanilla-laced brioche flavors, crisp apple notes and a rich minerality. A steal for the price. (*The Vintner Group*)



On all of Falcon's by-the-glass lists he has four or five sparklers and turns them often. None are from large Champagne houses, but he explains that's less about cost savings than about showcasing variety. (Many fellow NYC sommeliers have removed Champagne from their by-the-glass offerings in favor of other sparklers due to coast, he adds.)

Some of France's most distinctive sparkling wines originate in the Loire, where weightier, earthier Chenin Blanc takes center stage, and Cabernet Franc plays a supporting role. Some are made differently, too. Vouvray's Domaine Huët, one of the Loire's finest producers of still wines, crafts a beautiful Pétillant which is bottled during fermentation, which means a smaller amount of carbon dioxide is released so it has a gentler level of carbonation.

YEAR-ROUND ADVANTAGE

Crémants aren't constrained by the celebratory-only reputation that skews Champagne sales to holidays and special occasions. "Because of their more affordable price points and food-friendly profile, Crémant d'Alsace is enjoyed year round," says Helfrich. The Crémant d'Alsace on the list at Bouley's Brushstroke sells strong in all seasons, Falcon reports: "More and more diners are requesting sparkling throughout their meal, not just a glass to start."

Antoine sees the same thing, particularly with Winebow's Pol Clement Blanc de Blanc Vin Mousseux from the Loire, of which she sells 500 cases a month. "It can retail for \$13, so it's a terrific brunch wine; it's a proper wine for a great price and sells all year long."

As Champagnes continue to price themselves out of the everyday usage and the American demand for bubbles climbs higher, the future looks very bright for crémants. "The interest is there," says Helfrich. "Our challenge is to do what producers of Cava and Prosecco have done; we must educate consumers about France's other sparkling wines—the potential is tremendous." ■