

# POP!

The sound of a cork leaving the neck of a wine bottle automatically sends our minds into a great expectations mode. When it's the "POP" of a cork leaving a Champagne bottle, the expectations are raised to celebration. Why? Because we automatically associate Champagne with celebration. Remember Pavlov's dog? In school we learned that Pavlov had conditioned his dog to associate the ringing of a bell with receiving a treat. It's just a little humbling to realize that humans are just as easily conditioned to a specific reaction to the pop of a Champagne cork. I wonder if Fido enjoys his "treat" as much as we enjoy ours.

Champagne is the chosen wine for celebrating. If we're drinking Champagne, we must be celebrating something. The bubbles in our glass contribute, they add, to our mood of celebration. And they seem to float away our inhibitions even quicker than a glass of regular wine.

Yes, weddings and Champagne make the most perfect wine pairing. So Champagne belongs at your wedding reception. At least for the toast. Also consider offering it to guests as they arrive before the reception formally begins. A glass of Champagne put into your hand at arrival makes a perfect transition from the seriousness of the ceremony to the joy of the celebration. If \$\$\$ are beginning to glaze your eyes, fret not. A wide selection of sparkling wine styles and prices is available to work with every budget.

The Champagne Region of France is recognized as the origin of the best sparkling wines in the world. Why are sparkling wines from Champagne special among all sparkling wines? Because the soil of that region about 30 miles northeast of Paris is unique. Just under a thin layer of ordinary dirt is a 15- to 20-foot layer of chalk, which is actually sea shell fragments, deposited millions of years ago when this part of the continent was under the ocean. Its unique properties give the grapes flavor, complexity and depth characteristics unmatched by grapes

grown for sparkling wine anywhere else in the world. Incidentally, this same ridge of tiny seashells surfaces again in the Cognac region. The best Cognac is made from grapes which are grown in the Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne districts. Coincidence? This special chalk soil then reappears across the English Channel where it's known as the White Cliffs of Dover.

Why do Champagnes cost so much more than other sparkling wines? Because the quantity of grapes (and wine) is limited to that one region and vines that are planted only in that special soil. The demand for Champagne continues to grow, but the supply cannot, because no more vines can be planted in Champagne. When more people want a product with limited supply, prices increase – the perfect example of supply and demand.

French Champagne makers realized they couldn't increase their revenues except by continually increasing prices. As too-high prices would eventually reduce sales, their solution was to produce more sparkling wine somewhere else. In the 1970s they began buying acreage in California. Moët & Chandon (Chandon), Taittinger (Domaine Carneros), Mumm (Mumm Napa), Roederer (Roederer Estate), Piper Heidsieck (Piper Sonoma) – all from France – are now producing California sparkling wines at half the price of their Champagne counterparts. Even Codornui (Gloria Ferrer) from Spain, produces sparkling wine in California. And they are all good.

Most wine producing countries produce a sparkling wine. Italy's are known as Prosecco and Asti Spumante. Spain produces sparkling wines known as Cava. The good ones are delicious, a joy to drink and reasonably priced because they can increase supply according to demand. Sparkling wines have been produced in California for 100 years, with only passing attention being paid to them. Scharfenberger and Schramsberg are two of the oldest and still among the best.

So the wedding planner's choices are broad enough to suit every budget. One plan would be to greet reception arrivals with a California or Spanish sparkling wine. Spanish sparklers range between \$8 and \$13 a bottle, Californians cost between \$15 and \$30. The toast could call for refilling glasses with the entry wine, or, to add excitement and drama, announce the name of a French Champagne for the toast. Bottle costs start at about \$25 and go up to \$50 for a non-vintage Champagne.

All of the mentioned non-Champagne sparkling wines are produced by the "methode Champanoise" or "Champagne Method." Simply, those terms mean that the the grape juice is first fermented into ordinary wine, then that wine is fermented a second time in an individual bottle you will buy. There are also California sparkling wine brands such as Totts, Andre and Cooks, whose wines are pumped into sealed tanks and then injected with carbon dioxide to make them bubbly. Sure, the wine has bubbles, but so does Coca Cola. You can tell by the under-\$8 price that they were made by the "Charmat" or bulk, method. What's interesting is, that the Spanish "Cavas" are made by the "Champagne Method", and cost only a few dollars more. The "Champagne Method" is a much more expensive process because there are many more steps in production.

Spanish sparkling wines are made with white grapes indigenous to Spain. All French Champagnes and the better California sparkling wines are made with – are you ready? – chardonnay and two red grapes: pinot noir and pinot meunier.

Most Champagne produced is non-vintage, and each house has its own distinctive style, ranging from light and fruity to robust and yeasty. The house style is consistent from year to year, thanks to blending several vintages into the cuvée. Producing non-vintage Champagne is even more complicated when you consider that it is a blend of at least three vintages' wines: the