

Some perfect sparkling wines for spreading holiday cheers (without breaking the bank)

By Amber Gibson
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If you're bringing wine to a holiday party this year, the obvious bet will be a bottle of Champagne.

France's most famous sparkling wine has grown steadily in popularity in the United States over the past decade, with Americans embracing a #champagneallday attitude rather than reserving fine bubbles for special occasions. In 2021 alone, more than 34 million bottles of Champagne were shipped to the U.S. — more than any country outside of France.

Champagne is so exclusive because it must be produced in the Champagne region of France, an hour-and-a-half drive northeast from Paris. Champagne is nearly always made from some combination of three grape varieties — chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier — and it must be produced in the traditional method, with secondary fermentation (which gives the wine its bubbles) occurring in the bottle rather than in a large steel tank, like prosecco.

In recent years more North American winemakers, particularly in California and Oregon, are perfecting the art of making sparkling wines with the same process and same grapes as they use in Champagne. These exquisite bubbles could be mistaken for Champagne in a blind taste test, and can often be found at a better value.

Here are some to try this holiday season.

The steal: Roederer Estate Brut MV

From the same French family behind renowned Champagne brands Louis Roederer and Cristal, this Mendocino winery has been producing America's best value sparkling wine since the 1980s from 580 acres of estate-owned vineyards in foggy Anderson Valley. The multi-vintage brut is crisp and fresh, with oak-aged wines from the estate's reserve cellars adding nutty complexity



Sparkling wines are perfect for holiday toasts this winter. CHRIS WALKER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

and depth. This one's a crowd pleaser that's also appreciated by connoisseurs. \$28. *Binny's, binmys.com; Sal's Beverage World, sals-beverageworld.com; Hart Davis Hart Wine Co., hdhwine.com; Mariano's, marianos.com*

The rarity: 2017 Wente Vineyards Brut Sparkling Wine

Livermore Valley flagship winery Wente Vineyards is America's oldest family winery, and this special edition brut is the only sparkling wine they ever made, using 100% chardonnay sourced from Wente's vineyards in Arroyo Seco, Monterey, where the family has been growing grapes since

the 1960s. The long, cool growing season and deep, gravelly soil ripen the chardonnay for an exquisite natural balance of sugar and acidity — key for great bubbles. You'll taste pear and dried apricot with hints of crème brûlée on the finish. \$45. *Wente Vineyards, wentevineyards.com*

The classic: 2018 Argyle Vintage Brut

One of Oregon's most iconic wineries, Argyle pioneered sparkling winemaking in the Willamette Valley beginning in 1987, putting Oregon on the map for elegant, long-aging methode champenoise sparkling wine. Unlike many wineries that

blend wine from different years to create a consistent house style, Argyle has vintages on all of its sparkling wines, meaning the grapes were harvested from the same year. The 2018 brut is exceptionally vivacious with stone fruit flavors and beautiful bright finish. \$30. *Binny's, binmys.com; Whole Foods, wholefoodsmarket.com; Miska's Liquors, facebook.com/MiskasMelrose; Dom's Kitchen and Market, domschicago.com*

The blend: Emmolo Sparkling No. 5

Winemaker Jenny Wagner takes inspiration from her favorite Champagnes such as Egly-Ortiet and Billecart-Salmon when

crafting her nonvintage sparkling wine with chardonnay and pinot noir sourced from Monterey, Sonoma and Santa Barbara vineyards. These cooler coastal regions have longer growing seasons, fully ripening the grapes while maintaining a crisp natural acidity that tastes like citrus zest and an ocean breeze, with creamy sea foam bubbles.

Wagner loves pairing her sparkling wine with sushi, truffle popcorn or a charcuterie board. \$40. *Binny's, binmys.com*

The newcomer: Sojourn Cellars NV Brut

Sojourn Cellars released its inaugural brut sparkling wine this year, and it's a stunner. This Sonoma County winery specializes in single vineyard Sonoma chardonnay and pinot noir, and the latest addition to its portfolio combines equal parts of both along with a touch of pinot meunier to round out tart apple flavors with toasty brioche notes and creamy lemon panna cotta.

Only 1,200 cases were produced, so you'll have to get this one straight from the source. \$54. *Sojourn Cellars, sojourncellars.com*

The rosé: Gran Moraine Brut Rosé

If you prefer rosé Champagnes, Gran Moraine's brut rosé is a graceful balance between pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier grapes from the winery's Yamhill-Carlton estate vineyards in Oregon. Multiple vintages are blended together for a house style that flirts with flavors of strawberry shortcake, juicy nectarine and watermelon rind.

The dosage — a small amount of sugar plus wine added after the bottle is disgorged — is very low, allowing the quality of the wine to shine. \$55. *Prestige Countryside Liquors, prestigeliqors.com*

Amber Gibson is a freelance writer.

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