



Break out the Bubbly

Champagne: A wine for all reasons

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In almost any language, Champagne is a trigger word evoking images of elegance and luxury and is one of the most challenging of all wines to make. Only people as talented and resourceful as the Champenois would have attempted it, let alone taken it to the very pinnacle of winemaking achievement. The trick, as always, is to marry climate and soil with grape variety, and here the Champenois have centuries on their side. They know exactly where each variety should be planted within the region so as to give of its best. To be properly called Champagne, the wines used for blending must come only from a small, well-defined area located ninety minutes east of Paris.

Champagne is made in a variety of styles. Both vintage and non-vintage cuvees may be blends of the region's three major grape varieties: Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and Chardonnay. Blanc de Blancs are made solely from Chardonnay (the rarer Blanc de Noirs are made entirely of the red grapes Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier). Rose Champagnes also rely on all three grapes or combinations thereof.

The reputation of an established house is based on its non-vintage wines blended so that continuity is seamless from year to year. Non-vintage Champagne accounts for approximately eighty per cent of wine from the region. The established house style is achieved

by blending reserve wines from previous years together with the wine of the current harvest—a wise system given the extreme vagaries of the regional climate. All major houses sign long-term contracts with independent growers to ensure a consistent supply of grapes to complement their own vineyard holdings.

Vintage Champagne is produced from premium wine of a vintage whose intrinsic quality is considered too superior to be hidden in a non-vintage cuvee. The finest vintage wines will almost always come from grapes picked from the top-rated

sites—mainly grand crus known not only for quality but also for their personality. To qualify as vintage, the wine must be cellared for at least three years before it is released, although the best houses wait considerably longer.

Here are some of my favorite Champagnes to celebrate the holiday season and special occasions throughout the coming year: For non-vintage—CSPC 268771 Louis Roederer Brut Premier \$80 and CSPC 349688 Krug Grande Cuvée \$225. In the vintage Champagne category, choose from the superb 1996's and 1990's—CSPC 267880 Perrier-Jouet 1996 Belle Époque \$145 and CSPC 71818 Dom Ruinart Rose 1990 \$410.

—Peter Blattmann

Cellar Notes

Veuve Clicquot
1996 La Grande Dame
 CSPC 354779, \$195 GST incl.

This celebrated luxury cuvee is made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes chosen exclusively from grand cru designated sites. Rich aromas of ripe fruit, citrus, and brioche and notes of honeyed nuts permeate this complex, well-balanced Champagne. The seemingly never-ending finish promises that it will mature magnificently over time. Drink now through 2010.