

The Washington Post

Not All Good Festive Fizz Comes From You-Know-Where

By *Dave McIntyre*

Wednesday, December 10, 2008; Page F07

I nearly clocked my mother-in-law with a champagne cork. It exploded from the bottle as I loosened the wire cage holding it in place, whizzed past her right ear, thwacked the ceiling and came to rest on the floor under the kitchen table, where our cocker spaniel assessed its edibility. The entire family began laughing before my MIL had time to wonder whether it had been a bad cork or bad aim.

That scene might be played out across the land this month as we flit from holiday party to office reception to family celebration, culminating in the traditional New Year's toast. Chances are we will sip more fizz in December than we have all year. If someone else is pouring, all well and good. But when it's our turn to buy the wine, it pays to know our options so we can fit our budget and our bubbles to the occasion.

"Champagne is so expensive!" I hear that complaint all the time, and not without reason. Decent stuff starts at about \$35 a bottle and skyrockets into the stratosphere, and unfortunately, higher price does not guarantee higher quality. But other wines, including Italian prosecco, Spanish cava and American sparklers, can provide the bubbly celebration we need this time of year and still leave some change in our pockets.

"Champagne," of course, refers to sparkling wine from the Champagne region of France, about an hour's drive northeast of Paris. It is the most sought-after and expensive of sparkling wines, and for many bacchanalians nothing less will suffice. To call other sparkling wines "champagne" is unfair, not only to champagne producers, which try to protect the brand, but also to the wide range of bubbly from around the world that have their own character and identity.

I'll discuss how to find good value in champagne in next week's column. For now, here's a primer on the other main types of sparkling wine.

Prosecco is the name of the grape as well as Italy's best-known bubbly, produced in the Veneto region of the country's northwest. The carbonation is induced in tank rather than in bottle, yielding softer bubbles. Most prosecco is underwhelming, though better examples show floral aromas and delicate flavors. Prosecco serves best as an aperitivo or for a celebratory toast. Prices range from \$12 to \$25.

Cava is Spanish sparkling wine made primarily from three grapes -- Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada -- and using the traditional champagne method, in which the second fermentation takes place in the bottle. That gives it more richness than prosecco, though nowhere near the depth and complexity of champagne. Cava pairs well with salty or acidic foods, making it ideal with tapas

or appetizers. Ranging in price from \$8 to \$20, cava represents the best bargain in sparkling wine.

Cremant is French sparkling wine made outside Champagne. They most commonly come from Alsace, Burgundy or the Loire Valley. Though made in the traditional champagne method, they use different grapes and tend not to be as rich as champagne. They are, however, versatile with food and make an adequate stand-in for their more prestigious cousin. Prices range from about \$12 to \$30.

American sparkling wine spans the style spectrum from light, refreshing prosecco imitations to full-bodied, rich and complex wines that come close to mimicking champagne. They are priced accordingly. The best American sparklers rival champagne in complexity, though they tend to be fruity and exuberant in contrast with champagne's chalky minerality. That's because the grapes can ripen more fully in our warmer climate and because U.S. producers don't always use the classic champagne grape blend. Pinot meunier, the main red grape of champagne, is rarely used in California, for instance, while many U.S. producers season their blends with a dash of pinot blanc, not used in champagne.

As you celebrate this holiday season, don't despair about the bubbles. There are delightful toast-worthy sparkling wines at any price range. Just be careful where you aim the bottle.

Rebuli Prosecco

* **VERY GOOD**

Italy

Toasty, which makes this a little more champagnelike and perhaps more familiar to consumers. Nice balance; quite refreshing.

