

BUBBLE TROUBLE

by Lance Sparks



War is insane, of course, but only slightly less crazy than a wedding. Not some cuddly elopement, or a dash to City Hall, or a race to Reno for private nuptials with janitors for witnesses. No, I mean the full-dress, ramped-up, brain-burning, gut-searing, credit-shattering, space/time-warping *wedding*.

A mind-numbing number of variables must be weighed, evaluated, discussed, sometimes argued with staggering ferocity: THE DRESS, the bridesmaids' dresses (oh, yeah, and guys wear something), shoes, veil, train, garter, something borrowed/blue, flowers (for church, for reception, bride's bouquet, boutonnieres ...), THE CAKE, place, vows, RINGS, invitations, OMIGOD THE GUEST LIST, hair, nails, make-up, rehearsal, rehearsal dinner, reception (food, tables, seating, settings, plates napkins, napkin folds, glasses ...), transportation. A shuttle launch is less complex.

No wonder that in this chaos one variable that often gets short shrift is the Champagne. Too often, this item is simply left to the caterer with a skimpy budget. Result? The whole event comes together with the seamless complexity and perfection of a Persian carpet, but the bubbles are such ghastly schlock that not even gooey white cake can disguise the gag-factor. Result? A roomful of reeling receptioners with Bitter-Bubbles Face — tragic.

And the tragedy can be averted so easily, with just a bit of planning. First, the purpose intended for the bubbles, another decision, yes, but critical. Filling the spa or pool with fizzy stuff for group dunking? Get the \$6-schlock, dump it in. That's all it's good for anyway.

Hoping for something closer to the Dream of the Perfected Moment, glasses of delicious liquid raised in joy and the Nuptial Wish of Eternal Harmony? Ah, then...

Now, scale: How many guests, and for which occasion? Let's concentrate on the reception because so many other events — the various dinners come to mind — take place in restaurants or other controlled venues in which choices reduce to availability: Choose the affordable best.

Back to the reception. Say you're inviting 200 closest friends/family and want at least a toasting glass each for adults. Depending on glassware, expect to pour about five glasses per bottle, so — basic arithmetic — plan for 40 bottles. Since you can expect discounts for cases, go ahead and order four cases (48 bottles), leaving a little extra for crashers and Uncle Slackjaw.

Next, value, calculated by adding quality and price. We look only at sparkling wines produced by the Champagne method (fermented in the bottle), not the bulk (or Charmat) method (fermented in large vats, i.e., schlock):

Affordable and drinkable: Segura Viudas Brut Reserva (\$7.50), a Spanish sparkler, bone dry but crisp apple notes and aroma of fresh-baked bread. From Australia, **Seaview Brut 2000** (\$7.50) offers tasty citrus flavors, light and fluffy. **Chateau Ste. Michelle Extra Dry** (\$10) is a pretty (Washington) wine with just a touch of sweetness behind flavors of ripe pears and apples; it's refreshing and can satisfy a range of palates, a match for wedding cake.

Steppin' up: A shocker from the Land of Enchantment, **Gruet Brut** (\$15), made in America (New Mexico!) by a great French Champagne house, very nice, crisp, clean; its big brother is **Gruet Blanc de Noirs** (\$15), made from pinot noir grapes for pretty pale salmon color, deeper flavors and longer finish, hard to beat at this price.

Oregon sampler: Thinking globally and buying locally? Our homies' best, by consensus, is probably **Argyle 1998 Brut** (\$19), well-made,

fine bubbles, snappy flavors, rivals wines costing much more. A personal favorite is **St. Innocent 1998 Brut** (\$17.50), bright fruit, toasty note, active bubbles. More local yet (Veneta), **Secret House Northern Silk** (\$15) is blended to deliver complex flavors on a sturdy frame, very good value.

California's cream: Years ago, French Champagne houses foresaw that California could produce fine sparkling wines, and many (Chandon, Roederer, Taittinger) invested heavily, with very positive results — sparkling wines with character and finesse, if not quite the complexity and distinction of the great French Champagnes. Many are terrific values — Schramsberg, Iron Horse, Chandon (which has recently taken a giant leap in quality), and others. But consistently among wine-lovers' favorites is **Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut** (\$21.50) for bright color, jazzy fizz, balance flavors/acidity, just a fine wine.

Freedom wines: Global war politics aside, French Champagne sets the standard, and each "house" strives for distinction and consistency in style. Though some vintages might be a bit better than others, these wines are always good. This year, two favs are **Drappier Grand Sendré Brut** (\$36) and **Ch. Bollinger Brut Reserve** (\$37), brilliant flavors, perfect balance, just excellent.

Over the top: Cross this line and encounter exquisite: **Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill 1985** (\$150-ish), pin-point bubbles, complex flavors, delicacy, flawless balance. This is special-order wine, not for the masses; Put a bottle on ice in the honeymoon suite. This is love in a glass, making memories.

Shop, pop the tops, and let the ceremonies begin.

EW

True champagne is only produced in the small Champagne region of France, located northeast of Paris. All other bubblyies are technically sparkling wines, produced primarily in Spain, Italy, Germany, Australia, and Russia and several regions in the United States. If you want to add some local flavor to your reception, Oregon sparkling wine producers include Argyle, Domaine Meriwether, Laurel Ridge, LaVelle, Rainsong, Secret House and St. Innocent.

Champagne and sparkling wine are categorized by their sweetness. "Brut" is the driest or least sweet wine. "Extra-dry," contrary to its name, is slightly sweeter and fruitier than brut. "Sec," "demi-sec" and "doux" champagnes and sparkling wines are very sweet and are generally served as dessert wines.

Steve Baker, assistant manager of Sundance Wine Cellars, says most people are unaccustomed to the austere style of brut. For a large group of people with mixed levels of sparkling wine experience, Baker recommends an extra-dry.

He also suggests serving a rosé sparkling wine, which has been tinted by red grape skins. "Rosés are really great for weddings because the

color is so festive," he says. They range in color from light salmon pink to dazzling strawberry.

Above all, it is important to note how the bubbles of the champagne and sparkling wine are formed. For the best quality, look for bottles labeled "*méthode champenoise*," meaning the sparkling wine has been fermented in the bottle. This traditional method is more expensive, but the higher quality and true bubblyness may worth the higher price.

"*Méthode champenoise* is quite an elaborate project and quite a labor of love," says Ron Chappel, co-owner of Secret House Winery. The alternative method is the Charmat bulk process. It is less expensive but makes a lower quality sparkling wine; Charmat-processed wine is easily identified by its large, lazy bubbles that disappear quickly.

The best thing about tasting champagne and sparkling wine is that all of your senses are involved. First, sparkling wine should be served cold, about 45 degrees. After the wine is chilled, pour it into tall champagne flutes. Shallow glasses make the bubbles dissipate more quickly. Always hold the glass by the stem so the warmth of your fingers does not increase the temperature of the champagne.

To fully appreciate champagne or sparkling wine, begin sampling with your eyes. Look for clarity and trueness of color. Next, watch the stream of bubbles — the smaller and more numerous, the better. Moving on, hold the glass close to your ear and listen to the bubbles' dainty crackle. This doesn't increase your knowledge of the wine, but it's fun.

The wine's aroma should be delicate and pleasant. "The bouquet of any wine is almost as important as the taste," says Baker. Finally, taste the wine. Let it flow all about your tongue as the bubbles bring out the flavors. Champagne and sparkling wine should bring a clean and refreshed sensation to the mouth.

Champagne and sparkling wine prices vary from one extreme to the other, but price does not necessarily reflect the quality. Cava, Spain's sparkling wine, is surprisingly good for around \$7 per bottle. Nearly all the Oregon sparkling wines mentioned above sell for less than \$20 per bottle.

Tom Robertson, owner of Jiffy Market Wine and Deli, says some couples with limited budgets buy a few high quality bottles for the wedding party table, then buy a less expensive sparkling wine, like Cava, for the guests. Most wineries and wine merchants give a 10 to 20 percent discount if you buy sparkling wine by the case.

— Bethany Larson

101 Champagne



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