

Gushing Love Juice

Give the wine of amour

All right, it's time for Valentine's, time to tote ye tokens and proffer ye heart. Traditionally, gather up some nice whiffy perfume (no junk), yummy truffles in heart-shaped box (no stale corporate cack), bottle of fine vino. Ready to ring the bell? Hold it.

Bag some bodacious bubbles, real Champagne, because Champagne is the quintessential wine of amour, this world's most sensuous high. Far as I'm concerned, anyone who denies this fact either doesn't know wine or doesn't know love. But there's a trick.

First, it's important to remember basics: The term Champagne refers rightly only to bubbly made in the Champagne region of France. All others are sparkling wines, and while they might be very good, even excellent, they are not Champagne. Next, it's critical to distinguish between sparkling wines

(off-dry, meaning a hint of sweetness) that can be refreshing and bright with certain appetizers. Both these are priced in the \$10-\$12 range. For a few dollars more, buyers can pick up some very good domestic sparklers, often bearing French names — Moët, Chandon, Tattinger, Roederer, to name a few

— for those "houses," as they are called, that have established vineyards in the New World, particularly in Napa Valley; the best of these are very good and priced reasonably (\$25-45); Roederer Estate is consistently among the best. Oregon sparkling wines also garner praises; for just one example, Argyle Brut 2001 (\$22), a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, is mighty flavorful and stylish, excellent for the price.

A necessary word on styles and the reading of labels: Sparkling wines can be light and fluffy or more full-flavored, depending on the grapes used and the distinctive style adopted by the house or maker. If the label reads *blanc de blancs*, for instance, the wine is made from white grapes, usually chardonnay, and will tend to be light and crisp; a *blanc de noirs* will be a blend of white grapes with darker (usually pinot noir but often including pinot meunier), resulting in a sparkler that is light in color but more flavorful. Sparkling rosés are all the rage these days; they show more color (from pale salmon to dark pink) and deliver a load of flavor, usually from pinot noir grapes; they can be delish and flat-out sexy.

Now Champagne, best of the best. Fifty bucks will net you a fine French bubbly — work with your local wine clerk for special experiences — but I gotta clue ya: There's a line, marked by price to some degree, that, once crossed, will take you into the rarefied world of ultra-premium Champagnes, a place usually accessed only by the stupidly rich, an entry into a form of intoxication like no other I've ever known. And it ain't just the alcohol; wine may just be fermented grape juice, but it's chemically complex, and I can testify from personal experience (to which I was privileged only because of the generosity of friends) there's something in the best Champagne that goes straight to the limbic (emotional) centers of the brain and engenders a gush of love juice like nothing else on this rock.

If you're flush, just cashed in some stocks of Microsquishy, shell out some of your ill-gotten shekels for a bottle of Dom Perignon 1996 Brut Rose (\$330), Perrier-Jouet Fleur de Champagne (\$280) or Louis Roederer 1999 Cristal (\$260). Cristal, as you probably know, is the current fave of bling-dripping gangstas and dotcom nouveau riche. If you're really rollin' in the shit, bang the bash by showing up packin' a Rehoboam (three liters, six bottles in one) of Cristal (mere \$2,600), pop its top, hose the room just to show you can (be sure to hit your mouth), half-wit waste being all the rage.

Nah, just try loving the one you love — and yourself — by just once in your life soaring into passion's stratosphere behind pure bubble power. Then tell me: If that ain't love, what is?



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made in the traditional method — called *methode champenoise* — by which fermentation is encouraged through natural processes which, without going into tedious detail, are complex and time-consuming, meaning, of course, expensive. Sparkling wines can also be made by the bulk process (also called Charmat process) by which carbon dioxide bubbles are simply added to still wine; most of the really cheap guck sold in grocery stores as "champagne" is cheap because it's made through the bulk process. It's mostly ghastly stuff suitable for fruit punches at tailgaters or for spraying on crowds at raves. Under no conditions should it be drunk straight from the bottle.

Not only is the traditional method expensive, virtually everything about good wines made by this method is also expensive: because the wines are under up to six atmospheres of pressure, the bottles must be a bit heavier than usual. The corks are special, and they must be held in place by a cage. Often the labels are given a special coating so they can sit in an ice bucket without melting off. All these costs to the producer are passed on to the consumer as higher retail prices, so it's a minor miracle that we can actually find decent, drinkable sparkling wines at affordable prices.

But it can be done. Washington's Chateau Ste. Michelle, for example, bottles a brut (meaning bone dry) that's quite quaffable. California producer Korbel turns out a sec

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