

How to savor this golden era for sparkling wines

By **ELIN MCCOY**
Bloomberg News

A daily glass of fizz sustained me during the darkest days of the pandemic. Like so many other wine lovers, I find there's something about bubbles in wine that makes everything look a little brighter, a little more hopeful — no matter what dire things are happening in the world.

"Let's face it. Bubbles awaken a pleasure center in your brain," enthuses Zachary Sussman, author of the recently published "Sparkling Wine for Modern Times," via phone.

Luckily, there are more high-quality choices than ever as winemakers around the globe rush to satisfy our thirst. Sparkling wine has been on an upward sales trajectory for the past decade. It's now the fastest-growing wine category among American consumers, up 22% for the year ending in July 2021, according to sales data from market research firm Nielsen IQ.

The old idea that sparkling wine is an expensive luxury drink best poured only on special occasions has, well, fizzled.

The bottles we're popping go way beyond Champagne, though we're drinking plenty of that, too.

Sussman's book charts the ways winemakers are experimenting with unfamiliar grapes, new styles, and different production methods to put those dancing bubbles in the bottle. There's a rebirth of traditions in remote locations (think France's Savoie) that we're just learning about. And climate change is creating potential in chilly places such as Japan, Nova Scotia, England, Vermont and Wisconsin — though few of the wines are yet on U.S. shelves. They will be.

Wine spots we don't usually associate with sparkling wines, such as Hungary, Austria and Brazil, have new fizz to share. Even in California, a surprising number of established win-



Dreamstime-TNS

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eries are dabbling, with one or two sparkling wine cuvées being added lineups. More than 150 producers in Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Santa Ynez counties make at least one example.

Champagne itself even includes a lot of new, exciting projects, such as the Marie Césaire label founded a few years ago by the first Black female Champagne producer.

The world of bubbles has now become so free-wheeling and diverse that a sparkling version is on offer in whatever you want to drink: red, white, rosé, or orange.

You may be wondering what drives all this recent activity.

It all started 20 years ago when grower Champagnes (bottles crafted by small family producers cultivating grapes on their own land) made us realize that products from big, well-known brands weren't the only ones from the region worth drinking.

Then came our embrace of drink-me-now, party-pleaser prosecco from northeast Italy. It's made by a different method than Champagne — fermented in a tank and sugar and yeast added to cause a second fermentation that creates bubbles.

Prosecco taught us that fizz could be fun, inexpensive enough for a daily

splash, and offering a casual appeal completely different from luxury Champagne. The region debuted official rosé versions in 2021 and is also pushing serious, high-end single-vineyard wines.

The natural wine movement introduced us to easy drinking, no-fuss petillant naturel, made by a simpler process referred to as ancestral. Once considered geek wines (they can appear cloudy), pet nats have recently become more mainstream. Partially fermented juice is bottled and sealed with a crown cap; fermentation finishes in the bottle, trapping the bubbles. Because this method doesn't involve pricy equipment or storage for aging, even small wineries can experiment. This has inspired dozens of producers to offer new, delicious examples.

Until recently, California and Oregon's sparkling wines came only from wineries dedicated to producing it, such as Schramsberg in Napa and Roederer Estate in Mendocino, both in California. What changed things was a handful of custom crush facilities, like Oregon's Radiant Sparkling Wine, that offer small-scale winemakers the pricy specialized equipment and facilities required to make bubbly by the traditional Champagne method.

Think of all this as the liberation of sparkling

wine. Now, with the global reopening of restaurants and wine bars, you can expect to see a wider variety of bubbles on their lists. I've listed some of my recent exciting discoveries below, but could have included dozens more.

Where does Sussman see the most exciting future for fizz? He has his eye on Central and Eastern Europe in such countries as Hungary and the Czech Republic.

11 EXCITING SPARKLING WINES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

NV Sidonio de Sousa Branco Brut Nature (\$17)

Portugal has become the go-to spot for terrific bargains, and that includes crisp sparkling wines. This zippy one is from the Bairrada region near the chilly northwest coast. The blend of three local white grapes has aromas of ripe pears and white flowers.

NV Lubanzi Sparkling Rosé (\$18)

This frothy, fruity, fun South African pale-pink fizz will remind you of a dry, crisp prosecco. It's made from cinsault grapes. The winery is environmentally and socially conscious, a certified B corporation that is also part of One Percent for the Planet, whose members contribute at least 1% of annual sales to environmental causes. The wine comes in a can, too.

2020 Folias de Baco Uivo PET NAT Rosé (\$23)

The young winemaker behind the label makes four pet nats in Portugal's Douro region, land of vintage port. This one is 100% pinot noir. It's light and lively but intense, with fresh, tart, red-fruit flavors.

NV Bodkin Cuvee Agincourt Brut Sparkling Sauvignon Blanc (\$25)

America's first sparkling sauvignon blanc, made from

Lake County grapes in California, is the brainchild of Black winemaker Chris . First launched in 2012, it's now more available. It's light, dry, and aromatic, with a green-apple fruitiness — and made like a prosecco. Christensen is also putting the same wine in 250 ml cans for \$8 each.

2020 Casa Belfi Naturalmente Frizzante Rosso (\$25)

Savory and slightly herbaceous, with soothing, gentle bubbles, this bold-flavored sparkling red is the color of a Negroni. It's from prosecco land but has some taste resemblance to a bone-dry, fruity Lambrusco. I'd never heard of the varietal—Raboso Veronese, whose taste reminds me a bit of cabernet franc.

2019 Heidi Schrock & Sohne Pinot Blanc Petillant Naturel, v. 2 (\$26)

Schrock, with a long history at making wine in Austria, is crafting a new line of natural wines, Nostalgie Naturelle, with her sons. The second vintage of this orange-tinged sparkler, a re-creation of a wine Schrock's great-grandfather made, is bright and citrusy with floral aromas.

2020 Carboniste Octopus Sparkling Wine Extra Brut (\$28)

Dan and Jacqueline Person are making modern sparkling wines in California that don't aim to be like Champagne. Their flagship, made from aromatic albariño grapes, has softer bubbles and tastes of passion fruit and fresh herbs, not toasty brioche. Serve, of course, with grilled octopus.

2020 Milan Nestarec Danger 380 Volts Pet Nat (\$32)

Czech winemaker Milan Nestarec has been called the "enfant terrible" of the country's leading natural wine group. This unusual mix of Mueller-thurgau, neuburger, and muscat

grapes is citrusy and very tart, best for adventurous palates.

2018 Cruse Wine Co. Tradition Sparkling Wine (\$45)

Michael Cruse is best known for his very expensive cult sparkler Ultramarine and for pet nats from grapes like valdiguie. This third version of his sunny, lemony, and toasty California-style fizz is his idea of an entry level cuvée made by the Champagne method. The blend of pinot noir and chardonnay has intense fruit aromas and delicious delicate berry and green apple flavors.

NV Louis Roederer Champagne Brut Collection 242 (\$45)

Famous Champagne houses don't want to be left out when it comes to experiments. The maker of luxe favorite Cristal ditched its basic non-vintage wine, replacing it with a stunning multivintage blend — a definite step up. Silky textured and lacy, with lots of energy and complexity, it's made a little like a sherry solara, with new wine added to a perpetual reserve every year.

2016 Radgonske Gorice Untouched by Light Methode Classique Brut (\$290)

The first sparkling wine made in complete darkness, this Slovenian fizz is not just a gimmick: Research has found that exposure of bottled wines to fluorescent or ultraviolet light can cause light-strike, which affects a sparkling wine's aromas. This winery is taking no chances. The grapes are harvested on moonless nights and processed in the dark by workers wearing night vision goggles. The wine matures in dark caves and the wine comes in a black glass bottle. All-chardonnay, it's gentle, creamy textured, and elegant. The only thing not to like is the price tag.

Giving your wok a workout

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

I've been a fan of chef and culinary scientist J. Kenji Lopez-Alt ever since his first bestselling cookbook, "The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science," was published in 2015. So like so many others, I couldn't wait to get my hands on his highly anticipated follow-up, "The Wok: Recipes and Techniques" (Norton, \$50), which hit store shelves on March 8.

It was worth the wait. The 658-page cookbook grew out of a chapter on the wok that had been edited out of his first cookbook. It makes a compelling case that, when it comes to producing fast, flavorful and versatile meals, nothing beats stir-frying in the traditional Chinese cooking vessel.

Along with an introductory chapter on how to buy, season, clean and maintain a wok, it includes instructions on knife skills and easy-to-follow wok techniques for a variety of meats and vegetables. It also boasts more than 200 recipes — many with mouthwatering photos — for stir-fries, rice, noodles and simple no-cook side dishes such as smashed cucumber salad.

I test-drove the cookbook with one of my favorite Chinese recipes, Dan Dan Noodles, which Lopez-Alt writes "are to Sichuan what the hamburger is to the United States: They're ubiquitous, there are certain expectations, but there are no hard and fast rules other than the basic ingredients" — noodles, chile oil, pickled Sichuan vegetables, vinegar and lip- and tongue-numbing Sichuan peppercorns.

Like many traditional Chinese foods, this dish involves more than a few ingredients, but not so much as to be intimidating. Some might be unfamiliar; this was the first time I cooked with preserved mustard root, for instance.

The crushed Sichuan peppercorn will add a tingling, numbing sensation on the tongue and lips known as "ma" in Chinese.

DAN DAN NOODLES

2 teaspoons red Sichuan peppercorns

For sauce

2 tablespoons Chinese sesame paste or 4 teaspoons tahini or unsweetened peanut butter mixed with 2 teaspoons roasted sesame oil
2 tablespoons warm water

2 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 tablespoons Chinkiang or balsamic vinegar
2 teaspoons sugar
½ cup Sichuan chile oil with its sediment
2 teaspoons minced fresh garlic (about 2 medium cloves)

For pork

1 tablespoon peanut or other neutral oil
6 ounces ground or finely chopped pork
2 ounces minced preserved mustard root or stem
1 tablespoon Shaoxing wine
1 tablespoon light soy sauce or shoyu

To serve

1 pound fresh wheat noodles
4 ounces fresh greens, such as spinach or baby bok choy, optional
2 ounces mung bean sprouts, optional
¼ cup roasted or fried peanuts, gently crushed in a mortar and pestle
4 to 5 scallions, thinly sliced

Toast Sichuan peppercorns in a dry wok over high heat until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer to mortar and pestle or spice grinder and grind into a fine powder; set aside.

Make sauce: Combine sesame paste and water in medium bowl and stir until completely smooth.

Add soy sauce, vinegar, sugar, chile oil, garlic and half of the ground Sichuan peppercorns and stir until homogenous and sugar



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

Made with a spicy sauce containing Sichuan chili oil and garlic, and topped with crispy round pork, Dan Dan Noodles are a popular street food in China.

is dissolved. Divide sauce evenly among 4 individual bowls or pour into one large serving bowl to share.

Make pork: Heat wok over high heat until lightly smoking. Add 1 tablespoon oil and swirl to coat. Add pork and cook, stirring and tossing and using a spatula to break up pork until it is no longer pink, about 1 minute.

Add preserved mustard root and cook, stirring and tossing until all excess moisture has evaporated and the mixture starts to stick to the wok, about 1 minute longer. Add a big pinch of ground Sichuan peppercorns and toss to combine.

Swirl in the wine vinegar and soy sauce around the edges of wok and continue to cook, stirring and tossing, until wine and soy sauce have completely evaporated, about 3 minutes. Transfer pork mixture to a small bowl.

Prepare noodles: Bring 3 quarts of lightly salted water to a boil in the wok or in a large pot over high heat. When water is boiling, add the noodles, greens and bean sprouts, if using, and cook according to the package directions until barely cooked through, just a couple minutes.

Drain noodles, reserving some of the cooking liquid, and divide evenly among the individual

bowls or transfer to the large serving bowl. Add a few tablespoons of cooking liquid to each bowl. Spoon the pork mixture on top.

Sprinkle with remaining ground Sichuan peppercorns and the sliced scallions. Serve immediately.

Serves 4.
—"The Wok: Recipes and Techniques" by J. Kenji Lopez-Alt (Norton, March 8, 2022, \$50)



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