

Get That Champagne Feeling on a Sparkling Wine Budget

The price of Champagne has risen, but good alternatives are made all over the wine-producing world. They might taste different but they are superb.



By Eric Asimov

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The holidays require sparkling wine, there's no getting around that. But does it need to be Champagne?

That's a particularly good question this year, as Champagne is more expensive than ever. You may be able to find a bottle for under \$40 somewhere, but decent bottles now begin around \$45, and very good nonvintage bottles from producers like Pierre Péters or Louis Roederer are \$70 to \$75.

These price increases have occurred for reasons that have affected businesses around the world. Rising interest rates along with pandemic supply-chain disruptions have raised prices of raw materials like grapes, bottles and corks. Labor costs have also gone up.

Champagne is not the only wine region with rising prices. Almost all wines cost more than they did last year, not to mention five years ago. It's just that, among sparkling wines, Champagne started at a higher price. The increases may be similar in percentage terms to other sparkling wines, but it feels worse. Will prices ever come down? I'm not holding my breath.

Fortunately, great sparkling wines are now made everywhere that makes wine. This year I decided to seek out distinctive sparkling wines that provided satisfying alternatives to Champagne. I found 12 that were exceptional, at different price levels, in New York retail shops.

Notice I called them alternatives, not replacements. No other sparkling wine tastes just like a good Champagne, which is the product of its place and culture. But other regions make sparkling wine that can be just as distinctive in myriad ways.

Sekt, the sparkling wine of Germany, and cava, the sparkling wine of Spain, are both undergoing rejuvenations with a growing number of producers putting far more care and effort into making terrific examples of what used to be cheap afterthoughts.

The best producers in these regions use local grapes, like riesling in Germany and xarello, parellada and macabeu in Spain. Sparkling Vouvray and Montlouis are made of chenin blanc. These all can be wonderful, but they don't taste like Champagne.

Other places prefer to use traditional Champagne grapes like chardonnay and pinot noir. These don't taste like Champagne, either, as they come from different terroirs. They are not necessarily better or worse, just different.

I chose only sparklers that are made by the same method as Champagne, in which a finished wine is refermented with a sweet solution and yeast in a sealed bottle. This second fermentation produces carbon dioxide, which, with nowhere to escape, carbonates the wine.

I skipped sparkling wines made by other methods. Pétillant naturels, for example, are made by the ancestral method in which wine is bottled while still fermenting, which creates bubbles. Other popular wines, like almost all Proseccos and cheap sekts, are carbonated in big tanks.

The differences in texture are often discernible. Wines made by the Champagne method tend to be more elegant, and maybe a little more formal, although it's certainly not hard to find harsh, coarse Champagnes.

I'm not at all suggesting you don't drink Champagne for the holidays. Good Champagnes are singular, and I have many producers whom I recommend. But if you are looking for excellent sparklers that mostly won't cost as much as Champagne, here are 12 options, from least to most expensive.



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Parés Baltà Cava Brut Nature NV, 11.5 percent, \$20

This might have been a classic cava, if all cavas were farmed organically and made with as much care. Instead, it stands out. Parés Baltà uses only the traditional grapes, xarello, parellada and macabeu, with the emphasis on xarello. It's fresh, lively and dry. Other good Spanish sparklers to seek out include Gramona, AT Roca, Recaredo and Raventós I Blanc. (U.S.A. Wine Imports, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Ferrari Trento Brut Metodo Classico NV, 12.5 percent, \$27

I'm not sure any country drinks more sparkling wine than Italy. Ferrari's wines, from the Trentino-Alto Adige region of Italy, are generally superb. This entry-level bottle, made entirely from chardonnay, is sleek and graceful, impeccably balanced and a great value. (Taub Family Selections, Boca Raton, Fla.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Clotilde Davenne Crémant de Bourgogne Brut Extra NV, 12.5 percent, \$27

Clotilde Davenne makes small amounts of Chablis and Burgundy as well as Crémant de Bourgogne, the sparkling wine of Burgundy. This bone-dry blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, farmed organically near the town of Chablis, is ultrafresh, lacy and elegant. (Bonhomie Wine Imports, South Orange, N.J.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Jo Landron Atmosphères Méthode Traditionelle Extra Brut NV, 11.5 percent, \$28

Jo Landron, a scrupulous biodynamic farmer and careful winemaker, has long been one of my favorite Muscadet producers. He also makes this terrific sparkling wine. It's made roughly of a third chardonnay, a third pinot noir — two Champagne grapes — and a third, folle blanche, a local grape known for its high acidity. The combination is certainly lively, but also airy and elegant. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)



Roederer Estate

Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut NV, 12.5 percent, \$33

Roederer Estate, the Mendocino County outpost of the excellent Champagne house Louis Roederer, has long been not only one of California's biggest sparkling wine producers, but one of the best. This is, not surprisingly, made with Champagne grapes, pinot noir and chardonnay, but grown in Anderson Valley terroir. It doesn't taste like Champagne. It's more herbal, less mineral, but it's got a good Champagne's freshness and elegance.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

François Chidaine Montlouis-sur-Loire Brut Nature Méthode Traditionelle 2020, 12 percent, \$33

Chenin blanc is the most unusual grape. It has the uncanny ability to be graceful and bone dry yet taste sweet, courtesy of its characteristic honeysuckle flavors. That combination works beautifully in this sparkling chenin blanc. It's lacy, light and floral with that gorgeous hint of honey. François Chidaine farms biodynamically and regeneratively, and he also makes excellent still chenin blancs. (Polaner Selections)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Domaine de Montbourgeau Crémant du Jura Brut Zero NV, 12 percent, \$36

Domaine de Montbourgeau is one of the Jura's most undersung producers. Its wines are almost always precise and expressive. That's especially true of this sparkling wine, made entirely of chardonnay. It's dry, focused, racy and elegant, subtly herbal and deliciously refreshing. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Bénédicte et Stéphane Tissot Crémant du Jura Extra Brut NV, 12.5 percent, \$38

Unlike Montbourgeau, Domaine Tissot is a celebrated Jura estate. Stéphane Tissot farms biodynamically and is a thoughtful, conscientious winemaker. This Crémant differs considerably from the Montbourgeau. It's half chardonnay, with the remainder mostly pinot noir with some trousseau and poulsard. It's bigger and more voluminous, with pronounced citrus and herbal flavors. If imagining a Crémant du Jura evening, serve the Montbourgeau as an aperitif and the Tissot following. (Camille Rivière Selection/Fruit of the Vines, Long Island City, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Peter Lauer Saar Riesling Brut 2020, 12.5 percent, \$40

Florian Lauer, the current proprietor of this excellent German estate, makes wonderful sparkling rieslings. They are what the Europeans like to call gastronomic wines, bottles that are best served with food. I've had numerous Lauer sparklers, but this is one of the more unusual bottles. It's profoundly herbal, with an aftertaste of anise. It's also paradoxical, austere yet generous, light yet rich and intense. Altogether, a thrill. (Vom Boden, Brooklyn, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Schramsberg North Coast Blanc de Blancs Brut 2020, 12.6 percent, \$40

Schramsberg was one of California's modern pioneers of sparkling wine, with 1965 as its first vintage. A lot has changed in California's sparkling wine world since then, with many small producers now making excellent wines. But Schramsberg is still going strong. This blanc de blancs, made entirely from chardonnay, is creamy, toasty, crisp and fresh.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Corte Bianca Franciacorta Essente Dossagio Zero NV, 12 percent, \$48

Franciacorta in Lombardy has long been an area dominated by big companies making expensive but not particularly interesting sparkling wine. That has changed, with many smaller, distinctive producers like Corte Bianca making outstanding bottles. This is made from chardonnay, pinot noir, pinot blanc and erbamat, a rare local grape, all farmed organically. It's lively yet creamy and elegant, lightly floral and savory. Other Franciacorta producers I especially like include Divella, Arcari e Danesi and Cà del Vént. (Artisanal Cellars, White River Junction, Vt.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Racines Santa Rita Hills Chardonnay Grand Reserve Sparkling Wine NV, 12.5 percent, \$82

Racines is a new collaboration between Étienne de Montille and Brian Sieve of Domaine de Montille in Burgundy and Rodolphe Péters of the excellent small Champagne producer Pierre Péters. This is the first bottle I've tried and it's superb. It's yeasty, creamy and supremely elegant, made from organically farmed chardonnay. It's delicious now but will age well for 10 years.

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