

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

# Discovering American Bubbly

## U.S. Sparklers Make A Great First Act To a Holiday Feast

WHEN IT COMES TO real Champagne, it's easy to figure out which ones were made by the little guys—if you have good eyesight.

There's a tiny code on the label that begins with RM, which means it's a grower's own wine. When it comes to American sparkling wines, however, even perfect vision doesn't help because there's rarely a hint on the label. This is a shame because, all over the country, committed vintners are making small batches of handcrafted, highly personal and often excellent bubbly.

Now is a good time to explore these hidden gems because American sparklers are perfect for Thanksgiving.

Last week, we suggested Cabernet Sauvignon for Thanksgiving and a couple of weeks before that, we recommended a light Muscat wine for dessert after any big meal. The way to start your celebration, however, is with a sparkling wine.

Because Thanksgiving is an American celebration, we think an American bubbly is the way to go. When we were young, that usually meant Korbel from California or perhaps Great Western from New York. We both grew up in households where wine was rarely consumed, and when our fathers gathered all of us around to verrrrry carefully open that bottle on Thanksgiving, the big pop signified the beginning of a warm holiday season even more than the sight of Santa at the end of the Macy's parade.

### An American Revolution

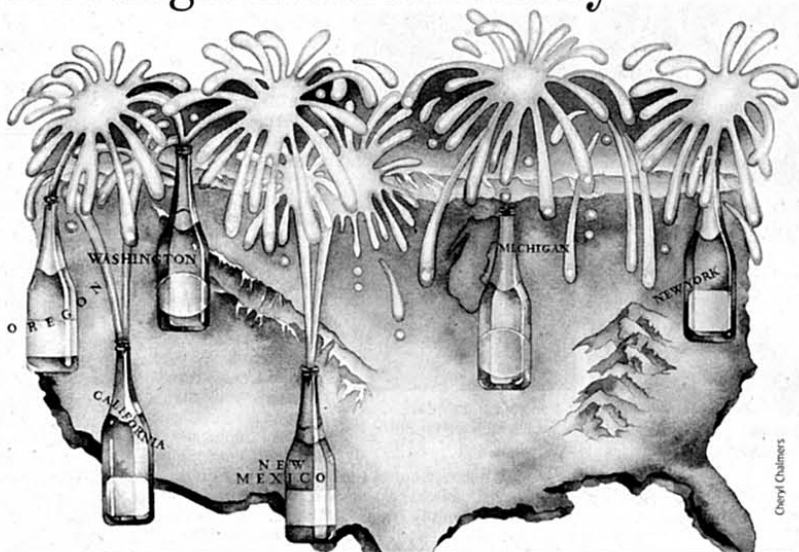
Since then, there has been a revolution in American bubbly. Now, big producers such as Domaine Chandon, Roederer Estate and Mumm Napa produce tons of very good sparkling wine at excellent prices. Smaller producers, such as Scharffenberger Cellars and the pioneering Schramsberg Vineyards, have helped to set a standard for sparkling wine that is very good and fairly widely available. And it's not just California. Gruet Winery in New Mexico and Domaine Ste. Michelle in Washington, for instance, each produce a significant amount of good, well-priced bubbly.

America's bounty of bubbly doesn't stop there. The U.S. has about 4,700 wineries, and you'd be amazed how many of these produce a little bit of bubbly, often made pretty much just for fun and often sold only at the winery or at a limited number of stores or restaurants. The bubbly are sometimes excellent, and for a good reason: Really fine sparkling wine requires a tremendous amount of time-consuming, hands-on care.

The grapes (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier are the classics) must be just right, and when they are, they convey the qualities of the soil and climate in which they thrive. The wine must be slowly turned in the bottle so that during the second fermentation, the sediment works its way to the top and it's disgorged, a process that sometimes takes years. This is the classic method of producing Champagne, and the labels on American bubbly made that way will proudly say *Méthode Champenoise* or perhaps something like "fermented in this bottle." This is a sign of great care, compared to the bulk process, in which the wine is made in large fermentation tanks. Fine bubbly requires passion and commitment, and that often is the result of a vintner producing a small amount of sparkling wine because it's fun or because...

Well, ask Tony Soter. Mr. Soter is a well-known winemaker who now owns a winery in Oregon. We were surprised to find a Soter sparkling rosé at a store recently, and so we picked it up. The wine was marvelous—soulful, with good weight, great acidity and impressive austerity. When we called Mr. Soter to ask why he made a bubbly, he immediately responded: "I make it for my wife. It's a small part of our production. The deal was I'd be delighted to make it for her, and if I couldn't sell it, she'd have to drink it. I'm not trying to get rich with it. I'm making it for the love of it." In fact, every winemaker we interviewed spoke of love when discussing their sparklers, adding that their still wines are far more profitable. Said Rollin Soles, the winemaker at Argyle: "I love drinking the stuff, and I love making the stuff."

During our recent quick visit to the Santa Cruz mountains of California, we dropped into Thomas Fogarty Winery and bought a bottle of bubbly that we drank at our hotel. It was one of the best American sparklers we've had. To us, great sparkling



Cheryl Chalmers

### A Sampling of Small-Production American Sparklers

We collected a large sample of handcrafted, small-production American sparkling wines and tasted them over two weeks. These were our favorites. Although we bought these from retail stores, all are made in very small quantities and are hard to find outside of the winery or the immediate area where they are made. We list them simply to give an idea of the very special small-production wines made across the U.S. If you live near a winery, and chances are that you do, we'd guess it makes a sparkling wine that might be for sale only at the winery. Pick one up. We did not taste these blind because they are so varied. They are listed in alphabetical order.

| VINEYARD/VINTAGE   | PRICE   | TASTERS' COMMENTS  |
|--|---------|--|
| <b>Argyle Winery Blanc de Blancs 'Knudsen Vineyard, Julia Lee's Block' 1999 (Dundee Hills, Ore.)</b> | \$28.50 | Reliable name. Brioche, lemon and some fetching. Chardonnay-like mouthfeel. Good balance of acidity and fruit, pretty bubbles. Good before and during dinner. It's 100% Chardonnay, and 887 cases were made.   |
| <b>Domaine Meriwether Brut 'Captain Wm. Clark Cuvée' 1999 (Oregon)</b>                               | \$22    | Lovely wine, classy, complex and so easy to drink, with a haunting underpinning of minerals that's unusual in American sparklers. Very clean and mouth-watering, with lovely bubbles that are very much part of the taste. The latest release of this wine. The sparklers are "disgorged on demand," which means the winery releases 500 cases at a time and lets the rest continue to evolve at the winery. |
| <b>Hagafen Cellars Brut Cuvée 2001 (Napa Valley)</b>   | \$24.25 | Pink-tinged, and it tastes pink, too, with some weight and gripiness. Filled with fruit and toasted almonds. Fuller than most, so we'd serve with food, or even with dessert. Made every four or five years. Kosher.   |
| <b>L. Mawby 'Talisman' Brut non-vintage (Leelanau Peninsula, Mich.)</b>                              | \$27.99 | Nutty and rich, with some real taste and body. Fruity, with orange blossoms, honey, toast and peaches. Charming. Mawby makes only sparklers.   |
| <b>Pugliese Vineyards Blanc de Noir Nature 2000 (Long Island, N.Y.)</b>                              | \$19.99 | Pink, with lovely balance of fruit, acidity and integrated bubbles. Very fresh, with more finesse than many. About 400 cases made. Very little Pinot Noir, one of the traditional grapes of Champagne, is grown on the North Fork of Long Island, and the Puglieses grow it just for their sparklers.  |
| <b>Soter Vineyards Brut Rosé 'Beacon Hill' 2001 (Ore.)</b>   | \$44    | Proudly pink, with real taste, good mouthfeel, some weight and balancing acidity that's just right. Soulful and not at all simple. A wine to talk about. The 700 cases of 2001 were distributed in 23 states. The 2003 (650 cases) is just entering the marketplace. There was no 2002.  |
| <b>Tabor Hill Winery 'Grand Mark' non-vintage (Lake Michigan Shore, Mich.)</b>                       | \$17.59 | Lovely, Champagne-like color, with subtle bubbles and seashell minerality in the nose and taste. Austere and interesting, with some toast on the finish. Tasty. Good with food.  |

NOTE: These are the prices we paid at wine stores in Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York and Oregon. We paid \$26 for Argyle, \$19.76 for Domaine Meriwether, \$29.99 for Hagafen and \$37.99 for Soter, but these prices appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

wine isn't just wine with bubbles. The reason Champagne is the classic sparkling wine is that it gets the balance just right among all of the elements—the fruit, the acidity, the soil—and the fine bubbles themselves become part of the taste, not incidental to it. Too many American bubbly simply taste like wine, sometimes very good wine, to be sure, with bubbles. The 2000 Fogarty (\$32) got it just right. As we wrote in our notes: "Exceptionally good, with yeast, chalk, nuttiness and rich fruit. Someone made this who cares a lot about bubbly. Very classy and elegant." The winery makes only 600 cases of it, and it's available for sale at the winery and online and at a small number of wine stores and restaurants in the San Francisco area.

### Good Fruit—Plus Luck

Of all the vintages made by Fogarty's long-time winemaker, Michael Martella, the 2000, his most recent vintage, is his favorite. "Everything just kind of came together," he said. "Luck plays a big part of it, but having really good fruit is key." The grapes have to be just right, with perfect levels of acidity and ripeness. "Sometimes," he said, "they're not ripe enough for dry, still wines and too ripe for sparkling wines. To know when to pick, you sort of need a crystal ball." Mr. Martella has a couple hundred cases of the 1998 vintage sitting on its yeast.

Obviously, not all American bubbly are good. Some taste like simple wine that has been pumped full of bubbles. Others have an overlay of sweetness that seems designed to hide flaws and leaves the wine cloying and heavy. Here's the bottom line: We can't tell you what small-production, highly personal American bubbly you might find. That's kind of the whole point—they are very small and highly personal. Chances are, though, you live near a winery that makes a little bubbly, or you know a good wine merchant who brings in a few bottles of a special bubbly you've never seen before from somewhere in the U.S. Now is the perfect time to search a little harder than usual and try one of these with your friends, family and Thanksgiving dinner.

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