

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

A Global Spin on Holiday Cheer

On Our Gift List: Great Bubbly From All Over the World

ONE OF THE MOST popular holiday presents we've recommended over the years is something we call the World-Wide Sampler. It's a mixed case of affordable wines from throughout the world—everywhere except California—to make the point that lovely, well-made and fairly priced wine is being produced pretty much all over the globe these days. This year, we have a twist on the idea that would make an even more festive gift: the World-Wide Sparkler Sampler.

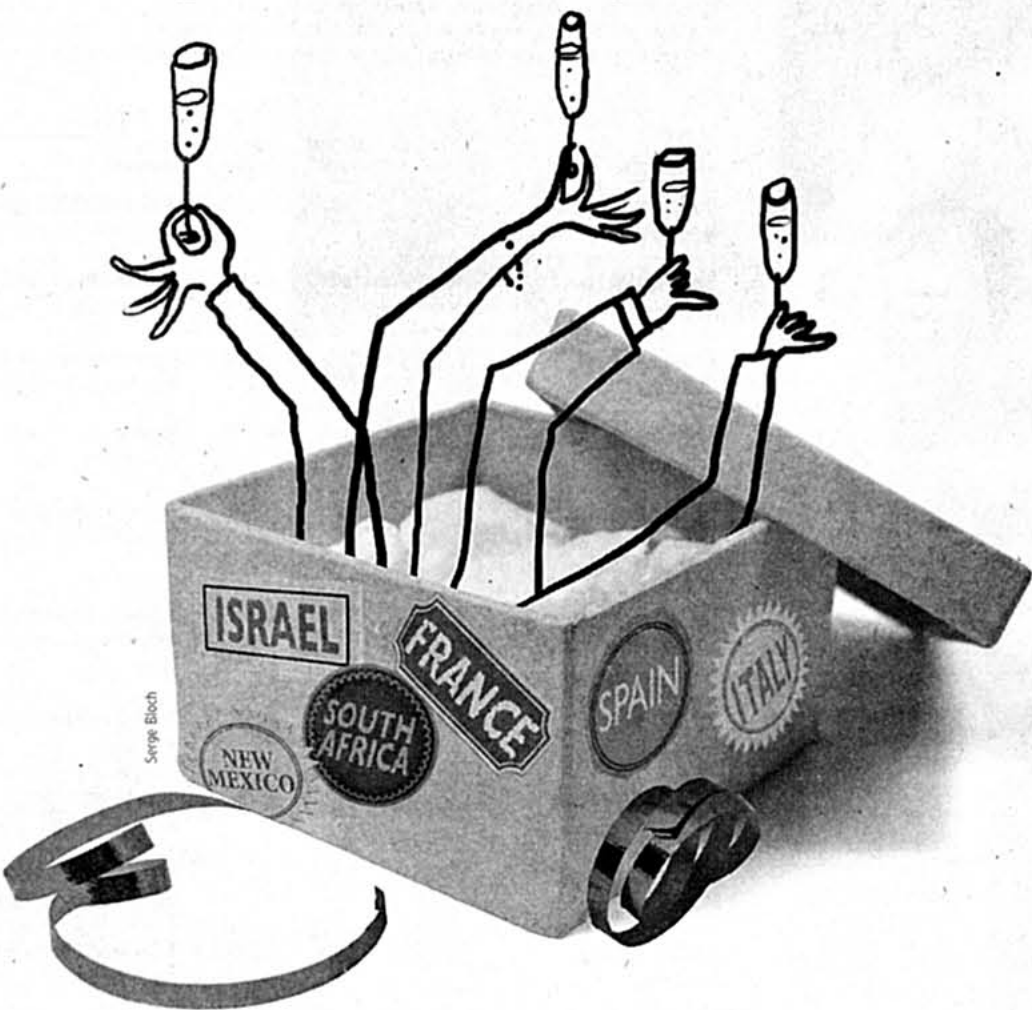
Sales of sparkling wine are robust. Imports of sparkling wine increased 60% between 1996 and 2006, according to U.S. government reports. AC-Nielsen says sales of all bubbly rose 2.7% by volume last year. Of course, around this time of year, all eyes turn to bubbly to celebrate the holidays and ring in the new year. But most people still think of sparkling wine only as a beverage to celebrate big events, like weddings or national holidays. With good sparkling wines flooding the market, there's no reason to wait until the last six weeks of the year to enjoy a bottle of bubbly. Not only does sparkling wine help the worries of everyday life fade away no matter when it's opened, but many bubbly also pair well with all kinds of food, from sushi to just about anything with a cream sauce.

That's where the World-Wide Sparkler Sampler comes in. It's a case of good sparkling wine from all over the world except California and the Champagne region of France. California produces fine sparkling wine and only Champagne is Champagne, but we've avoided those two areas because it's not a surprise to anyone that California and Champagne produce good bubbly. But Greece? Israel? Austria? We think that might be more unexpected.

A Broad Selection

So we have spent the past couple of months trying sparkling wines from all over the world. Some are fairly widely available and some are rare, but we can say this with confidence: There has never been a broader selection of well-made, well-thought-out sparkling wines on store shelves. With the competition in the sparkling-wine market intense, wineries clearly understand that they need to produce clean, balanced and charming bubbly at a good price—and they are.

So here is a possible case of sparkling wines from around the world that will amaze and excite any friend. Because some of these can be hard to find and because bubbly is special, you might think about a six-bottle case instead of 12. The prices we list are very general, designed to give you a broad idea of how much these wines might cost. Where we have a specific favorite that isn't rare, we've listed that wine, but don't worry too much about individual names because it will be hard enough to find a selection without focusing too narrowly. Getting a nice group of these will probably require a visit to at least a couple of good wine stores and some help finding them—sometimes they are displayed with other sparklers, sometimes with still wines from the same region and sometimes just lost in a corner somewhere—but, hey, isn't the wine-



lover in your life worth it?

Mionetto Brut (\$14) or any Prosecco from Italy. Prosecco is the lightly sparkling, mellow bubbly from the Veneto region of Italy. It's better as a welcome-home aperitif than a match with food. Another reliable name in Prosecco is Zardetto (\$12.50).

Cristalino Brut (\$7.50) or any Cava from Spain. Look closely and you'll likely see quite a bit of Cava on shelves. Good old Freixenet Cordon Negro in the black bottle (\$9) continues to be reliable, so if that's the one you see, that's fine, but it would be more fun to get something new and different.

Gruet Brut from New Mexico (\$14.50) or any bubbly from a state other than California. Gruet makes about 80,000 cases of very good sparkling wine—the Brut was our best value in a tasting of American bubbly under \$30 last year—and is just one example of the fine bubbly being made all over the U.S. Any one of them would be an eye-opener about the exciting things happening to the wine industry in every state. (For our recent column about American bubbly, drop us a note at wine@wsj.com.)

A Sekt from Germany. Sekt is Germany's name for sparkling wine. Many of us have long been familiar with Henkell Trocken (\$11.50), a nutty, full wine that's good with food, but some excellent, smaller-production Sekt is beginning to show up on shelves as well. We tasted a bubbly made from the Scheurebe grape—Gysler "Bundle of Scheu" (\$26)—and it was excellent: soft, fruity and gentle, with the acidity of a ripe lemon and some honeysuckle at the end. Even better would be a Sekt from Austria. More and more fine wines are arriving from Austria every day, and among them are some bubbly. We don't see them often, but we did taste a 2004 Brut from the well-known producer Bründlmayer (\$36) and it was very good: clean and balanced, with some richness, a bit of honey and real complexity.

Graham Beck Brut (\$15.50) or any sparkling wine from South Africa. Wines from South Africa haven't made quite the splash we expected a few years ago, but they're out there, and the Graham Beck seems to be fairly widely available. It's soft and lacks the intensity of some

other bubbly, but it's pleasant and highly drinkable.

A sparkling Vouvray from France. Vouvray is made from the Chenin Blanc grape, which means the sparkling version has a natural fruitiness that's quite fetching, with some apples and honey. These will generally cost between \$12 and \$30.

Lucien Albrecht (\$16.50) or any Crémant d'Alsace from France. These are often full wines, with tartness and some weight.

Greece, Israel and Austria are a few of the places making fine sparkling wine.

They're especially good with food. Like the Vouvray, this is a good example of the fine sparklers made in France that aren't Champagne.

Yarden Blanc de Blancs 2000 (\$20) or any bubbly from Israel. We've been impressed with Yarden's sparklers for years and this one is especially good, with brioche, minerals, great acidity and plenty of class. It would open anyone's mind to what's possible in Israel—and, even more broadly, help put to rest any misconceptions about the quality of today's kosher wines.

Sparkling Shiraz from Australia. Yes, this is sparkling wine that's deep red. We'd guess that many people avoid red sparklers because that used to mean gross, sweet stuff that tasted like cough syrup. But good sparkling Shiraz is different, with a firm blackberry core and a lovely finish. There are quite a few of them out there, but it's impossible to know which you'll see. They'll cost anywhere between \$7 and \$65, with an average around \$23. Our most recent favorite, for instance, was

Majella 2004, which costs around \$27.

Two rosé versions of any of these. Pink bubbly is a big trend and you should be able to find a rosé version of several of the wines above. We very much enjoyed the rosé Cristalino (\$8)—it was impressively austere for a rosé and we thought it would be great with roast chicken—but our favorite was the rosé Lucien Albrecht Crémant from Alsace (\$19), which was so delicate and beautiful that it reminded us of a pink rose. In fact, it was our single favorite wine of the entire world-wide tasting.

Other. This is the most important category, because you are likely to see something unexpected. In our own tasting, we also tried bubbly from New Zealand, Hungary and Portugal. We tried a sparkler from Argentina that was made from Chardonnay and Semillon. We tried a semi-sweet white sparkling Muscat from Moldova and a semi-sweet sparkling red Muscat from Ukraine. One of the best wines of our tastings in fact, was a sparkler from Greece made from Moschofilero grapes. It was Spiropoulos "Ode Panos" (\$15) and it was quite floral and mouth-watering, with a good underpinning of minerals. It made us think of herbed, grilled fish.

One last thing: With your gift, include a note that says something like, "These are everyday bubbly for the special occasions that happen every day. Drink up!"

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

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Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about sparkling wines at WSJ.com/Tastings.