



WINE NOTES

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

CHAMPAGNE SUGGESTIONS

What Champagne should I serve this season?

That is the most common question we receive around this time of year and it's no wonder: About 40% of all sparkling wine sales in the U.S. take place in the last six weeks of the year. While we're big fans of small-production sparklers, we understand that many people are looking for reliable and widely available names in Champagne and other sparkling wines, so here's a quick guide based on our tastings over the years.

Under \$10. Cava from Spain. We especially like Cristalino Brut, but Freixenet Cordon Negro Brut, Segura Viudas Brut Reserva and Marqués de Gelida are also good bets.

\$10 to \$15. Gruet from New Mexico or Chandon from California. Chandon has been our house bubbly for many years. While it often costs more than \$15, it's available pretty much everywhere and there tends to be a great deal of price competition on it this time of year, so shop around. In any event, you might get a discount when you buy a case.

\$15 to \$25. At this price range, we'd look for California bubbly: Scharffenberger Cellars, Roederer Estate Brut or Mumm Napa Valley "Brut Prestige."

\$25 to \$35. Now we're getting into real Champagne territory. In our blind tastings over the years, we've found that if you look for "Heidsieck" on the label, you'll do well. We're continually impressed by Heidsieck & Co. Monopole Blue Top Brut, Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve and Piper-Heidsieck.

\$30 to \$60. At this price, you can

We know that some people will turn to Dom Pérignon or Louis Roederer Cristal because they have such special status; that's fine because they're not just fashionable, but they really do taste special, too. A big favorite among serious wine-lovers is Bollinger R.D., which has been one of our favorites for many years, but beware that it is fuller and more serious than most and can even taste somber. Still, if a serious wine-lover is on your guest list, this is sure to impress.

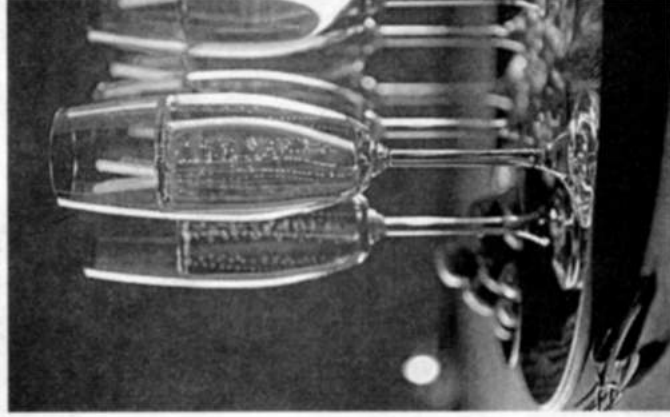
Do I really have to use flutes?

Many of us grew up with those bowl-shaped "Champagne" glasses, but it's pretty much accepted now that flutes are better for the bubbly because they concentrate the bubbles, the aromas and the tastes. That said, if those old-fashioned bowl glasses say "celebration" or "Champagne" to you, go ahead and use them. For heaven's sake, this is all about fun, not wine-judging, and if bowl glasses add to the joy of the party, go for it.

Will that leftover unopened bottle of bubbly be OK in my refrigerator?

As soon as the holidays are over, that becomes our most frequently asked question. What we want to say is this: "Now that it has been refrigerated, you must drink it within five days or it will go bad!" We want to say that because, heck, if you have a bottle of bubbly in the refrigerator, you should just open and enjoy it. But the truth is that it will be fine in there until Valentine's Day. If you really, really want to save it for longer than that, remove it from the fridge and put it on its side in a dark, undisturbed place with a moderate, fairly constant temperature and it will be fine for a while.

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



try some of the high-end domestic bubbles, though these can sometimes be hard to find. Look for DVX by Mumm Napa, Roederer Estate L'Ermitage, Iron Horse Classic Vintage Brut, Gloria Ferrer Royal Cuvée Brut and Schramsberg Blanc de Noirs. Schramsberg, by the way, is a storied name in American bubbly and if any of your guests know wine, this can't miss. (Schramsberg's slightly sweet and floral Crémant is our favorite dessert bubbly, which would be a delicious surprise for your guests after dinner.)

\$100 and up. If you're going all-out, our favorite "prestige Champagne" is Pol Roger Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill.