



T H E F I N E A R T O F

# Bubbly

## A WINE TO ENTICE THE SENSES

*By Jennie Orvino*

“Come quickly, I am tasting the stars!” The 17th-century Benedictine monk Dom Pierre Pérignon may have uttered those words after sipping a glass of sparkling wine, though it’s far more likely the phrase was lifted from a 19th-century print advertisement. Whatever the exclamation’s origin, there is no doubt that wine with bubbles is thrilling, making it the perfect accompaniment to life’s momentous occasions.

“Sparkling wine is probably the most exciting wine to the human senses. You hear the pop of the cork and the frothy sound as it is poured,” says Ludovic “Ludo” Dervin, winemaker for Mumm Napa. “You see the tiny bubbles rising and feel the breath of the wine when you smell it. Even before you taste, the palate is primed for a sensual experience.”

More and more, sparkling wine is a drink of choice, regardless of time or season. "Giving your dog a bath can be an occasion for opening a bottle of sparkling wine, a reward for accomplishments, an end-of-day relaxer," Dervin says. "There can be a reason to celebrate every moment, even if it's just being alive."

Joy Sterling, of Sebastopol's Iron Horse Vineyards, concurs, "Times are changing. If I order a bottle of sparkling in a restaurant and the server asks, 'What are you celebrating?' I answer, 'I'm celebrating Tuesday.'"

Sparkling wines are also more versatile than the average consumer might think. Because the wines can be effectively stoppered and chilled, producers are hoping people will go beyond thinking of sparkling as a cocktail, or a toast to be sipped and put aside, and that chefs will encourage its pairing with their specialty dishes. Tasting-room hosts are not only speaking the poetry of flavors and aromas when they pour, but also explaining how sparkling wines enhance different menus. A Blanc de Blancs can be enjoyed with oysters or grilled sea bass; a Brut Rosé with pizza, ribs or roast chicken; a Demi-Sec with dessert, like fruit tarts, light cakes or custards. It's all part of progressing the reputation of bubbly beyond wedding receptions and yacht christenings.

Sparkling wines are handcrafted via the time-honored Méthode Traditionelle. The science of this process has been refined through the skill, experience and ingenuity of generations of vintners. The art of it is like the execution of a gourmet meal where the finest ingredients are combined in a recipe aligned with the style, palate and intention of the chef. "As in any creative act, you must keep the end result in mind," Dervin concludes. "Sparkling wine making is a slow process; it is truly a labor of love."

### Sparkling rises in Wine Country

The history of sparkling wines in Sonoma County is rooted in the union of two Spanish winemaking families in the early 20th century. Pedro Ferrer married Dolores Sala and launched the Freixenet company 124 years ago with their first cava (Spain's sparkling wine alternative to champagne). The world's largest producer of bottle-fermented wines is still going strong, with global operations that include wineries and vineyards in Spain, France, Australia, Mexico, Argentina, Chile and California.

Pedro Ferrer's son, José, fulfilled his father's wish to grow grapes in the United States, purchasing 250 acres in the heart of Carneros. When Jose and his wife, Gloria, first travelled from Barcelona to Sonoma County in the 1980s, they recognized that the Mediterranean climate, sloping hills and



Ludovic "Ludo" Dervin, winemaker, Mumm Napa

maritime influences would be well-suited for the two most important sparkling wine grapes—Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Gloria Ferrer Caves & Vineyards is the first sparkling wine house in Sonoma Carneros and also the first to plant Champagne clones.

Gloria Ferrer winemaker Steven Urberg says the Catalan influence of the winery's founders is present in the extreme love of the land. "We've been farming this piece of earth for more than 30 years; we have a sense of stewardship and know every inch. Our vineyard crew shares more than a quarter century of vintage memories."

The winemakers introduced Champagne clones after journeying to France in the 1980s to learn about the grapes and comparing them to those in the U.S. "We had to evaluate what would work best in our area. We brought back Pinot Noir clones, did various trials. Now we're planting again,

always building on what we have learned," says Urberg. "It takes a long time to develop the vines, a whole lifetime really."

Gloria Ferrer continues to pioneer viticulture development in the region. Urberg says they plant to maximize the effects of coastal winds funneling through the Petaluma Gap and blowing over the western Carneros each afternoon. His background is in chemistry, and while the science of the process is apparent, his team is committed to personal nurturing of their vines. Making the hundreds of decisions required for each vintage is where the art happens.

"When it comes down to it," Urberg says, "we'll be out there walking, observing, sampling grapes, analyzing juice, putting our palates into it. When we get to the tanks, we consider: how does it look, smell, taste? Is there harmony in the blend, an appropriate level of acid, mouth feel, texture, the right amount of fruit? It is this exercise that gets to the elegance." Something must be working

right, since Gloria Ferrer Caves & Vineyards has more than 500 gold medals and 50 scores of 90-plus ratings.

### No corners cut

The history of Schramsberg Vineyards also began in Europe. In 1862, German immigrant Jacob Schram bought 200-plus acres and started his winery on Diamond Mountain above Calistoga. More than 100 years later, Jack and Jamie Davies restored the crumbling Schramsberg Estate winery, which had ceased functioning in 1912, with a goal to produce a world-class sparkling wine. The Davies' 1965 Blanc de Blancs was the first commercial use of Chardonnay in American sparkling wine.

Hugh Davies was born the month after his family took ownership of the estate, and is now the president and chief executive officer of Schramsberg Davies Vineyards.



Steven Urberg, winemaker, Gloria Ferrer



Hugh Davies, president and chief executive officer, Schramsberg Davies Vineyards

The operation produces 85,000 cases of sparkling wine and 5,000 cases of Davies red wines, showcasing both brands in a St. Helena tasting room and facility that once housed a car dealership and the original Schramsberg property on Diamond Mountain.

Over time, it became apparent that the original estate's geography was more suited to red Bourdeaux varietals, so now the grapes for J.Schram and Schramsberg's other sparklers are sourced from cool-climate vineyard sites across four

north coast counties. Davies is always alert for the best growing areas to produce, "a wine where no care is omitted, no corners are cut," he says.

"The J. Schram style focuses on Chardonnay to make wine that is truly 'age worthy' and has the drive and character of the best sparkling in the world. It's more linear, crisp, has tremendous backbone, and paramount is the very high level of acidity that comes from fruit grown in these coastal zones," says Davies. "You see a gentle process inside the bottle where flavors caramelize, season, and develop gently over the course of 20, 30, perhaps even more years."

He tells the story of how his parents—in a brilliant act of public relations to promote their first release—travelled to London in the fall of 1992 to stage a blind tasting of their California sparkling wine against a variety of French champagnes. In what must have been a surprising upset to the French winemakers, J. Schram won.

### Making the world better

Iron Horse Vineyards was founded by California-born Audrey and Barry Sterling. The couple met at Stanford University, married and moved their family to Paris in 1967. Living in France sparked the Sterlings' vision of owning a winery; nine years later they purchased property in the heart of Green Valley where the loamy soil, rolling hills, and cooling night breezes were ideal for growing grapes for sparkling wine. Now, there are about 160 acres in vine, planted exclusively in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The Sterlings wanted to keep the historic significance of the area—which included an old railroad stop—so they chose the name that Native Americans gave to the train: iron horse. The winery's logo depicts a rearing horse, stylized from a 19th century weather vane unearthed during construction.



Joy Sterling, chief executive officer, Iron Horse Vineyards

Joy Sterling, the current Iron Horse chief executive officer, has a deep respect for the terroir and commitment to a sustainable, future, something that's common to all the producers and growers in Napa and Sonoma counties. "We feel that our area is privileged; its meaning is bigger than us," says Sterling. "Our responsibility here is to do whatever we can to make the world better—one delicious sip at a time."

## SPARKLING FOR A CAUSE

Both Mumm Napa and Iron Horse Vineyards know the importance of supporting foundations and nonprofits both locally and beyond. Here's a look at the two wineries and their charitable contributions.

In 2005, guitar superstar Carlos Santana and Mumm Napa winemaker Lucovic Dervin created the first Santana Brut. A portion of the proceeds from the wine is donated to the Milagro Foundation, a nonprofit that supports underserved children through health services, education and the arts. To date, funds raised total more than \$500,000.

This sparkling collaboration came about following a conversation between the Mumm Napa brand manager's wife and Santana's wife at their yoga class. "Carlos is very particular about who he works with, and wants everything to be at the highest artistic level. He came to Mumm, stayed for four or five hours and loved it; he said he felt 'spiritually connected,'" Dervin recalls. "We have been making his wine every year since. When there is a new release, Carlos does the final blend with us, creating a dosage to his taste and putting his vibrant personality into it."

In the aftermath of the October 2017 wildfires that devastated so much of Santa Rosa and the surrounding Wine Country, Iron Horse released a special cuvée called Gratitude; \$5 of every bottle sold of the Rosé (based on a freshly disgorged 2012 blend of 76 percent Pinot Noir and 24 percent Chardonnay) was donated to the Redwood Empire Food Bank, which provided food to evacuation centers and shelters for those displaced by the disaster.

The White House served Iron Horse Rainbow Cuvée during the Obama administration at its annual LGBT events celebrating Pride Week in June 2014 and 2015. The winery has also produced a new Summit Cuvée, which honors Santa Rosa's Kevin Jorgensen and Tommy Caldwell who were the first to free-climb El Capitan's Dawn Wall.



This winery has also contributed a large measure to the history of “Champagne diplomacy.” Its sparkling wines have been served for diplomatic events for every U.S. administration from Ronald Reagan through Barack Obama. A visit to Iron Horse’s on-site office reveals walls covered with letters on White House stationery and framed photographs, including one of President Reagan clinking flutes with Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva, Switzerland. Bill and Hillary Clinton also served Iron Horse Demi-Sec to Boris Yeltzen at a White House dinner in 1994. (A thank you note reads that the Russian guests “...enjoyed the sweeter taste.”) Another photo shows Al Gore awaiting the vote count on election night in 1996 with an Iron Horse bottle and poured

glasses on the coffee table. George H.W. and Barbara Bush celebrated their 60th anniversary with Iron Horse sparkling, and it was served at the wedding of Jenna, daughter of George W. and Laura Bush.

Similarly, Schramsberg provided the Blanc de Blancs for President Nixon’s “Toast to Peace” in Beijing with Premier Zhou En-lai in 1972; according to the winery, this was the first time any American wine was served at a state event at home or abroad.

### “The doyenne of sparkling wine”

Domaine Carneros, the French-style chateau high on a knoll above Highway 12 between Sonoma and Napa near the diRosa Center

## MÉTHODE TRADITIONELLE

The Art of Capturing Sparkles & Bubbles

The crafting of this effervescent beverage is steeped in an age-old technique known as *Méthode Traditionelle*. Ludo Derwin, born in the Champagne region of France, honed his skills with the prestigious Champagne houses of Charles Heidsieck and G.H. Mumm. He explains the process:

“The primary varietals we use at Mumm Napa are the classic: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier (and a little bit of Pinot Gris for some blends). Harvest is a joyous celebration that marks the end of the year in the vineyard and the beginning of a new cycle in the cellar.”

When to pick is a vineyard block-by-block decision. Once scheduled, harvesting is done by hand, starting in the early morning hours to keep the grapes (and the workers) cool. It is done in small batches to prevent bruising and oxidation of the fruit.

“Our slow and gentle low-pressure process preserves the juice freshness and finesse. You can taste this delicate quality,” says Derwin. “The first press fraction makes the best juice; we use only the *cuvée* with perfectly balanced sugar, acidity and flavors to handcraft our wines.”

This extracted juice is fermented immediately at cold temperatures in stainless steel tanks. A team, (including the head and assistant winemakers, an enologist, and a viticulturist) blind tastes and ranks 80 to 120 or more different individual base wines. Next, a small amount of extra-fine grain cane sugar and yeast is added to the blend, which goes inside a thick glass bottle and is then sealed for secondary fermentation and aging. This is the step that makes the bubbly. The yeast produces alcohol, flavors and carbon dioxide, but with the bottle sealed, the gas cannot escape and stays dissolved in the wine.

“And *voilà!*” Derwin says. “*Prise de mousse*—we are ‘capturing the sparkle.’ The longer the wine ages, the more delicate the bubbles.”

Traditionally, the process of tilting and rotating the bottle to gradually loosen the yeast sediment and collect it in the bottle’s neck via the force of gravity was done by hand. At Mumm Napa and other larger sparkling wine houses, a *gyropalette* performs the same task automatically on many bottles at the same time.



(Above) Yeast and sugar sediment, before the neck of the bottle is chilled to freeze the yeast plug. (Right) An Iron Horse cork before the pressure changes its shape.

[Photos courtesy of Jennie Orvino]

Smaller wineries like Balletto use outside vendors to perform this service for their *méthode traditionnelle* wine.

Once the yeast has done its work, the deposits collected in the neck must be removed in a process called *disgorgement*. First, the necks of the bottles are dipped into a neck freezer. A small quantity of wine and the yeast is frozen in an ice plug. A machine removes the crown cap and the bottle’s internal pressure ejects the frozen yeast plug with a satisfying plunk, leaving perfectly clear wine in the bottle. Then, a dosage liquor, consisting of reserve wines and pure cane sugar, is added to replace the little amount of wine lost in the disgorging. This is the final moment for the winemaker to add their personality to the wine.

Right after disgorging, the bottles get corked. (The original shape of the cork is a thick cylinder. That distinct mushroom-shape is created by pressure build-up against the internal glass walls of the bottle as the cork struggles to return to its original form.) After corking, the wire is applied and the bottles are put to rest for several months to recuperate from disgorging shock and to allow the dosage liquor to integrate. Most sparkling wines are released at a time they are ready to drink, but they can

for Contemporary Art, is a Wine Country landmark. Its grand staircase rises to an expansive terrace where tastings begin at 10 a.m. under an array of wrought-iron tables with cream-colored umbrellas. Amidst the elegance of a marble-floored salon and formal gardens, the atmosphere is high-spirited and friendly. A flour sack towel on sale in the gift shop reads: "Brunch without bubbly is just a sad breakfast."

Dubbed "the doyenne of sparkling wine," Eileen Crane was selected by the distinguished Taittinger Champagne family in 1987 to build their American branch in the Napa Carneros appellation and be its founding winemaker. This was just three years after Crane had succeeded in building Gloria Ferrer Caves & Vineyards, overseeing the design and construction of the facility as well as developing its line of sparkling wines. She would do the same at Domaine Carneros, and continues as chief executive officer there to this day.

Because her father learned about French and German wines during World War II, Crane's family had something rare in New Jersey in the 1950s—a wine cellar. She had her first taste of wine when she was 8 years old. "We had wine on Sundays; I had my own special glass. Then one day, Dad pulled out a bottle of Champagne. I tasted it and thought, this is for me!"



Eileen Crane, chief executive officer, Domaine Carneros

In her early career, Crane did social work in Venezuela, taught nutrition at the University of Connecticut and attended the Culinary Institute of America. This prepared her to be eventually tapped by Claude Taittinger. "He said, 'We are of Champagne, you are of Carneros. If you try to make an imitation of us, it is not going to be good. It would be like Picasso trying to paint like Renoir—a total failure,'" Crane recalls.

Currently, Domaine Carneros produces 50,000 cases and in the next few years, their wines will be 100 percent estate grown. This puts the winery in rarified company; according to Crane, as there are only about 18 sparkling houses in the U.S. producing a quantity exceeding 5,000 cases.

The style of Domaine Carneros wines reflects Crane's aesthetic and years of experience. "I would describe our sparkling as classic, sophisticated, timeless, understated,"

she says. "Think Audrey Hepburn in a little black dress."

#### From veggies to vines

Amidst all the glamour and tourism promotion in Wine Country, sometimes it's easy to forget that wine production begins with farming, and includes hard labor and accommodating to the vagaries of weather.



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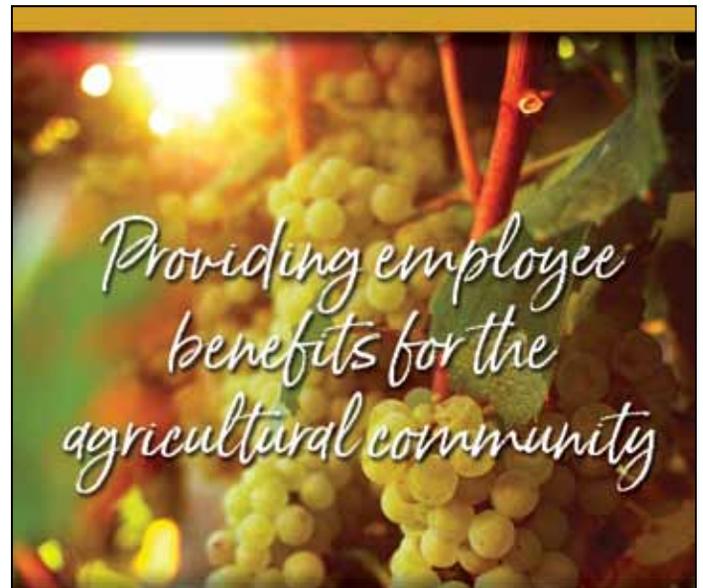
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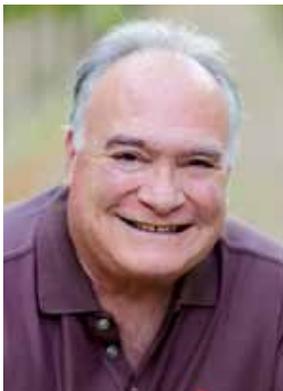


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John Balletto, founder and owner, Balletto Vineyards

John Balletto began farming at the age of 17 after his father's untimely death. Foregoing athletic scholarships and with \$200 in the bank, John and his mother, Hazel, began growing vegetables on five acres. The Balletto family expanded the business to 700 acres of more than 70 different vegetables, over a 25-year timeframe. Then came a change of circumstance—El Niño storms, floods, drought and economic hardships caused by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Encouraged

by friend and neighboring farmer Warren Dutton of Dutton Ranch, John and his wife, Terri, decided to convert the vegetable acreage into estate vineyards. In 2001, they created their first vintage of Balletto Vineyards wines from Russian River Valley. From the very first, they saved the top 10 percent of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes for their own label. Today, they make 20,000 to 25,000 cases of wine per season, and sell the remaining fruit to more than 30 other wineries.

Balletto Vineyards currently offers only one bubbly—a golden-hued, peach-shade of pink Brut Rosé. (The 2013 vintage was awarded 90 points by *Wine Spectator*.) But what this family-owned winery has in common with some of the larger sparkling wine houses is a commitment to stewardship of the land, responsible development and engagement with the community.

Says Balletto, "We're proud to be part of a county that is committed to becoming the first 100 percent sustainable wine region in the nation by 2019." To that end, Balletto's vineyard managers sample soil and water and closely monitor their properties to minimize the amount of fertilizer and other inputs, use natural pest control, compost the grape pomace, plant seasonal cover crops, and more. Solar panels supply 25 percent of the energy needs of the winery. Since 2010, Balletto has been third-party certified by the LODI Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing, California's original sustainable viticulture program.

Balletto says the winery donates to more than 600 organizations each year, and employs around 60 people, many of them long-term. Balletto also provides single-family houses for many long-term worker families and supplies housing for 50 individual workers.

"We keep investing in more housing, as does agriculture as a whole. I don't know any other industry in this county, or the state, that does more to help alleviate the crisis in housing," Balletto says. "Our business is an extension of our family and we believe in treating everyone who interacts with us on any level as family. We feel blessed to grow grapes and make wine in Sonoma County. It's a very special spot." ■

# POPPING THE CORK 101

## How to Open a Bottle of Bubbly

1. Remove the foil but leave the cage on the cork.
2. Keeping one thumb over the top of the hood to prevent the cork from moving, untwist the wire.
3. Wrap one palm around the cork with a secure grip, and with your other hand, twist the bottle. Twisting the bottle instead of the cork leads to an easy opening, and yields the satisfying "pop."

For some added dramatic flare, consider using a sparkling wine saber. Found in many winery gift shops, these knives range from \$80 to \$225 (and can be personally engraved) and sport 15 to 17 inch stainless steel blades. Learn more about the art of sabrage at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

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