

Entertainment

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Add some sparkle to your Valentine's Day

By Pamela S. Busch

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Be sure to read the label when choosing a sparkling wine. Getty Images **SAN FRANCISCO** – My Valentine's Day gift to all of you this year is advice on how to pick a good sparkling wine.

First, look at the label. Some of you are probably thinking, "Pamela is telling people to buy a wine based on its label!" No, I'm asking you to read the label so you can find out where the wine comes from.

You might be surprised how many people buy sparkling wine believing it is Champagne and are often disappointed that the quality of the wine did not match the mighty price tag. Know what you are buying.

As a rule, California and Australian sparkling wines have more fruit than sparkling wines made in Europe (though this does not mean they are sweeter). There is an easy way of determining if a sparkling wine is dry or sweet. The term "brut" is applied to sparkling wines from all, and it indicates that the wine is dry. "Brut nature" means that the wine is completely dry. "Extra dry," contrary to what seems obvious, is actually not as dry as "brut." Then there are demi-secs that are somewhat sweet and are often paired with desserts and cheese.

Blanc de blancs means that only white grapes are used and Blanc de noirs means only red grapes. In

the United States and France, most Blanc de noirs are largely made from pinot noir and, contrary to still wines made from this grape, tend to produce richer sparkling wines than white grapes. Blanc de Blancs Champagnes and many California sparklers often have a more apple-like quality.

Vintage Champagnes and sparkling wines are usually more complex but they also cost more. I would take a non-vintage sparkling wine from a good producer over a vintage sparkling wine from a mediocre producer any day.

If you are not familiar with a wine, you can't really guess its quality. Never be afraid to ask a sommelier or salesperson for assistance — they are being paid to help you. Don't just ask what she likes, but let her know what you are looking for, such as a dry, full-bodied sparkling wine that cost less than \$50.

Find someone with a palate you can trust and ask for suggestions. If you find that the Wine Spectator has always pointed you in the right direction, use its reviews as a guide. If you've always hated what it has recommended, use it as a reverse guide. Remember, everyone has different taste.

Top picks

Here are a few selections I'm digging now:

- Gruet Blanc de Noirs, NV (Engle, New Mexico): \$13.5
- Gramona Cava Gran Cuvee, 2004 (Penedes, Spain): \$20
- Il Faggeto Prosecco Valdobbiadene, NV (Veneto, Italy): \$22
- Gloria Ferrer Brut, Royal Cuvee, 2001 (Carneros, California): \$25
- Jacquesson Brut, Cuvee 732, NV (Champagne, France): \$50
- Bollinger Special Cuvee, NV (Champagne, France): \$50

One more wine

2008 Hagafen Sauvignon Blanc

This, lively, dry kosher wine hasn't given up a molecule of its fruit in the flash-pasteurization process. It's an intensely flavored, mouth-filling wine with hints of pineapple, grapefruit, lime and herbs. Kudos to Hagafen, which continues to produce wines with interfaith appeal, for getting this wine into the market while it's at the peak of its freshness.

Retail price: \$18

--The Baltimore Sun

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