



Poetry in Motion

By Bill Stephens

Bubbles. Tiny bubbles. Lots and lots of tiny bubbles. Captive for years... indiscernible... invisible... waiting... interminably waiting. Then, an explosion of joy, of madness and motion, of urgent rushing, surging hedonistically toward freedom ...toward fruition ...emerging into silver rivulets streaming stylishly toward the surface. Always controlled, never hurried, each bubble greets the surface and gently adds its measure to the history of Champagne and the joy of man.

And what a history it is, dating back to a time when someone accidentally closed a fermenting wine jar too tightly, and, upon opening it, unable to wait for the bubbles to subside, drank it, bubbles and all. This one unthinking act can today cost the modern-day reveler as much as \$100 a bottle for a stellar celebration.

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Intrepid as the curiosity of man remains under the most mundane situations, where pleasure is concerned, the quest for perfection can reach prodigious proportions. So it was with Champagne. Not satisfied with a murky, bubbly wine made of random grapes, there was a ceaseless striving to get bubbles into wine.

The results were mixed until the last quarter of the 17th Century when Dom Perignon, the blind winemaker of the Abbey of Hautvilliers, made the three most significant discoveries in Champagne history:

The first being that bubbles in wine need not come from the first fermentation of the grapes. A cleaner wine could be made by racking the still wine (*cuvée*) off of the yeast, and then inducing a second fermentation, after bottling, by adding more sugar.

Even more importantly, he discovered that a careful selection of still wines could be blended into the *cuvée* producing a quality superior to any of its component parts.

Add to this the discovery of the first efficient method of sealing a bottle to hold in the bubbles, forcing them to dissolve into the wine, and you can see why Dom Perignon is the namesake for one of today's most costly luxury Champagnes. The Dom's method? The same used today on all premium sparkling wines, an over-sized cork with a wire retainer.

The only improvements left to those who followed in his footsteps was the development of a bottle that would withhold the pressure of the

bubbles without breaking, and a way to clean up the sediment the yeast left in that bottle after the second fermentation. This turned out to be fairly straightforward, also. Madame Veuve Clicquot simply invented the "pupitre," a rack that held the bottles on a varying slant, neck down, and by periodic riddling (gentle shaking) the solid matter in the bottle would collect in the neck. The process was dubbed "remuage."

The neck was then frozen in an iced brine, and the temporary cork removed, allowing the frozen plug of wine to disgorge. The varying degrees of sweetness in Champagne are achieved by adding cane sugar before recorking the bottle for the last time.

This method of making sparkling wine is still used today after hundreds of years, and is named after the area in which it was developed — *Méthode Champenoise* (Champagne method).

Sound complicated and expensive? You bet! For these reasons, others have scurried around for years trying to find a cheaper method to put bubbles into wine. The most common of these is the bulk process, a technique developed by Eugene Charmat in the early part of this century, whereby the *cuvée* goes through its second fermentation in a tank under pressure and, after the wine is filtered and the appropriate dosage is added, it is drawn off the top and bottled.

How can you tell by which method your sparkling wine is made? Easy — you read the label; it will say "Bulk Process" or "Charmat Process." Easier than this, even, is to look at

the price tag, and it will usually be no more than \$5 per bottle.

For what are bulk process sparkling wines useful? For launching inexpensive ships, and for celebrating your mother-in-law's birthday! Other than this, they are of little interest in a serious discussion of sparkling wines, with the exception of some *Spumante* wines from the Italian village of Asti. Over the past few years, however, bulk process sparklers produced in countries such as Germany, Spain, Italy, France and even the United States have steadily improved in quality and are perfectly acceptable wines for entertaining at large holiday get-togethers where budget is a factor.

Of more importance to those of us who partake of the bubbly with more than a casual interest, are the incredible technical advancements which have brought *méthode champenoise* sparkling wines within the reach of the common man's pocketbook. If one has even a passing interest in things mechanical, absolutely do not pass up a visit to a modern sparkling wine producer. It will amaze and delight.

The old, tedious, time-consuming tasks are now performed by machines in a fashion calculated to eliminate expensive hand labor. Combine these mechanical marvels with a low labor rate like that of Spain, and you can come close to marketing a traditional *méthode champenoise* for about \$2 per bottle above the bulk-process sparklers. California *méthode champenoise* sparklers sell somewhat higher, anywhere between \$9 and

\$25 per bottle. Most French Champagnes will be above that price level.

Another phenomenon in the sparkling wine market is "The Great California Champagne Rush." Locked into production quotas by France's Champagne Control District, French Champagne producers looking for increased sales have established production facilities in California. Close behind are the Spanish.

But whether or not you prefer Champagne from France, Cava from Spain, *Spumante* from Italy, *Sekt* from Germany, sparkling wine from American-owned sources, or sparklers produced in the U.S. by European owners, don't make something complicated out of Champagne and sparkling wine. They are for pleasure. For laughter. They lift our eyes from today's travail to tomorrow's triumphs.

They are as appropriate for special occasions as they are for a lift on a dreary day, for a good meal, or for a good friend. They rejoice at our birth, celebrate our successes, exult our victories, and commemorate every happy event of our lives.



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