

# BUBBLING OVER



★  
Domestic  
sparkling  
wines raise  
the bar on  
quality and  
value

BY TIM FISH

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
JEFF HARRIS

Champagne might be sparkling wine, but not all sparkling wine is Champagne. Americans increasingly understand this distinction, now that the quality and popularity of domestic bubbly is on the rise. The awareness that there are plenty of delicious sparklers on the market that don't carry the name "Champagne" (which can only be used for wines from that particular region

of France) is a clear sign of the progress U.S. producers have made in recent years.

Even so, many consumers can still find the semantics of sparkling wine confounding, with labels using designations such as blanc de blancs or blanc de noirs, brut or extra brut, rosé or extra dry. How are drinkers, especially newcomers, to distinguish the differences



J Vineyards winemaker Nicole Hitchcock sources a range of vineyards across Sonoma's Russian River Valley to make the winery's diverse lineup of outstanding bubbliies.

between these categories? It doesn't help that every sparkling wine producer has its own house style, so not all bruts or blancs de blancs are created equal.

This is my takeaway after reviewing nearly 100 U.S. sparkling wines in blind tastings at our Napa office since my previous report ("Pushing the Boundaries," Dec. 31, 2021). More than half of the wines under review earned outstanding scores of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. That means there are plenty of excellent bubbliies on the market for seasonal celebrations, including a number of great values.

Because my tastings covered an eclectic collection from California, Oregon, Washington and beyond, I was inspired to talk with two winemakers to better understand sparkling wine categories in the context of house style. Nicole Hitchcock of J Vineyards and Tamra Lotz of Mumm Napa, who both scored a number of top bubbliies this year, offered perceptive insights.

At J, Hitchcock made eight wines rated 90-plus this year, led by the J Blanc de Blancs Russian River Valley 2015 (93 points, \$80), which is vibrant and elegantly rich, with Meyer lemon, orange blossom and blanched almond flavors. Of the three outstanding wines Lotz made at Mumm Napa, the top-scorer is the DVX Napa Valley 2014 (94, \$70), which has a proprietary name, DVX, in honor of



**"We're trying to capture the essence of a place. And we can't do that if we try to emulate another region that's famous for sparkling wine."**

**NICOLE HITCHCOCK**

the winery's founder, Guy Devaux, though it is technically a brut. The DVX brilliantly marries bright California fruit with Old World tension and structure.

Since both Hitchcock and Lotz produce a range of sparkling wines each year, I started by asking how they distinguish the different wines they make—brut versus blanc de blancs, for example—while remaining true to their respective house styles. The categories, you have to remember, are as much technical as stylistic. The most widely used term is brut, which is generally dry to the taste and includes a blend of red and white grapes, typically Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Slightly sweeter

than brut is extra dry, which also includes a blend of grapes.

Blanc de blancs is made only from Chardonnay, while blanc de noirs is fermented from red varieties such as Pinot Noir. The *dosage*, or level of sweetness, varies, but bottlings of blanc de noirs are typically more full-bodied and opulent, while blancs de blancs are often steely and crisp. Those qualities are derived from the character of the grapes. "That's what sets the personality of the two wines apart," Lotz says. "Blanc de blancs has the bright acidity and elegance you find in Chardonnay." And yet, Hitchcock adds, "It's important for each of the wines to have their own expression beyond the varietal aspect."

Producers of sparkling wine harvest earlier than those making still wine, since a high level of acidity is crucial for bubbly. Because of this, it might seem as if the source of the grapes would be less important when full, physiological ripeness is not the goal. Au contraire. Quality is all in the details. Lotz harvests red grapes for the winery's blanc de noirs from vineyards in Napa's Oak Knoll District, while the Chardonnay for the blanc de blancs comes from the cooler Carneros region.

Hitchcock works with various *terroirs* across a wide range of vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley. "I'm looking for diversity for my blending options," she says. "My approach is to use a broad



palette of different base wines.” She is also using more Pinot Meunier, a kin to Pinot Noir, to add layers and detail.

The cellar is another place to etch out the differences among the wines while still maintaining the house style. Stainless steel fermentation is standard for sparkling wines, since it’s the best method for preserving the freshness of the fruit and acidity. Non-vintage brut rarely sees oak, but a portion of many luxury cuvées spend time in French oak barrels and casks, typically neutral. About 10% of the 2014 DVX, for example, was aged in older oak.

How long a wine ages in the bottle is also critical to the style, as is the *dosage*. Once bottled, the wine goes through a second fermentation that creates the bubbles. Then it ages on the yeast for two to seven years or longer, a process that imparts layers of complexity, including nutty, spicy elements as well as aspects of brioche. When the yeast sediment is removed, a small amount of sweetened liquid is added before the final cork. That helps balance the bracing acidity. Often an aged still wine will be part of the cuvée to add depth and personality.



Schramsberg owners Hugh and Monique Davies oversee one of California’s most successful producers of sparkling wine, turning out 15 bottlings at 90-plus points this year, including a handful of top-scorers.

**B**eyond Mumm Napa and J, there are a number of delicious sparklers to seek out for the holidays. Leading the pack is the Iron Horse Brut Green Valley of Russian River Valley LD 2013 (95, \$125), a boldly expressive late-disgorged bottling with brioche, roasted hazelnut and lemon tart flavors that soar on the long finish. The Domaine Carneros Blanc de Blancs Carneros Le Rêve

2014 (94, \$120) is dynamic and sumptuous, balancing vibrant acidity with a luxurious array of Asian pear, lemon and brioche flavors. Schramsberg’s decadent J. Schram Blancs North Coast 2013 (94, \$130) offers detailed baked apple, fresh ginger and graham cracker



The property of Domaine Carneros was inspired by the historic chateau of its founder, France’s Champagne Taittinger, which established this leading bubbly estate in the 1980s.



accents, while Roederer Estate's vibrant Brut Anderson Valley L'Ermitage 2015 (94, \$68) is classically styled, with notes of baked apple, roasted hazelnut, clove and nutmeg.

The prices for the top sparklers reserve them for special occasions, but there are bargains to be had, whether you're stocking up for a party or feel like opening a bottle on a Tuesday night. One of the best options comes from Washington: the Domaine Ste. Michelle Brut Columbia Valley NV (89), which is a steal at \$13, showing stylish baked apple and lemon verbena accents that finish with a snappy hint of sweetness.

From California, Paula Kornell's Brut California NV (89, \$22) is appealing for its fresh apple, raspberry and spice flavors, while Scharffenberger's Brut Mendocino County Excellence (89, \$23) is lively with spritzly pear, lemon and spice accents. Others to look

for include Domaine Chandon's creamy Brut California NV (89, \$25), offering lively apple and yeast roll flavors, and Piper Sonoma's steely and refreshing Blanc de Blancs Sonoma County NV (88, \$22), with notes of green apple and kiwifruit.

I have been reviewing California sparkling wines for *Wine Spectator* for nearly 20 years and their quality continues to excel. The non-vintage bruts are better values than ever, while the tête de cuvées can compete with their peers from France. Not that Golden State winemakers are trying to recreate Champagne; that time has passed. "We're trying to capture the essence of a place," says Hitchcock. "And we can't do that if we try to emulate another region that's famous for sparkling wine."

Senior editor Tim Fish is *Wine Spectator's* lead taster on U.S. sparkling wines.

## Tim Fish's Recommended U.S. Sparkling Wines

Nearly 100 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/SparklingAlpha123122](https://www.winespectator.com/SparklingAlpha123122). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

### TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>IRON HORSE</b> Brut Green Valley of Russian River Valley LD 2013	95	\$125
Boldly expressive aromas of brioche, roasted hazelnut and lemon tart open to rich, decadent apple pie flavors, laced with baking spices.		
<b>DOMAINE CARNEROS</b> Blanc de Blancs Carneros Le Rêve 2014	94	\$120
A sumptuous bubbly, balancing vibrant acidity with a luxurious array of Asian pear, lemon, brioche and roasted hazelnut flavors.		
<b>IRON HORSE</b> Wedding Cuvée Green Valley of Russian River Valley 2018	94	\$56
This beautiful bubbly is stately yet festive, with effusive raspberry and zesty lemon flavors accented by graham cracker and ginger.		
<b>ROEDERER ESTATE</b> Brut Anderson Valley L'Ermitage 2015	94	\$68
Classically styled and expressively vibrant, this bubbly opens to notes of baked apple, roasted hazelnut, clove, nutmeg and other spices.		
<b>ROEDERER ESTATE</b> Brut Rosé Anderson Valley L'Ermitage 2013	94	\$100
Graceful and vibrant, with detailed strawberry, quince and cinnamon flavors that expand and take on richness on the long, crisp finish.		
<b>SCHRAMSBERG</b> Blanc de Blancs Green Valley of Russian River Valley 2016	94	\$95
This full-bodied sparkler is rich with brioche and spice aromas that show ginger, orange blossom and Asian pear hints on the finish.		
<b>SCHRAMSBERG</b> Brut Blanc de Noirs North Coast Late Disgorged 2010	94	\$110
This wine's rich maturity is highlighted by steely acidity, with strawberry and cherry flavors accented by brioche, roasted nuts and cinnamon.		
<b>ARGYLE</b> Brut Rosé Willamette Valley 2018	93	\$30
Delicate and refreshing, with layered strawberry, blood orange and spicy yeast accents that gather richness and polish on the finish.		
<b>DOMAINE CHANDON</b> Brut Carneros étoile NV	93	\$58
Elegant and precise, with fresh acidity highlighting the rich Asian pear and Meyer lemon flavors, accented by toasted almond and ginger.		

### TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>J</b> Brut Russian River Valley Late Disgorged 2013	93	\$110
Richly multilayered, showing both maturity and freshness, this version is filled with baked apple, yeast roll and spiced nut flavors.		
<b>MUMM NAPA</b> Rosé Napa Valley DVX 2016	93	\$80
A dynamic sparkler, this is steely and sleek up front, with strawberry, nectarine and ginger hints that fan out on the vibrant finish.		
TOP VALUES		
WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>MUMM NAPA</b> Brut Napa County Prestige NV	90	\$24
Delicate in style yet plush, with pretty cherry, lemon verbena and yeast roll flavors that linger on the supple, refreshing finish.		
<b>DOMAINE CHANDON</b> Brut California NV	89	\$25
This creamy version is loaded with lively apple, yeast roll and spice flavors that linger on the plush finish.		
<b>DOMAINE STE. MICHELLE</b> Brut Columbia Valley NV	89	\$13
This bubbly is stylish and appealing, with baked apple, pear and lemon verbena accents that finish with a snappy hint of sweetness.		
<b>DOMAINE STE. MICHELLE</b> Luxe Columbia Valley 2017	89	\$20
Rich and fruit-forward, with lively baked apple and toasty spice flavors that finish on a clean, crisp note.		
<b>PAULA KORNELL</b> Brut California NV	89	\$22
Appealing for its fresh apple and raspberry flavors, which are accented by brioche and spice.		
<b>SCHARFFENBERGER</b> Brut Mendocino County Excellence NV	89	\$23
A lively sparkler, crisp and spritzly, with easygoing pear, lemon and creamy spice flavors.		
<b>PIPER SONOMA</b> Blanc de Blancs Sonoma County NV	88	\$22
Steely and refreshing, with green apple and kiwifruit flavors.		
<b>PIPER SONOMA</b> Brut Rosé Sonoma County NV	88	\$22
Crisp and steely, with fresh strawberry and red apple flavors.		