

December 22, 2008

The Sommelier Says....

Hello and welcome to the newsletter for <http://www.wine-sommelier.com/>

Happy Holidays and Happy New Year! 2009 is right around the corner and a perfect time to party with your friends and break out some nice wines. And what wine is used to celebrate the New Year? Champagne!

Champagne

Champagne is a sparkling wine produced by inducing the in-bottle secondary fermentation of wine to effect carbonation. It is produced exclusively within the Champagne region of France, from which it takes its name. While the term "champagne" is used by some makers of sparkling wine in other parts of the world, numerous countries limit the use of the term to only those wines that come from the Champagne appellation. Within the United States the term, Sparkling Wine is used.

Wines from the Champagne region were known before medieval times. Churches owned vineyards and monks produced wine for use in the sacrament of Eucharist. French kings were traditionally anointed in Reims and champagne wine was served as part of coronation festivities

Kings appreciated the still, light, and crisp wine, and offered it as homage to other monarchs in Europe. In the 17th century, still wines of Champagne were the wines for celebration in European countries. The English were the biggest consumers of Champagne wines.

Although the French monk Dom Perignon (1638-1715) did not invent champagne, it is true he developed many advances in the production of this beverage, including holding the cork in place with a wire collar to withstand the fermentation pressure. In France, the first sparkling Champagne was created accidentally; its pressure led it to be called "the devil's wine" (*le vin du diable*) as bottles exploded or the cork jolted away. Even when it was deliberately produced as a sparkling wine, Champagne was for a very long time made by the *méthode rurale*, where the wine was bottled before the only fermentation had finished.

Méthode Champenoise is the traditional method by which Champagne is produced. After primary fermentation and bottling, a second alcoholic fermentation occurs in the bottle. Adding several grams of yeast and several grams of rock sugar induces this second fermentation. According to the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée a minimum of 1.5 years is required to completely develop the entire flavor.

After ageing, the bottle is manipulated, either manually or mechanically, in a process called riddling, so that the lees settle in the neck of the bottle. After chilling the bottles, the neck is frozen, and the cap removed. The pressure in the bottle forces out the ice containing the lees, and the bottle is quickly corked to maintain the carbon dioxide in solution. Some syrup is added to maintain the level within the bottle. The process described above is the industrial one, the manual one is in fact no more used, it relied on the skills of the wine maker able to get rid of the lees that had accumulated just under the cap with as little wine as possible.

Most Champagnes are made from a blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, for example 60%/40%. Blanc de blanc ("white from white") Champagnes are made from 100% Chardonnay.

Opening a Bottle of Champagne!

To reduce the risk of spilling Champagne and/or turning the cork into a dangerous projectile, a Champagne bottle can be opened by holding the cork and rotating the bottle (rather than the cork). I hold a towel over the end of the bottle, grasping the cork through the towel. By using a 45 degree angle, the surface of the champagne has the maximum surface area, thus minimizing the excessive bubbling. The cork can ease out with a sigh or a whisper rather than a *pop*. The flavor will be largely the same, irrespective of the method used, but the volume left in the bottle will differ. The whispering noise made while opening the bottle is sometimes named "*le soupir amoureux*" (loving whisper).

The proper serving temperature for Champagne is between 43 and 48 degrees F; a helpful hint is that your home refrigerator is usually set to about 46 degrees, perfect for your bubbly! If you have any questions on what the temperature is of your wines you can also get the winegeek tool I always use....

<http://www.wineenthusiast.com/nuvo-vino-infrared-wine-thermometer.asp>

Restaurants/Wine Shops and Ratings... oh my!

I've been involved with both restaurants and retail wine shops in my career as a Sommelier, and I've enjoyed every second of each opportunity.

The curious thing is how different these businesses can be, beginning with how they sell wine. As a consumer, I've often taken advantage of the services offered in the retail stores that specialize in wine (as opposed to just picking up whatever's on sale in the nearest supermarket or discount warehouse). Go into a specialty wine shop and tell them you're thinking of smoked salmon, crème fraiche, and caviar, ask for a \$35 Champagne that you can use to ply your sweetheart tonight, and the best possible bottle is placed in your hands in a matter of seconds. They live for these moments.

In retail, however, even the most sophisticated merchants still base their selection and marketing on the almighty 100-point scale. This is not necessarily a

bad thing—especially since, as many retailers will tell you, it is the consumers, not they, who give credence to the major critics and their ratings. Retailers who don't sell by scores cannot compete effectively with those who do.

But are they serving their customers' best interests? Never mind whether the quality of the wine can truly be measured by numbers. The real problem, as the retailers themselves would admit, is that no one should rely on the opinions of a few writers to determine their tastes. If the more enlightened retailers know this, why do most of them voluntarily choose to depend on scores to prescribe what their customers should buy?

You won't find many point scores on restaurant wine lists, but retailers can be just as put off by the way wine is sold in restaurants. I'll never forget what one manager of a highly successful retail store in Southern California once told me: "Most sommeliers are idiots. They don't know their stuff, and their markups are ripoffs. All this is beyond me—no wonder the restaurant business has gone to hell!"

I have to admit that many sommeliers are, indeed, self-possessed. The worst (a definite minority) are more concerned about bolstering their own egos and commissioned sales than showing their guests a good time. Regarding markups, however, what is our excuse? Why are restaurant wine prices typically so much higher than retail prices?

It's true that in the average restaurant, wines are marked up at least twice as much as in the average retail store. But remember this: the 2 pounds of chicken you buy in a supermarket might cost you \$3; in a restaurant, you expect a 2-pound serving of chicken to cost \$10-18—about four times the grocery-store price.

Look around your average 100-seat, fine-dining restaurant, and you see a maitre d' and two hostesses or hosts at the door, six waiters backed up by three assistants, a bartender and a barback, a dishwasher, two valets, and five or six cooks in the kitchen. Stroll into your average retail wine store and you see, at the most, one cashier, one manager, maybe a salesperson, and a stocker or two.

Purchase a wine in a retail store, and you're certainly not going to get an army of servers and chefs, a designer chair, a white tablecloth, crisply folded napkins, fresh flowers, hand-polished silverware and stemware, and dishwashers to clean up after you. Considering the cost of all this, it's a wonder that the finest restaurants—the ones with the bone china, Riedel glasses, celebrity chefs, and decorated sommeliers—don't mark their wines up 10 times.

It has also been claimed that wine consumption remains relatively low in the United States in comparison to other countries because of the intimidating atmosphere of our restaurants—which is where most Americans first learn to

appreciate the beauty of wine with a meal. Be that as it may, I can't say that I haven't been just as intimidated in specialty retail stores as I have in upscale restaurants. Face it: both wine retailers and restaurateurs work hard at their craft, but it's not the nature of their businesses that determines consumer-friendliness, it's the nature of the individuals who operate them.

In fact, there's room for improvement all around. Although I believe that specialty wine merchants in general could be more friendly and service-oriented, I also wish that restaurant markups were kinder, servers better trained, sommeliers less anal, and wine lists more informative, less predictable, and more food-focused. None of which, for the sake of the thirsty consumers we all serve, should be too much to ask.

Sonoma Barrel Tasting Weekend

Mark March 7/8 on your calendars... it will be time for the annual Sonoma Barrel Tasting weekend! This will be the 31st year of Barrel Tasting! Over 100 wineries in the Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River Valleys throw open their cellar doors for you to sample wine from the barrel, purchase futures, meet winemakers and sample current release wines. Must be 21 years of age or older to attend event; kindly leave pets and underage children at home. All details available at <http://www.wineroad.com/>

My plans are flying up to Oakland Saturday morning, driving to Sonoma and having a hotel in the area (Santa Rosa) for the weekend. We come home on Sunday night. Some of you might decide to drive up to Sonoma, but remember we are drinking all day Sunday too.

Southwest Airlines has 'wanna get away' fares that I recently priced at about \$375 roundtrip for a couple. Plus the hotel in [Courtyard Santa Rosa](#) 175 Railroad Street Santa Rosa, CA 95401 is \$150 a night. ***(I have already booked mine).***

Cheers-

Tim

If you would like to be removed from this list, please reply to me at tim@wine-sommelier.com and request removal from this list.