

Bubbly That Won't Bust Your Budget

Written by Bill Citara -- BT Contributor
December 2012

Red, white, and you: Agreeable wine for \$12 or less

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Imagine, if you would, the sad state of a world without bubbly.

Celebrations would be puny and joyless, as flat as a Nebraska cornfield. Champagne would be just another anonymous region in France; Kendall on the Marne. Dom Perignon would not be a revered figure who once “drank stars” but a weird old guy in a dirty brown robe. Newlyweds, World Series champions, rappers with more money than taste, and Bond, James Bond, would be SOL.

And the New Year would be rung in with something horrible. Like Pinot Grigio. Or water.

All this is very, very bad.

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In a world lousy with war, poverty, recession, layoffs, foreclosures, and Honey Boo Boo, we need all the bright, lively, celebratory bubbles we can get, whether in Champagne, cava, prosecco, sekt, or sparkling wine. So for that reason -- plus we just really like the stuff -- VINO once again presents this helpful roster of affordable bubbles. If the world is going to hell in a handbasket, we can at least drink a toast on the way down.

Of course, it would be nice to drink it with Champagne -- real Champagne, which is to say, sparkling wine produced from grapes grown on the approximately 85,000 acres of vineyards in the Champagne region of France. There are other legal requirements, too, about varietals, growing, and winemaking practices, but you get the idea.

Fortunately for quality (unfortunately for our budgets), those limitations make true Champagne a pricy special occasion splurge. Sparklers made beyond the borders of Champagne, however, offer much of the same fresh, bright acidity, crisp bubbles, and intriguing minerality of their more expensive and exclusive counterparts.

Saint-Reine's NV Brut is a stellar example and, at a mere \$11.99, an exemplary value. This is the whole package: fine, abundant, pinpoint bubbles; lovely aromas of ripe peaches and citrus and intriguing herbal nuances; flavors of oranges and lemons, with a clean, crisp, refreshing acidity. If you buy anything from this month's tasting, it should be the Saint-Reine.

I wasn't quite as enthusiastic about the **Depreville NV Brut**. Though displaying the requisite taut, citrus-green apple fruit, nutty-toasty aromas, and bracing mineral undercurrent, its bubbles faded quickly, the lemon-grapefruit profile seemed unnecessarily harsh, and there was a faint bitterness on the finish.

On the other hand, I've long been enthusiastic about the quality of Spanish cava, especially given its generally wallet-friendly price. Sadly, this batch of Spanish sparklers was something of a disappointment. Let's get the **NV Berberana Cava Rosé Brut** out of the way first. Please. It's a pretty pale rose color with aromas of rose petal, red apple, and toast, but on the palate it's a mouthful of tart, soapy, sour bubblegum yuckiness.

The best parts of the **Rondel NV Cava Brut** are its cool royal blue bottle and pleasantly nutty, red apple aromas. At first, it too tastes soapy and bitter, but after a few minutes it mellows out

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and delivers an acceptable but undistinguished blast of citrus.

As for homegrown bubbly, there's not much that fits under our \$12 price ceiling, and much of what does is probably better suited to flushing your car's radiator or scrubbing out tough fabric stains than, you know. . . drinking.

Like the **NV Barefoot Bubbly Brut** from California, one of two wines in the tasting not made in the preferred methode champenoise (fermented in the bottle), but by the less desirable bulk or charmat process (fermented in stainless steel tanks and then bottled). I don't want to say the Barefoot tastes like old socks, so I'll just say it's not very good. There are plenty of better choices for \$10. Beer, even.

Better and cheaper is the **Chateau Ste. Michelle NV Brut**. This Washington State product shows off fuller, riper fruit than its European competitors -- citrus, green apple, a little pear -- as well as hints of herbs and minerals that give it a bit of richness and complexity.

An Italian sparkler, the **Tosca NV Prosecco Brut**, hits much the same flavor profile. Though prosecco is typically made by the charmat process, this wine has the freshness and fruitiness the Barefoot wine lacks. Not a lot of complexity here, but the Tosca does deliver a mouth-filling blend of smoky-toasty flavors combined with citrus, peach, and red apple.

It's not Dom Perignon, but it's better than a world without bubbly.

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