

TASTING REPORTS

Pop Culture

U.S. sparkling wine houses offer delicious bubbly for the holidays



By Tim Fish

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Celebration has been a tough sell in 2020, but America's sparkling wine producers are thinking positive in the final months of the year, always the peak season for bubbly. "We're learning to pivot," says Joy Sterling, CEO of Iron Horse Vineyards in Sonoma County. "You just have to be nimble. The independent retailers and high-end groceries have been a saving grace."

In this era of social distancing and sheltering in place, wine sales have been in flux. The good news is that retail sales for domestic sparkling wine are up 8.9% for the year ending Sept. 5, according to market research firm Nielsen. On-premise sales tell a different story. This is a crucial market for domestic producers, who enjoy robust sales via by-the-glass programs at restaurants and wine bars.

“The on-premise business vanished pretty much overnight,” says Xavier Barlier, senior vice president of marketing and communication for Maisons Marques & Domaines USA, which includes Roederer Estate in Anderson Valley. “We all remember the hangover for sparkling wine after the millennium. We all remember what happened in 2008, but this is unprecedented.”

The fact that 2019 was a banner year for sales only adds salt to the wound. Champagne has also suffered, with sales down 35% for the year ending in July, according to the Union des Maisons de Champagne.

What’s a sparkling wine lover to do? Let the bubbly flow this holiday season, of course. To that end, I have reviewed nearly 100 sparkling wines in blind tastings at our Napa office since my previous report (“[United States of Bubbly](#),” Dec. 31, 2019). The wines hail from California, Oregon, Washington and New Mexico, with more than half of them earning outstanding scores of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator’s* 100-point scale.

With retail prices that range from \$14 to \$160, domestic sparkling wines offer both quality and value. One of the year’s best values is a California wine with a French pedigree—the historic Champagne house Louis Pommery, which launched a U.S. program a few vintages back. Its Brut California NV (90 points, \$21), made with 95% Chardonnay, is a steely and vibrant example, offering fresh lime, kiwifruit and blanched almond flavors. Also worth seeking out is the Paula Kornell Brut California NV (90, \$22), a fitting tribute to Paula’s father, Hanns Kornell, who was a pioneer of California sparkling wine.

This year's best buys also include familiar labels such as Domaine Chandon, whose easygoing Brut California NV (89, \$19) is a delight to sip, and Korbel, whose Brut California Organic Grapes 2017 (89, \$16) continues to impress with excellent quality at a bargain price.

Finally, from the well-known Gruet in New Mexico, there's the Blanc de Blancs American NV (88, \$19), a brisk and refreshing bubbly.

As for this year's top sparkling wines, Roederer Estate continues its winning streak. The Mendocino-based winery's Brut Anderson Valley L'Ermitage 2012 was the No. 5 wine of Wine Spectator's Top 100 of 2019. This year the Roederer Estate Brut Rosé Anderson Valley L'Ermitage 2012 (95, \$75) is effusive with blood orange and lemon peel flavors that show hints of marzipan.

The Domaine Carneros Blanc de Blancs Carneros Le Rêve is consistently among California's top sparkling wines, and the 2013 (94, \$120) continues the tradition established by founding winemaker Eileen Crane, who retired this year. This Chardonnay-based tête de cuvée is luxurious yet structured, with aromas of roasted hazelnut, fresh ginger and cinnamon roll.

Two other California producers frequent the list of top wines. The Mumm Napa DVX Napa Valley 2012 (94, \$70) is a 50-50 blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay that's 40% barrel-aged in older French oak. Impeccably focused and structured, this wine offers distinctive lemon verbena and strawberry accents that show a whiff of rubber. Hugh Davies and his crew at Schramsberg also remain at the top of their game with the refined Schramsberg Rosé North Coast J. Schram 2011 (94, \$160), which offers extravagant aromas of strawberry, Asian pear and cinnamon brioche.

A new player with an impressive release is Oregon's Gran Moraine, a project from Jackson Family Wines. The Brut Rosé Yamhill-Carlton NV (94, \$50) is that rare domestic rosé that captures the vibrant acidity of Champagne, with delicate strawberry and raspberry flavors laced with steely minerality. Among quality leaders in Oregon, Gran Moraine joins stalwart Argyle, whose Brut Dundee Hills Knudsen Vineyard 2016 (93, \$50) and Brut Willamette Valley Extended Tirage Master Series 2009 (93, \$80) are both rich, crisp and luscious.

Iron Horse also offers excellent wines in what has been a particularly eventful year at the pioneering Russian River Valley winery. Barry Sterling, who founded the winery with his wife, Audrey, in 1976, passed away in July, and longtime winemaker David Munksgard semi-retired, replaced by Sofian Himeur, the grandson of Gruet winery founder Gilbert Gruet.

The Sterling family has also replanted their 160 estate acres in the past decade, and the ^[1]_[SEP] results are beginning to come to fruition. The wines are even drier, yet richer and more luxurious. According to Joy Sterling, the new plantings and canopy management allows for greater sunlight and airflow, while the cool evening weather and morning fog moderate temperatures. In addition, the dosage added to the wine toward the end of the aging process is now considerably drier.

Iron Horse's cornerstone sparkler, the Brut Green Valley of Russian River Valley Classic Vintage, is better than ever. The 2016 (93, \$48) is plush and creamy, with a beam of fresh acidity, while the winery's Wedding Cuvée Green Valley of Russian River Valley 2016 (93, \$48) is a lovely combination of refinement and festive exuberance.

I continue to admire the positive attitude Sterling maintains through difficult times. "There's comfort food and then there's comfort wine, and I think sparkling wines falls into that category," she says. "Sparkling wine is about celebration, but it's also the drink of optimism."

Tim Fish's Recommended U.S. Sparkling Wines

Nearly 100 wines were reviewed for this report. [A free alphabetical list is available here](#). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online [Wine Ratings Search](#).

IRON HORSE

Brut Green Valley of Russian River Valley Classic Vintage 2016

Score: 93 | \$48

WS Review: Plush and creamy, with fresh acidity that accentuates the baked apple, strawberry and toasty brioche flavors, expanding on the long finish.