

Bloomberg

How to Take Champagne Season to the Next Level

The ultimate in luxury bubbly—plus last-minute wine gifts—courtesy of our wine critic.



Hi, it's [Elin McCoy](#), Bloomberg's wine critic.

Like everyone else, I'm thinking about the holidays, already reveling in cooking tasks and [gift shopping](#), as well as planning for serious end-of-year indulgence. To me that means plenty of Champagne because wines with bubbles perfectly match the sparkly lights on my tree and the general fizzy festiveness of the season.

I've just published my [annual 50 under \\$50 wine list](#), which includes a section on bargain Champagnes to pour at parties or sip while basting a roast, as well as fun fizz if the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée isn't of paramount importance.



About 20% of all sparkling wine consumption occurs during December, so if you don't indulge in these pricey bottles during the holidays, when will you? And don't just plan to serve them on New Year's Eve. While watching an old movie on TV? Sure.

Right now, though, I've been reflecting on how much excitement and change is going on in this region, something that struck me during a visit to Champagne last spring and in tastings of bubbly in New York and elsewhere around the world this year. A younger generation is taking over, including a growing number of talented female chef de caves, and new ideas are in the air and in the bottle.



Among current trends is the rise of very dry Champagne labeled brut nature, brut zero, zero dosage or non-dosé. A dosage is a mix of sugar and wine added at the last moment before final bottling to

balance a wine's sharp acidity or make it more harmonious. Winemakers often say the extra sugar is akin to adding salt to food to perk up other flavors. No-dosage fizz generally highlights more zingy acidity and edgy minerality—and I'm a big fan. Its currently popularity is mostly a result of changing tastes, the influence of top grower producers and the natural wine movement, and a changing climate that results in riper grapes, which means a dosage isn't as necessary as it was in the past.



Eco-friendly packaging and organic viticulture are increasing. Champagne Telmont, whose minority partner is Leonardo DiCaprio, recently launched Reserve de la Terre, a certified organic fizz, and in 2026 it will be released in a new lighter weight bottle. Beginning with 2024, Perrier-Jouet's vintage cuvées will be in recycled glass bottles following the pioneering example of Drappier.

Just about every house seems to be launching some new experimental cuvée. Some are single vineyard offerings, while others highlight unusual grapes. Meunier, a blending grape, used to be considered too fruity, earthy and lacking in sophistication to age and stand on its own. Now 100% meunier fizz is no longer a rarity, and others are turning to ancestral grape varieties such as arbanne and pinot gris. Laherte Freres offers one that is 100% petit meslier.



For now, the spirit of fizz lives large during the holidays, and, as always, I'll be toasting to peace everywhere in the new year, and especially to Palestinian winemaker Sari Khoury and others who are persevering to create delicious wines in war zones such as [Lebanon](#) and [Ukraine](#).

Recent luxury Champagne highlights

Underwater aging may be the future. Barnacles clung artistically to the bottles of 2018 Leclerc Briant Cuvée Abyss (\$400) and the 2018 Cuvée Abyss Rosé (€330, only available in Europe), both from biodynamic grapes and with zero dosage. They'd spent 10 months submerged on the sea floor off the coast of Brittany, a technique more and more Champagne makers are experimenting with. The constant cold temperature, total darkness (which eliminates any chance of light strike), and stable pressure prevent oxidation, and all are required for aging gracefully. The rosé is floral, fruity, and precise, with a mineral finish that reminds me of sea spray. The regular cuvée is all about tension and energy, and slightly smoky.



Great classics are worth it. [2008 Bollinger R.D. Extra Brut](#) (\$329) is surely the finest R.D. I've tasted recently; it's deep, fresh, intense, harmonious, savory and full-bodied, with gorgeous dry fruit notes, and aromas of brioche and hazelnuts.

Long-aged fizz offers new taste dimensions. One of the most complex and stunning Champagnes I drank this year was nearly 20 years old, the [2006 Dom Perignon P2](#) (\$550), a rich, hedonistic, plush-textured later-release wine with notes of candied ginger and lemon.

Offering older Champagnes has become a thing. The latest new cuvée is the just-launched [Bruno Paillard Cuvée 72 Extra Brut](#), a longer-aged (six years, or 72 months, get it?) mature version of their Premiere cuvée, with lots of flavor punch, freshness and super elegance, and all at under \$100.

The perfect blanc de blancs. The new vintage of legendary Salon's all-chardonnay fizz is what to indulge in if price is no object. This [2013 Salon Le Mesnil](#) (\$1,250) is only the 44th release in Salon's 120-year history, and it's pure elegance and finesse, with crystalline notes of lemon and a discreet minerality.



The ultimate bling Champagne. Last week, I sampled the just-launched [2015 Armand de Brignac Blanc de Noirs](#) (\$3,425, in magnum). It's the [first-ever vintage fizz](#) from rapper Jay-Z's brand, in which Moët-Hennessy is a partner. With only 1,258 big bottles sporting the brand's shiny (some would say garish) metallized coating, rarity is part of the price. But the creamy-textured pinot noir and meunier blend with complex stone fruit and biscuity flavors is serious quality bubbly with aging potential as well as bling factor. (Read more: [the historic backstory of Armand de Brignac](#), and a [review of last year's release](#).)



Stories for sparkling conversation

- A brilliant profile of billionaire Bernard Arnault, the man behind the LVMH luxury conglomerate, which owns half a dozen grandes marques champagne houses.
- My report last year highlighted [Champagne's investment potential](#).
- Everyone is worried about possible tariffs in the New Year, especially winemakers.
- Several years ago, Champagne Bollinger led the trend of annual [experimental cuvées](#) from grandes marques houses with its launch of a new all-pinot-noir cuvée.

Last-minute gifts for wine lovers

The year's top wine books: As a writer, I'm obviously partial to books, and 2024 is another excellent vintage for tomes on wine. I've already touted two favorites, *The Australian Ark* and *One Thousand Vines*. But here are three more.

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On Tuscany: From Brunello to Bolgheri, Wine Tales from the Heart of Italy, compiled by Susan Keevil (Academie du Vin Library, \$47.50) will satisfy every lover of this famous wine region. Essays by diverse writers include everything from a wonderful profile of opinionated Brunello producer Gianfranco Soldera and his feuds to a succession tale that charts the trials of guiding a wine dynasty through murder plots and merlot.

Wine Confident: There's No Wrong Way to Enjoy Wine by Kelli A. White (Academie du Vin Library, \$35) is a charming, unpretentious, conversational intro to wine with loads of information told winningly by a former sommelier who now runs the wine education program at Napa's Meadowood Resort.

Who's Afraid of Romanée-Conti? A Shortcut to Drinking Great Wines (Quadrille, \$45). This collection of essays by Dan Freeling, the editor of witty, brainy, opinionated UK magazine *Noble Rot* and co-owner of three eponymous London restaurants with stellar wine lists, reads like a journey of wine discoveries, with plenty of humor, passion, and—unlike most wine books—fun.

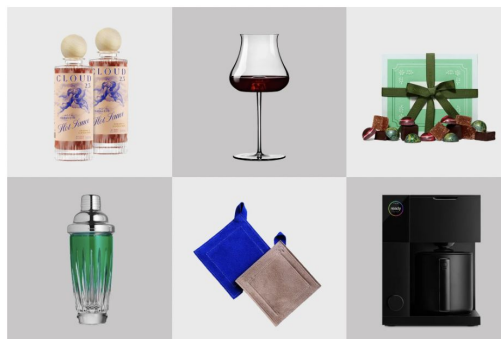


Black River Caviar from Uruguay: My first taste of caviar from this small remote family farm on the banks of the Rio Negro was a surprise and a revelation. I didn't even know caviar was produced in Uruguay. The three grades I tried impressed with their wonderful salty clearness and cleanness of flavor. The quality comes from a "wild-raised" farm system that manages the full life cycle of the fish and ensures 100% traceability.

The Black River Trio sampler set, which includes three grades of caviar, an opener, and two mother of pearl spoons, is excellent for gifts (\$295 plus \$50 shipping); 100 gram tins of their most premium Master Selection cost \$700.

Wine perfume: I love wearing fragrances, so I was captivated by new Napa Valley winery Bella Union's scent (\$38, only in tasting room) inspired by their Bianco white blend I recommended in 50 under \$50. It's bright and citrusy with a floral hint, a collaboration between winemaker Brooke Price and local perfumer Jessica Mennella of FLWR Napa Valley.

Burgundy extravaganza La Paulée: Pricey Burgundy makes my taste buds tingle, which is why I'm looking forward to the 25th vintage of La Paulée, and the several days of tastings, lunches, and dinners put on by Daniel Johnnes and his team at Pressoir. It takes place in three locations in late February and early March, 2025. In New York, most affordable is the \$150 off-grid tasting of 75 hidden gems; the blowout is the "Methusaleh" package for American Express Platinum and Centurion members at \$14,500 until Dec. 18, and \$14,650 after. General sales start on Wednesday, Dec. 18 at 10 a.m. Eastern Standard Time.



You had questions ...

If your host does not drink, is it smart to bring an interesting bottle of nonalcoholic beer, wine or spirits? Or is that so taste-dependent that you might just be bringing someone junk?

Short answer: bring the interesting bottle! This kind of gift shows you're a thoughtful person and friend who is paying attention to what your host is interested in. The Zero Proof has all the latest in good nonalcoholic wine and spirits. If it ends up not being their taste, even junk has its place. Which brings me to ...

What do you do with bad bottles of wine that people bring over?

That's such a tricky situation because a guest is simply trying to be polite and bring a gift, not make a wine statement. I always thank them for their thoughtfulness and assure them I'm putting it away to enjoy on another evening with my husband. (I do not serve it at the dinner.) Just about any wine can be used later in a marinade, but taste it first!

How do you keep the bubbles in sparkling wine if you don't finish the bottle?

How often does this happen to you? Maybe invite more people over the next time? Seriously though, the way to keep bubbles fizzing is to keep air out of the bottle by using a champagne stopper and then putting the bottle in the refrigerator. I like the Le Creuset Crown Sealer available for \$50. Yes, there's a Coravin wine preservation system for sparkling wine, but it costs \$300 and is way more complicated to use.