



Bubbling Up Good Holiday Cheer

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Whether or not you drink sparkling wine during the whole year, you drink more of it this time of year. 'Tis the season. As much as I like bubbly - I do drink bubbles year round - and like to try new things, I also need a "go to" list for reliable bubbles that I don't have to think or worry about. These wines are

not necessarily those I think of as "the best" but are in line with what I think of as favorites (I think Brennan's is "the best" restaurant in Houston but I eat at Charivari about four times a month - which makes Charivari my "favorite").

My list has to fill a few slots. I need a basic cheap bubbly good enough to drink straight and cheap enough so that I don't mind adding orange juice for a Mimosa or violet liqueur for a Kir Violette. It has to be widely and readily available. Alan Christopher fills that niche. And it is perfect for when you have to provide bubbles for a lot of people while keeping a budget in mind.

ALAN CHRISTOPHER Brut Blanc de Blancs Sparkling, France, NV

12x750ml \$7.99 \$89.21

Tech: 11.5% Alcohol. Fermented using Charmat process. Pale straw in color with green highlights, bright, clear, and sparkling; dry, medium light-bodied with fresh acidity. Offers lively bright lemony fruit and a surprising level of toastiness along with a subtle mineral note. Long, clean finish. Lively and refreshing. Much better than the price would indicate. Very Good. BS: 86+VHR.

I need some everyday-drinking, everyday-priced but "better" bubbles that offer a bit more quality and character. They need to be able to work as an aperitif or into the meal. For me, Varichon et Clerc Blanc de Blancs (lighter, cleaner style) and Gruet Blanc de Noirs (richer, toastier style) fit the bill. We ALWAYS have bottles of these in the refrigerator at home.

VARICHON & CLERC "Privelege" Blanc de Blancs Brut Sparkling, France, NV

12x750ml \$12.74 \$143.47

One of my perennial favorite everyday-priced sparklers, Varichon is basically the Dalton family "house fizz". Made mostly from grapes grown in Savoie in the eastern corner of France, it offers a fresh yeasty nose that leads to good sweet fruit offering hints of lemon, pear, and apple and a bit of floral nuance. With its clean, dry finish and fine mousse, it is very refreshing. Yum. Really Fine. BS: 90VHR.



GRUET Blanc de Noirs, New Mexico, NV

12x750ml \$13.55 \$149.18

A sparkling blend of 75% Pinot Noir with 25% Chardonnay aged 24 months en tirage and dosed to 0.8 residual sugar. Offers fine yeasty-toasty notes and minerally terroir with citrus and subtle red fruit. Long and flavorful with a fine mousse (lots of bubbles). Toasty to the end. Great as an everyday sparkler to serve as an aperitif or with fresh seafood, hard cheeses, or salty snacks. Excellent. BS: 91VHR

And then there's the good stuff. While I try - and like - sparkling wines from all over the world (Jansz Brut Rose from Tasmania, Ravantos y Blanc Cava from Spain, Pascal Toso Brut from Argentina, etc.), the best bubbles come from Champagne. For my "go to" Champagnes, I want crowd pleasers in three categories: one classic Brut, one Chardonnay-dominant Brut, and one Pinot Noir-dominant Brut. These are more "special occasion" wines for me but then, we have lots of special occasions.

HEIDSIECK MONOPOLE "Blue Top" Brut, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$28.49 \$313.55

This one won the "Top Sparkling Wine" award at the 2011 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition. That endorsement means that one panel of five judges thought enough of it to make it their class champion and that a "super" panel of over 20 judges picked it as the top bubbly of the show. That is a very strong recommendation.

My Note:

Tech: A blend of 70% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay, and 10% Pinot Meunier that is aged three year on the lees. Fully sparkling with enough richness. Subtly toasty with bright citrus and some tree fruit accented with notes of floral and mineral. Refreshing and delicious. Quite long. Excellent. BS: 92.

DEMOISELLE "Tete de Cuvee" Brut, Champagne, NV

12x750ML \$39.88 \$449.16

This is Demoiselle's basic Brut NV but it is much better than "basic." Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir fermented using Methode Champenoise with 36 months aging on the yeast. Sensory: Straw in color, bright, clear and sparkling. Offers refreshing acidity under white and yellow citrus and tree fruit (lemon and green apple fruit with hint of peach), clean toasty yeast notes, and dusty-minerally terroir. It is long, lively, and refreshing with a clean finish. Elegant, fresh, and focused; alive-in-the-mouth. Excellent. BS: 91+VHR.

JEAN LAURENT Blanc de Noirs Brut, Champagne, NV

12x750ML \$36.66 \$412.85

This is a fresh, juicy, flavorful, ripe fruit oriented 100% Pinot Noir Champagne with notes of yeast, minerals, and lemon drops and subtle red fruit (strawberry). It is long, focused, and lively in the mouth with good weight, and a nice mousse. Solid and delicious with a fine rich feel. Finishes clean and dry. Super with food. Excellent. BS: 92+. ✱