

ON WINE

Celebratory bubbles as needed, Part 1

Many food experts at this time of year suggest that the best libation to serve at parties and other celebrations is Champagne or any dry sparkling wines.



DAN BERGER

It's for toasting, they say, and people like it almost regardless of the style in which it is made or how sweet it is. But most never mention Champagne's greatest *raison d'être*:

pairing it with food.

I suppose we are all creatures of habit when celebrations are planned, such as year-end parties, graduations, promotions, and retirements. We launch ships by sacrificing a bubbly on the bow as the ship is named. And some people mistakenly give the parents of newborns a bottle of Champagne to hold onto for the scion's 21st birthday. (Almost all will be about 20 years too old at that point.)

The trend of Champagne and sparkling wines being so widely regarded as essential on festive occasions has been around for decades. But I always see it as a symbol. So do waiters. If a restaurant patron orders anything with bubbles (Cava, Prosecco, Sekt) waiters often ask, "What's the occasion?" Need there be one?

French Champagne makers don't like talking about the subject since they have year-round issues, such as: How to market bubbly in the eight months that celebrations decline? The celebratory months are June and the last three of each year.

The celebrations-with-bubbles thing is based also on sound. The well-known "pop" of the cork and the sounds coming out of the glass signify happiness.

"They love to hear the pop and the fizz," said one wine salesman to me 30 year ago.

As such, the quality of the sparkling wine rarely is an issue for infrequent bubbly consumers. Most people wouldn't know the difference between Dom Perignon and a \$3.99 Brut from Arkansas. And most wouldn't care as long as there is a loud pop.

Some French folks I've met have pointed an accusatory finger to "you Americans" who they indicate are daft to ignore the best reason to drink Champagne: serving it with food.

When the bubbly and the food are excellent, pairing bubbly with food can be an amazing wine experience. A key reason is that most sparkling wines have better acidity than most table wines.

When I mentioned this supposed American penchant for

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A tale of two tintos

Growing Tempranillo in Cabernet Country

TONY POER

When he was coming up in the wine business as a restaurant buyer in the 1990s, Calistoga winemaker-turned-grower Sam Spencer fell in love with Spain. Not the country, per se, but the *vinos tintos* — its red wines.

Guided by savvy importers, the industry veteran became so enamored of Spain's most famous wine regions, Rioja and Ribera del Duero, that, just a few years later, he planted his family's Lake County property with the vine that ties these *denominaciones* to each other and is the Spanish calling card to the rest of the wine world: Tempranillo.

Two decades ago, Spencer wasn't the only North Coast vintner to focus on this noble, age-worthy variety. In a small but significant way, the late '90s were an auspicious time for Tempranillo up and down Napa Valley.

After a visit to a famous Ribera del Duero estate in 1998, Napa importer-brokers Steve and Faith Ventrello acquired an armful of Tempranillo vine cuttings from the owner and airmailed them back to California. They used these raw ingredients to establish a one-acre vineyard for Parador Cellars, Napa Valley's first Tempranillo-centric wine brand.

"The hardier red wine varieties have done really well up here," Steve Ventrello said in an interview a couple of years ago. "I consider Tempranillo one of these."

Northern California's climate is a factor. Recall that in "My Fair Lady," Eliza Doolittle carefully enunciates, "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." Here in the North Bay, it mainly just stays away — for much of the growing season, anyway. But in the Napa Valley, Ventrello noted the weather works to Tempranillo's advantage.

"The dry climate leading up to the harvest, usually speaking, lends itself to it," he said. "It's an early-ripening variety, which is how it got its name: *temprano* means 'early' in Spanish. So you know that is something that's beneficial for the grape."

Around the same time the Ventrellos' package was jetting west over the Atlantic, Tony Truchard got inspired by Rioja and planted two acres of Tempranillo on a volcanic knoll at the eastern edge of his and his wife Jo Ann's Carneros property.

In 2000, the vintner Peter Prager grafted the vine over from Muscat in a Calistoga vineyard he owned. He farmed it to blend into some of the Port-style wines made at his St. Helena winery. Prager still buys the fruit from the vineyard's current owners, Brenda and Clay Cockerell, who bottle Tempranillo under their own label, Coquerel Wines.

For Sal Delanni, Tony Truchard's longtime winemaker,



TONY POER PHOTOS



BOTTLES

TONY POER PHOTO

Coquerel's Calistoga Tempranillo and Truchard's Carneros are Napa Valley examples

Left: Sal Delanni is Tony Truchard's longtime winemaker

istoga — offer an intriguing look at how Spain's signature grape can perform at opposite ends of the Valley.

"I probably drank some Tempranillo earlier in France, but I don't have the memory of it," confessed Coquerel winemaker Christine Barbe over lunch at Zuzu Restaurant, Napa's default locus for Spanish wine and food. "I'm from Bordeaux and we drink a lot of Cabernet and Cab Franc, maybe a little bit of Burgundy. But you know, Bordeaux people barely drink Pinot Noir!"

Barbe arrived in the U.S. in 1996 after earning a Ph.D. in enology from the University of Bordeaux. She worked for a decade at the volume end of the industry, in viticultural research at E & J Gallo and Robert Mondavi. When she signed onto the Cockerell's boutique project in 2006, she was tasked with shaping up Walnut Wash Vineyard, their Calistoga property.

"We bought the vineyard next door in 2008, and the Tempranillo was there," she said over the busy midday din at Zuzu, a Flamenco tune blaring in the

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PLEASE THE PALATE

Brooks Winery is sustained by friendship

In 1998, Jimi Brooks started Brooks Winery, focusing on Oregon's potential for expressive, complex and balanced Riesling and Pinot Noir.

In 2004, at the age of 38, Brooks unexpectedly passed away two weeks before harvest. A group of his friends donated



ALLISON LEVINE

their skills and time to make the 2004 wines in Jimi's style. Twenty years later, Brooks Winery continues to produce delicious wines under his name under the guidance of

Jimi's sister, Janie Brooks, and his friend and winemaker Chris Williams.

Chris and Jimi met in 1997. They met over motorcycle parts but bonded over wine. Chris worked alongside Jimi at Wil-



ALLISON LEVINE PHOTO

Brooks Winery winemaker Chris Williams.

laKenzie Estate and Maysara Winery and also worked in the cellar at Brooks. Chris was one of the many friends who stepped in to make Jimi's wine in 2004 and became the full-time winemaker at Brooks Winery in 2005. He has continued Jimi's gentle approach to winemaking, his commitment to biodynamic farming

and his desire to express the terroir of the Willamette Valley through the wines.

Oregon is known for its Pinot Noir, and Brooks produces elegant ones. But, in addition to Burgundian varieties, Jimi loved Riesling and he imparted his passion for the grape to Chris. Riesling was actually one of the

pioneering varieties planted in Oregon. Today, there are 782 acres of Riesling planted in Oregon. It may be a minor grape variety in Oregon, but Brooks Winery is showing what a versatile and expressive white wine it is.

Riesling is a grape that speaks to place, and it is very much at home in Oregon, specifically in the Willamette Valley. The climate is relatively mild throughout the year, with cool, wet winters and warm, dry summers, and the soils are ancient volcanic and marine sediment.

Brooks Winery is located in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA where they have an 18-acre biodynamically-farmed estate vineyard. The estate vineyard includes five acres of self-rooted Riesling that was planted in 1975. In addition to Pinot Noir and aromatic white wines, Brooks produces 22 Rieslings from 14 different sites in the Willamette Valley.

They purchase Riesling from vineyards across the Willamette Valley, including Yamhill-Carlton, Dundee Hills, Chehalem Mountains and McMinnville. This allows them to highlight the diversity of the region, and of the grape, and I experienced this during a recent tasting at the winery.

Brooks 2016 Estate Riesling, Eola-Amity Hills AVA (\$32) — A dry Riesling with 10.6 G/L of residual sugar, this wine has lively acidity and makes the mouth water. The aromas of lemon, cherry blossom and apple give way to lime, lemon, honey-suckle on the palate. The wine has a crisp and refreshing finish. Only 150 cases produced.

Brooks 2016 Ara Riesling, Willamette Valley (\$38) — With 14.4 G/L of residual sugar, the fruit from this dry Riesling

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Tintos

From C1

background. “We also had [the Portuguese varieties] Tinta Cao and Touriga Nacional, but I re-grafted them to Sauvignon Blanc because they didn’t do well.”

In the particularly cool 2010 vintage, Peter Prager opted not to purchase these two crops. But rain or shine, the Spanish vine has never been a problem. “With Tempranillo, it’s a better variety in all climates, because it resists very much to the drought,” she said, echoing Ventrello, “and we pick it just after Sauvignon Blanc. So it’s a good deal earlier.”

With a focus on Bordeaux grape varieties like Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc, it fits that Coquerel has a winemaker who comes from there. Barbe even specialized in Sauvignon Blanc fermentation while working towards her Ph.D. and makes outstanding versions of the grape at Coquerel and under own label, Toquade.

Tempranillo is a newer endeavor; except as a Languedoc blending grape, there’s none to speak of in France, and her first Calistoga harvest was in 2011. Since she has come on board, the Cockerells have encouraged her to experiment not just with Tempranillo but also the Portuguese white grape, Verdelho.

Meanwhile, down in Carneros, experimentation is the name of the game in Truchard’s 400-acre vineyard. There are an almost unprecedented 13 different grape varieties grown there to supply the winery’s 20,000-case production, “which is pretty unique,” as Sal DeIanni pointed out, “because it’s a unique piece of property with a lot of different soil profiles and aspects. You can find a little niche for almost everything.”

Like Barbe, DeIanni has an advanced wine science background. The Wisconsin native majored in chemistry at Marquette University in Milwaukee and was midway through graduate work at Northwestern when, courtesy of a few Chicago wine shops and restaurants, fermented grape juice replaced analytical chemistry as his calling in life. In a familiar winemaker’s tale, he packed his bags for California and ended up with a master’s degree in enology from UC Davis in 1996. Two years later, the Truchards hired him from a job ad in this newspaper. Coincidentally, it was the same year Tony Truchard planted those two acres of Tempranillo.

DeIanni described his boss as a grower who welcomes the challenge of raising non-traditional wine grapes. “It gets boring just growing Chardonnay and Pinot in Carneros. Tony was looking for something different. He was



TONY POER PHOTOS

into some of the Riojas, and when people let him taste some high-end Riojas, he thought, ‘That’s kind of a fun wine.’”

P&L considerations aside, perhaps “fun” is the main point of Tempranillo for DeIanni and Barbe. With the Spanish grape representing just a small fraction of their respective wineries’ total productions, it’s unthinkable that it would ever replace Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, or Cabernet in either portfolio. At the same time, the two winemakers’ shared science training and attention to detail assure that tackling Tempranillo is more than just a casual endeavor.

Stretching back to the 2000 vintage at Truchard, DeIanni has an extensive track record with the grape. For Barbe, it’s been a shorter learning curve. The just-released 2015 vintage is the French winemaker’s fifth in bottle. In a way, her experience mirrors the vine’s own compressed cycle of vegetation. From the get-go in 2011, bud-break to harvest, she watched Tempranillo develop much faster than Cabernet Sauvignon.

“I’m amazed on the property. It’s the last one to bud-break, but early to pick. So when you start,” she said, snapping her fingers, “it goes very, very quickly.”

In that ’11 vintage, Barbe figured the large, ripe Tempranillo berries would be less tannic than Cabernet. To compensate, she worked them aggressively, with lots of skin contact during fermentation to extract color and tannin. She ended up with a wine she described as “so tannic, we had to age it a long time to soften it.”

She has since learned to destem, do a cold maceration, and try to control the temperature during fermentation. “And,” she added, “we don’t leave it on the skins very long. As soon as it’s dry, we press it.”

If Calistoga Cabernet was Barbe’s original template, the reference point for DeIanni has been the red grape most closely asso-

ciated with Carneros. “We treat Tempranillo like Pinot Noir,” he said. “And actually, to be honest, we treat it more gently than Pinot Noir, because the skins on Tempranillo are a little thinner.”

DeIanni limits punchdowns during fermentation to one per day, versus the three or four Pinot Noir can require to get the color and extraction he wants. He laughed and admitted, “If I do that to Tempranillo, I end up with a tankful of oatmeal” from the meatier berries. Like Barbe, he’s had to figure out the grape’s peculiarities on the job.

“I would think it’s going to be much more fruit-forward, coming from upvalley, but it’s not. It’s really well-balanced. It’s nuanced like a Rioja.”

Mick Salyer, Zuzu proprietor

There’s an aromatic and flavor symmetry to Barbe’s and DeIanni’s versions of Tempranillo. The main difference goes back to the temprano, or early, nature of how the grape ripens. In Calistoga’s warm (and sometimes hot) climate, Coquerel consistently sees September pick dates that come, as Barbe noted, on the heels of Sauvignon Blanc, one of Napa Valley’s earliest-picked varieties.

The weather in Carneros is noticeably cooler and causes Tony Truchard and his team to grow Tempranillo that flies somewhat in the face of its early ripening identity. DeIanni observed that, in the milder climate, “things ripen here a little bit slower with the fog, and longer hangtime on the vine just gives you more flavor.” With his and Barbe’s 2014 Tempranillos each clocking in just above 14 percent alcohol, the additional weeks of Carneros growing season didn’t translate to a more potent Truchard wine.



Christine Barbe, winemaker at Coquerel.

Not that it doesn’t bite back a little. “Our Tempranillo’s got an edge to it, especially when it’s young,” he said, circling back to the topic of tannins. “It’ll eventually age out and soften, but anything you can do to get those tannins a little softer sooner, I think is a good thing.”

Both winemakers’ early challenges — Barbe’s surprising tannins and DeIanni’s “oatmeal” — might conjure a less-than-refined image of Tempranillo as a fine red wine. The results in the bottle are quite opposite.

Sitting down in the Truchard tasting room to revisit last year’s release, DeIanni described their excellent 2013 as lean, complex, and food-friendly. “It’s probably the best food wine we made. It’s good tasted by itself, but you have it with cheese or something off the grill and it transforms the wine into something else. It really marries well with the right foods.”

At Zuzu, Barbe shared a similar thought. “That’s what’s good in the U.S., because there are so many different tastes, and so many different foods, so Tempranillo goes with different kinds of food.”

There’s probably no one in Napa Valley better qualified to comment on this point than Zuzu’s proprietor, Mick Salyer. He opened his Main Street tapas and paella restaurant in 2002 and has since introduced his customers to scores of Tempranillo-based Spanish wines. Rioja and Ribera del Duero are two of Salyer’s go-tos, but he was also an early supporter of Steve Ventrello’s Parador label and, of course, Truchard. He even partnered with Napa winemaker Mark Herold to make a Zuzu Tempranillo with fruit supplied by Sam Spencer and the

respected Lodi grower, Markus Bokisch.

With their case production at just a fraction of Truchard’s, Coquerel Tempranillo mostly goes to the winery mailing list. It consequently stays off many restaurateur radars, including Salyer’s. Tasting it for the first time, he extended Barbe’s Calistoga wine an informed compliment. “Coquerel is very reminiscent of Rioja,” he said. “I would think it’s going to be much more fruit-forward, coming from upvalley, but it’s not. It’s really well-balanced. It’s nuanced like a Rioja.”

In both practice and theory, DeIanni and Barbe’s Tempranillos work alongside Zuzu Chef Armando Ramirez’s cuisine. “I don’t put Rioja or Tempranillo on the list because it’s Rioja or Tempranillo,” Salyer said. “It’s because it’s a good wine. Whether it’s from Spain or the Sierra Foothills or southern Napa, I’m going to put it on the list because I like it. And because it pairs well with our menu.”

The verdict may still be out, but the Spanish vine seems capable of succeeding in California. “I mean, Tempranillo thrives in warm climates,” Sam Spencer said recently, repeating a grower’s mantra. “That’s what it’s designed for, if a vine can be designed for anything. It can express itself really differently depending on where you pick it.”

At the end of the day, people tend to reach for their local wines before most anything else. Barbe had earlier mentioned that in Bordeaux, they drink very little Burgundy Pinot Noir. The same can be said of Napa Valley and Tempranillo. But in their respective ways, she and DeIanni are putting tiny chinks in Cabernet’s armor.

On Wine

From C1

drinking Champagne only at celebrations about 20 years ago to the New York-based head of the now-defunct Champagne News Information Bureau in New York, he said, “It’s not just here. Even in France, we have forgotten how good it is with food.”

Champagne has always been an iconic luxury wine, but about 25 years ago, the category hit some speed-bumps on the road to the checkered flag. In the late 1980s, at a blind tasting I staged of moderately priced Champagnes, a number of professional tasters challenged the authenticity of one highly popular French house.

I called the American representative of that brand to relay our suspicions about that wine, and asked for a comment. The representative ardently defended the company — but has never communicated with me since!

The bottle was clearly not worth a premium price. It has since improved markedly.

Shortly before that, stories in some French newspapers alleged chicanery (including discovery of some fake Moët bottles that were seized and, later, the discovery of some tainted Champagne).

Events like this slowed the rapid

growth of French Champagne sales here.

But they recovered. Between 1983 and 1986, American wine buyers, spurred by a wave of recently flush younger buyers, doubled their consumption of Champagne.

Part of this growth must be attributed to the early popularity of what had to be one of the surprise successes of 1984 TV, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” on which host Robin Leach would virtually shriek about the “good” life, “Champagne dreams and caviar wishes.”

As younger wine buyers began to discover other wines, Champagne remained a symbol of good living, celebrations, and promotions. Then sales again slowly declined again.

Today, from various random bottles of true French Champagne I have tasted in the last few years, some of the region’s most popular brands are turning out some of the best “normal” Champagnes in years. The drawback is that prices for some of these so-called luxury brands are quite high.

Mumm Cordon Rouge Brut and Ayala Brut Majeur are nearly \$40 a bottle. Moët et Chandon Brut Imperiale and Taittinger Brut La Française are closer to \$50. Bollinger Brut Special Cuvée is \$55. And these are not

reserve-level or vintage-dated wines.

As great as Champagne can be with its unique aromas that include hints of brioche, excellence in high-caliber bubbly can be had from at least a dozen U.S. projects, many owned by European-based bubbly specialists. Most sell for between \$13 and \$22 and the quality of these can be sensational.

Between \$8 and \$20 are Spanish Cava, German Sekt (pronounced Zekt) and Italian Prosecco. Quality of these ranges from good to excellent.

Discovery of the Week: NV Champagne Moutard Brut Rosé de Cuvaison (\$33) — Rosé Champagnes are some of the most popular sparklings around these days, partly as a result of the popularity of pink anything. This soft, strawberry-scented Blanc de Noirs-style wine is charming and not as austere as many such wines. Soft enough to serve as an aperitif, but with a solid mid-plate of fruit, it works nicely with semi-soft cheeses and lighter meals.

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Winery

From C1

comes from the estate vineyard and Yamhill Vineyards, blending two areas of the valley. Named after the constellation of the aura, it was first produced in 2003 by Jimi. Since 2004, Chris has made this special wine that has notes of pineapple, nectarine and lime. The aromatic wine has elegant minerality with mouthwatering acidity; 400 cases produced.

Brooks 2016 Bois Joli Riesling, Eola-Amity Hills AVA (\$24) — A medium-dry wine with 30.1 G/L of residual sugar, this wine comes from fruit planted in the 1980s. The wine has aromas of stone fruit, crisp apple and graphite minerality; 270 cases produced.

Brooks 2016 Sweet P Riesling, Eola-Amity Hills AVA (\$28) — A medium-dry wine with 36.5 G/L of residual sugar, this wine was first made in 2008, the result of a stuck fermentation. Made with 100 percent native fermentation, the wine has notes of nectarine, mint and cardamom. On the palate, it has beautiful salinity with a long finish

with rich acidity. The wine is mouthwatering; 500 cases produced.

Brooks 2015 Tethys Riesling, Willamette Valley (\$25) — A sweet, dessert Riesling, the wine is named after Tethys, a mid-sized moon of Saturn that is named after the Titan goddess of the primal font of fresh water that nourishes the earth. The grapes are frozen in the freezer and the resulting wine is rich on the nose with notes of apricot and pineapple and elegant acidity on the palate.

Riesling can taste so many ways. Its flavor profile can be anything you want it to be and its levels of sweetness can vary from dry to medium dry to medium sweet to sweet. And Brooks Winery has a Riesling in every style. Thanks to community and friendship, Brooks Winery is celebrating 20 years and Jimi’s Brooks love for Riesling lives on.

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