

THE GOLAN Heights Winery has a quality range of sparkling wines made by the Traditional Method. (Photos: Courtesy wineries mentioned)



GOOD RIDDANCE TO 2020



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Sparkling wine comes into its own on New Year's Eve, Silvester's or *Novy God*, whatever your excuse is to have a good time. On the last evening of the year, we will be toasting the new year and saying good riddance to the appalling 2020.

Champagne is the ultimate expression of the sparkling wine art. These are the wines made exclusively within the Champagne region of France. It is the wine of fashion and celebration, of success and happiness, and also optimism. Dom Perignon was the blind monk credited with discovering Champagne. He was said to come running after tasting a bubbly wine: "Come quickly! I think I am drinking stars!"

The wine gets its bubbles from a secondary fermentation which takes place in the bottle. It is more ex-

pensive and time-consuming done this way, but the results produce the better sparkling wines, with smaller and more continuous bubbles.

The Champagne houses have done a wonderful job marketing their product to convey the idea that only the genuine article provides the expected luxury and quality. Drappier, a family firm of eight generations, and Barons de Rothschild, the most famous of all wine families, have outstanding Champagnes, available in Israel, which are also kosher.

In fact, many countries also produce sparkling wines in the Champagne way. Many equal the quality of Champagne if not the image. Believe it or not, one of those is now England, where some truly excellent quality sparkling wines are produced. Another is Israel.

The finest Israeli sparkling wines are made by the Golan Heights Winery. In ascending quality and price, their Gamla Brut, Yarden Brut Rose, Yarden Blanc de Blancs Vintage (made 100% from Chardon-

nay) and Yarden Katzrin Late Disgorged match any Champagne.

The Gamla is bone dry and represents great value, and the Late Disgorged is rich, toasty and mouth-filling, being aged on its yeasts for no less than 10 years. The Yarden Blanc de Blancs lies between the two. It has a worldwide recognition and has won trophies and awards at the highest level. It is exquisite, delicate and full of nuance.

Pelter Winery also makes a fine sparkling wine.

In the meantime, there are exciting things happening, and there will be more players in the future. Raziel Winery, owned by the Ben-Zaken family of Domaine du Castel fame, and Sphera Winery, which produces only white wines, are both deep in the process of making quality sparkling wine.

Cava is the name of a Spanish sparkling wine also made by the Traditional Method. The home of Cava is the Catalonian region of Spain near Penedes. The



LEFT TO right: Jezeel Valley Pet-Nat. Tommasi Prosecco, Barons de Rothschild Brut, Jaume Serra Brut, Drappier Carte D'Or, Picasso Rose, Bartenura Moscato.

word “Cava” has become the slang for a sparkling wine in Israel. Many people ordering a “glass of Cava” are in fact requesting anything with bubbles! The Jaume Serra Brut is an example of a clean, fresh, inexpensive Cava.

The next level of sparkling wines is made by the tank method, whereby the secondary fermentation takes place in a tank and the wines are then bottled under pressure to preserve the bubbles.

Prosecco wines are made this way. They come from Northeast Italy and are more uncomplicated, less complex and a great deal less expensive than Champagne. The Tommasi Prosecco is soft, fragrant and refreshing.

The most inexpensive sparkling wines are made by what I call the Coca Cola Method. This receives its bubbles by simple carbonation. The price is normally a giveaway, but also the bubbles tend to be bigger and will dissipate more quickly than with the other versions.

Lambrusco is a wine from the Emilia Romagna region in Italy. The Lambrusco seen here is normally red, frothy, slightly sparkling with cherry berry fruit, good acidity and varying amounts of sweetness. These are fun wines. Drink them at eye level and don't take them too seriously. Then you can allow yourself to enjoy them. Picasso is in a bright pink bottle, which would make a nice gift. It does not look like a Lambrusco, but its taste is 100% Lambrusco!

Then, there is the family of light, low alcohol, sweet Moscato wines. They are made in the style of the Italian Moscato d'Asti and are lightly sparkling. Most are good, but there are some that are different. The Golan Heights Winery's Hermon Moscato is made from the Muscat Canelli variety, the same grape the Italians use. Most use the Muscat of Alexandria variety. Dalton Winery produces a rose Moscato called Pink, and Zion Winery produces a red Moscato. So, there is no lack of variety. Carmel produces no less than four different brands of Moscato: Buzz, Selected, the Selected Designer Edition and Private Collection in a blue bottle.

Which is the best and what are the differences, I have no idea. They are either the country's biggest experts on Moscato, or taking their customers for a ride. My advice? Don't be seduced by the blue bottle or the designer edition; buy the least expensive, the one on promotion or the youngest and freshest.

The most famous and most authentic is Bartenura, imported from Italy in the original blue bottle. This is the largest brand of Moscato d'Asti in Piedmont and a great expression of this style of wine. Moscatos are anytime wines. Great at breakfast, brunch, barbecue or picnic, or with fresh fruit desserts. They have a grapey in aroma, mouth-filling flavor and are refreshing despite the sweetness.

The new Tabor Pnanim is neither traditional Moscato d'Asti nor fully sparkling like an Asti Spumante. It comes in a screw top, is lightly sparkling, 10% alcohol, with an easy sweetness. Many will like it. It has more alcohol, but is less sweet than a Moscato.

Don't forget Pet-Nats (short for Petillant-Naturel). These naturally sparkling wines, stoppered like beers and referred to as beer drinkers' sparkling wines or hipster's Champagne. They are fun, irreverent and should be drunk informally and with spontaneity. The best are Jezeel Valley's Dabouki and Rose, and Dalton's Pet-Nat made from Semillon and Muscat.

Knowing the language of sparkling wine helps. If they are made by the Traditional or Classic Method, they are made the same way as Champagne. Brut means dry, Extra Brut, very dry. Frizzante means lightly sparkling. With Blanc de Blancs, the wine is made 100% from white grapes, usually Chardonnay. Blanc de Noir is made from black grapes. Wine made by the tank method may be called the Charmat Process or Cuve Close on the label.

Sparkling wines should be served very cold. Put them in your fridge more than four hours before you need them. Be extra careful opening a sparkling wine. Don't underestimate the pressure in a sparkling wine bottle. The cork is a dangerous missile if it flies uncontrolled in the wrong direction. The correct way is to hold the bottle at 45 degrees, not pointing at anyone. Carefully undo the wire cradle covering the cork, keeping a finger on top of the cork at all times. Then hold the cork and gently turn the bottle. The bottle should open with a sound like an erotic sigh rather than an explosive pop. Formula One drivers celebrating a win in the Grand Prix are not the role models to follow in this instance.

In times gone by, the coupe was the classic sparkling wine glass. It is said to have been shaped to Marie Antoinette's breast, but is not the ideal glass for Champagne. It is probably better for ice cream or cocktails. More suitable are the longer, narrower tulip or flute

glass, which better concentrate the aromas and preserve the bubbles for longer. These days a regular glass with a smaller bowl than for red wines, slightly tapering in at the rim, is also fine for sparkling wines. Maybe it even does more justice to the fruity and toasty aromas of a quality sparkling wine than the “official” Champagne glass. This is good for most households that don't have sparkling wine glasses. Just use the glass you would use for a white wine.

Pour sparkling wines as gently as possible. Tilting the glass so the wine slides down the side is the best method to avoid a spillage due to too much froth.

When to drink sparkling wines? They can more than match up to the needs of any party, wedding or celebration. Sparkling wine is most usually enjoyed as an aperitif. Most restaurants will have a Champagne, Cava or Prosecco by the glass, or maybe all three. It is a great pick-me-up wine. A glass of sparkling wine can often be a tonic after a tough day. There was a time when my first stop at a wine exhibition would be at the Golan Heights Winery stand, to receive a glass of its sparkling wine to set me up for the challenges ahead.

As for drinking with food, a sparkling wine will gladly accompany most first courses, fish, poultry and may be the most perfect partner of all for sushi. Even at the end of a big meal where you have eaten too much, a clean, refreshing glass of sparkling wine can be an excellent way to finish the evening.

At weddings you will often receive a sparkling wine cocktail. This is normally a sweet sickly concoction designed to mask a cheap sparkling wine. There are only two cocktails I like. One is the Bucks Fizz (or Mimosa), which is Champagne and freshly squeezed orange juice. If there is a better breakfast drink, I have yet to hear of it. The second is Kir Royal, which is Champagne with a touch of Crème de Cassis, added sparingly as much for color as taste.

Sparkling wine is a mood wine. If you are in a celebratory mood, or want to create an atmosphere of celebration, then pop open a bottle of sparkling wine. Whatever your poison, Champagne or the cheapest fizz, you can banish the memory of 2020 and toast a better new year by drinking stars. ■

The writer, a wine trade veteran, has advanced Israeli wine for nearly 35 years. He is referred to as the “English voice of Israeli wine.” www.adammontefiore.com