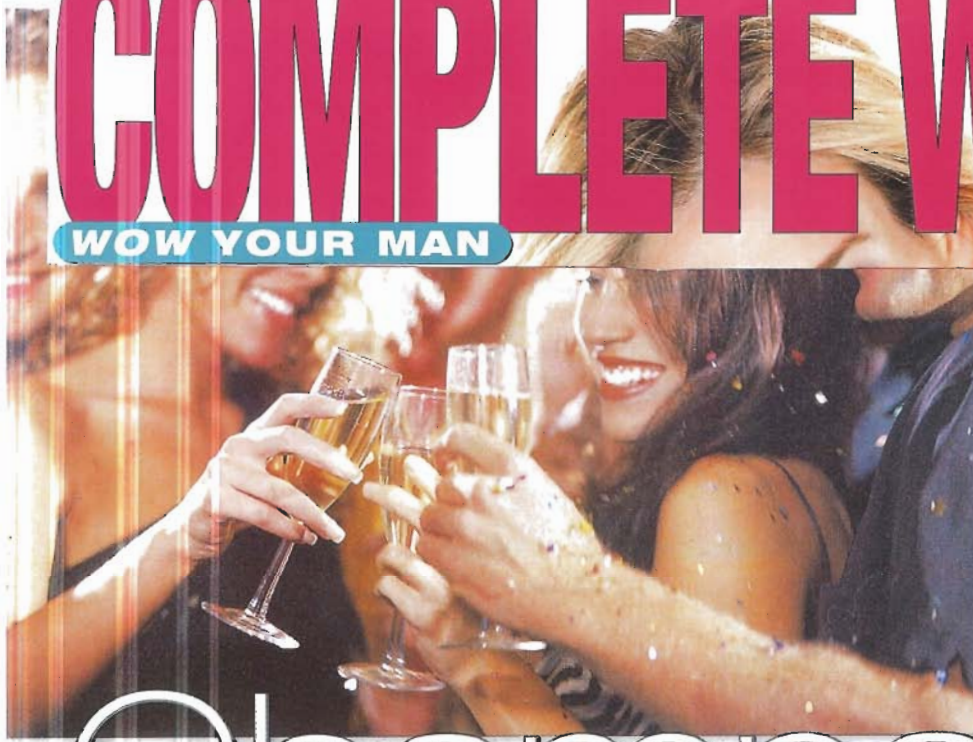


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Ooh La La!

The Saucy Sisters' Guide To Champagne

By Barbara Nowak and Beverly Wichman

Ah, champagne, nectar of the gods. With you we have rung in abundant New Years, blown out too many birthday candles, proposed to our beloved, toasted our best friends, cursed our enemies, grieved over our loved ones, consummated business deals, sung songs to whomever would listen, made the most passionate love of our lives, swung on swings and danced until dawn.

Champagne, sparkling wine, bubbly—whatever you call it—is the life of every party. Why? One taste will tell you...

Take A Look

Before you even take that first sip of champagne, there are three immediately obvious characteristics that distinguish champagne from other wines: bubbles, bottles and corks.

Bubbles are the essence of champagne—there are about 49 million of them in every bottle. They're formed during the second fermentation of the wine when the carbon dioxide is trapped inside the bottle.

Pour a glass and look for yourself. In fine champagne the bubbles will be tiny and float upward in a continuous stream from the bottom of your glass. If they're large and random, you might have a lesser-quality champagne. It's a subtle difference but easy to recognize.

Now take a peek at the bottle. If we were to compare a wine bottle to a champagne bottle, it'd be like comparing a quarterback to a linebacker. The wine bottle is sleek and lean with gentle curves, while the champagne bottle is heavy, thick and formidable. Not necessarily pretty, but it serves its purpose—to protect the cham-

pagne. The design of a champagne bottle is one of necessity and function. The bottles need to withstand the high pressure, about 90 pounds per square inch, exerted by carbonation after bottling. It also has a large punt, or indentation, in the bottom of the bottle to help reduce the pressure along the bottom of the bottle. Without it, the bottles would blow out and break much more frequently.

And the cork? Talk about big butts! How in the world do those big-bottomed corks fit into a champagne bottle? Well, just like some of us, at a younger age their shape was less expansive. The corks used for champagne are the same substance and cylindrical shape as those used for wine bottles, just a bit bigger and thicker.

Saucy Styles

Champagne houses, large or small, work tirelessly to create their own styles. Much of their success is owed to the tradition of using the best grapes and grape combinations and employing some of the top winemakers in the world. Here's a look at some of the different styles...

Vintage And Non-Vintage: Champagne is designated as vintage or non-vintage. A vintage champagne uses 100 percent of its grapes from the year indicated on the bottle—always a particularly good harvest year. Vintage champagne isn't made every year—only the best years. Its flavor is usually fuller

and fruitier than non-vintage. Vintage champagne must be at least 30 months old before it's sold and can be kept for up to 15 years.

Non-vintage champagne comprises about 80 percent of the champagne sold by the larger champagne houses. It's a blend of wines from several vintages, sometimes up to 40 different wines. Although the majority of the grapes in one bottle might come from a single year, the producer may use as much as 40 percent from previous years. Champagne houses use this technique to create their own distinctive styles that can be recreated year after year. The producers are required by law to set aside at least 20 percent of their champagne each year to be used for blends for future years. Non-vintage champagne is sold ready to drink, but may maintain its integrity for up to three years.

Rosé: Rosé champagne is sometimes called pink champagne because the skins of the

grapes are left in contact with the juice for a brief period, giving it a pinkish color. Alternatively, the color can be achieved by adding some Pinot Noir wine to the base wine blend. Rosé champagne can be vintage or non-vintage, and, despite its color, is usually dry in flavor.

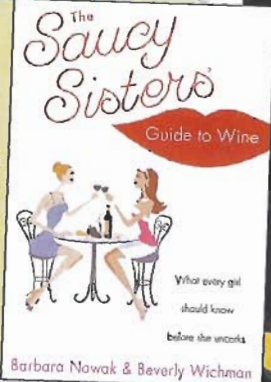
Blanc de Blanc: Some champagnes are made from just one of the three permitted grapes. A blanc de blanc (meaning white wine from white grapes) is made from 100 percent Chardonnay grapes and is lighter than champagnes that also include Pinot Noir. It can be vintage or non-vintage.



Bottles: © Getty Images; contents in photos used to illustrate story only.

RAISE YOUR GLASSES

Don't know the difference between Pinot Noir and Merlot? Wonder what to do with your leftover bubbly? Then pick up a copy of *The Saucy Sisters' Guide To Wine* by Barbara Nowak and Beverly Wichman (New American Library, \$13.95) at your local bookseller and you'll soon know all you need to know about every wine under the sun and more!



Blanc de Noir: Another one-grape champagne is blanc de noir (white wine from black grapes). It's usually made from the Pinot Noir grape.

Prestige Cuvée: These are referred to as luxury champagnes because they are made exclusively from grapes grown in the best vineyards. They are not released until they are at least five years old and may keep for 25 years or more. This is the finest champagne of the house. It may be vintage, such as Moët & Chandon's Dom Perignon and Louis Roederer's Cristal, or non-vintage, such as Krug's Grand Cuvée.

How Sweet It Is...

Many factors influence the flavor of champagne—such as the grape, vineyard, vintage and blend—some of which can be subtle and difficult to detect when tasting. One thing most of us discern, though, is the dryness or sweetness of a champagne. The amount of sugar in a champagne also determines its style. The designations of sweetness are indicated right on the bottle's label. Here's what they mean:

Extra Brut: The driest of all and not a common style.

Brut: The most common and popular style. It's considered very dry and to most experts it has the perfect balance of sweetness to dryness.

Extra Dry: A slightly less dry style than Brut. Considered dry to medium dry.

Sec: Medium.

Demi-Sec: Sweet and great with desserts—or as a dessert itself.

Doux: Extremely sweet.

Now you're ready to pick out the perfect bottle of bubbly to tantalize your taste-buds and spice up any special—or even not special—event.

In fine champagne the bubbles will be tiny and float upward in a continuous stream from the bottom of your glass. If they're large and random, you might have a lesser-quality champagne.



Quick Chill

Ever notice how you're never prepared for that impromptu visit? He'll be there in an hour, and the bubbly is resting comfortably in the hall closet. Here's a way to chill your champagne to its ideal temperature before you're even out of the shower...

Fill your sink with water and ice and immerse the bottle so it's covered. Twirl the bottle for a couple of minutes and leave it there while you shower. When you've towel-dried yourself, towel-dry the champagne bottle and put it in the fridge. You'll then *both* be ready to greet your special guest!

Open Sesame

Five, four, three, two, one—no, it's not Apollo 13, it's the champagne cork! It might be dramatic to open the bottle with a big pop and see the cork flying high, but it's unsafe. Here's the smartest way to open that bottle...

First, get a clean towel. Once you've removed the foil covering, point the bottle in a safe direction. Standing the bottle on the counter is usually safe. Keep one hand over the top of the cork with the towel between your hand and the cork as you untwist the wire cage. Corks can loosen and explode as soon as the wire is unwound. Remove the wire. Keep the towel on top of the cork with one hand and put your other hand on the bottle at a point where you have a good

grasp. Turn the bottle—not the cork. You should feel the cork loosen a bit. Keep a downward pressure on the cork as it completely loosens and finally releases. The sound you hear should be barely audible, which means you've saved the bubbles. Hold the cork over the opened bottle for a few seconds to ensure the champagne doesn't escape. Now it's safe to pour...and enjoy. *Cheers!*

Cocktails With Sparkle

Now that you know everything you need to know about champagne, try out some of these sophisticated cocktails...

Champagne Margarita

1 oz. tequila
Splash orange liqueur
Splash lime juice
4 oz. champagne
Mix tequila, orange liqueur and lime juice and pour into a glass. Add champagne and serve.

Champagne Martini

2 oz. vodka or gin
2 oz. champagne
Splash lemon juice
Orange twist
Pour vodka and champagne into a martini glass. Top with lemon juice, twist and serve.

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STAR SIPPERS

Nothing says class quite like a dainty glass of luscious champagne. And no one knows how to savor each sip like these bubbly-lovin' stars...



Diva luscious songstress Mariah Carey sips her bubbly in style.



Supermodel Jodie Kidd gives a toast with her flute of champagne.

Music men Lenny Kravitz and JC Chasez bond over some sweet libations.



Newlyweds Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey are still toasting their wedded bliss.