



Photo: Kevin Kelly

Oh, those irrestable lovely bubbles! Icon of joy!

By **Tonja Blatnik**

Since the early years of the 18th century, when champagne was drunk by the aristocracy in the French court, it has been "a must" for all kinds of celebrations and has become a popular luxury item all over the world. There are moments when pouring a glass of bubbly is almost a tradition – can you, for example, imagine toasting in a new year without it?

Of course, sparkling wine isn't just champagne, and if it were, even champagne has quite a bit of diversity in style.

There are obviously many types of bubbly. Since sparkling wines were first introduced in the mid 1500's, several processes have been

developed and each results in a sub-style of sparkling wine. The major production methods are the traditional and the tank methods, and apart from champagne, only produced in the champagne region in France, sparkling wines include Cava, Crémant, Lambrusco, Sekt, Franciacorta and the large range of bubbles from anywhere in the world. What do they have in common?

People tend to think its elite. When the French regent, Philip, Duke of Orléans, adopted champagne, it became a feature of his lavish parties. The hedonistic image of champagne continued into the 20th century as Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe, famously bathed in it – in her conviction that bubbles were good for her skin. Well, the idea of bathing in champagne is an old fantasy and it is still on the menu. The Cadogan Hotel, in London's Knightsbridge district, is pampering their guests - for the modest sum of £4,000, someone will pour 122 bottles of champagne.

Sparkling wines, a symbol of a lavish lifestyle and prestige, go along with late night entertainment such as Christmas and New Year's parties. When on the hunt for a good sparkling, consumers are sometimes surprised by the prices. High quality sparkling is expensive for many reasons ... because of the very restrictive rules and regulations to produce it, because of the lengthy method etc. First, it's fermented in steel barrels and then undergoes a second fermentation in the champagne bottle. The most iconic sparkling wine in the world is a blend of grapes including Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. The most treasured Champagne wines age for a minimum of three years. Most of us can expect to spend upwards of \$40 a bottle for basic, entry-level champagne.

Extreme sparkling wines are an art

Winemakers want people to take bubbles seriously, but without putting them on a pedestal. Bubbles may feel special, but sparkling wine shouldn't only be for high-end celebrations. "They most certainly stimulate a desire for playfulness, joy and companionship. The more selected they are, the more personal, perhaps even intimate, they affect us. They can be a real emperor of love," stresses **Matjaž Lemut** from the TILIA estate – House of Pinots in Vipava Valley. They are well-known for Pinot Gris and a selection of Pinot Noirs, and yet they are creating a brand of new sparkling wine, titled EL (Emperor of Love), which will personify their identity - less ordinary, less mundane, full of fine details, yet always drinkable and very memorable. "Extremely early-picked chardonnay gives clarity and purity of taste, also freshness, while pinot noir adds just the right shade of colour – not too gritty like some young roses, not too decadent like some rose

sparkling wines." Seems like a sparkling wine might just be the most technical of all wines. Lemut explains that its uniqueness lies in the on-going quest for perfection in all details. From the grapes in the vineyard, to choosing the time for the harvest, the details of the secondary fermentation and the length of the creeping yeast, to rounding the taste with liqueur d'expédition. "So many small details are associated with fine, precise choices like no wine!"

An esoteric juice of nature

On the other hand, **Miha Istenič** has a long tradition and commitment to sparkling wines. They were the first private company in Slovenia and in federal Yugoslavia to produce sparkling wine using the traditional method, and later developed a successful form of wine tourism. Miha stresses that sparkling wine is not just a drink. "In fact, it is not at all. It is a beverage that is not drunk but consumed. Sparkling wine is a pleasure in itself. It is an esoteric juice of nature, given to the human being, in order to honour the special and to transform it into joy." Istenič's main difference from champagne is obviously that they use different grapes. They are known for their production of fresh wines, with a nice, prominent acidity and not too much sugar, ideal for making sparkling wines. "Bizeljsko also had a good stock of the old indigenous variety, rumeni plavec, which is a welcome component of sparkling wines, giving them a pleasing acidity and freshness," adds Miha. They also place great focus on the culture of drinking sparkling wines, so they organise tastings in Stara Vas na Bizeljskem, that lies very close to the Croatian border.

The reputation of bubbly is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it enjoys a reputation as the celebration wine, all about elegance and prestige, on the other hand, sparkling wines bring joy – something that we should not feel only from time to time, but ... always. So, perhaps entering 2020 is just the right occasion to pair with bubbles magically. Bubbles may be lighter, like a silky white ocean, or sharper, like little bombs crackling in your mouth, so take time to appreciate this and "fly to the moon." ◀



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