

# A fizz for all seasons

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**Champagne is increasingly being seen as an ‘everyday’ drink in the region rather than a purely celebratory beverage, writes *Zara Horner***

Although ongoing economic uncertainty is seeing sales of Champagne stagnating in Europe, demand for the luxury wine is growing across Asia.

While this is partly down to a strengthening financial picture across the region, it is also due to the increasing sophistication of consumers.

“Champagne is absolutely an everyday drink,” Andrew Giblin, head sommelier at Brisbane’s award-winning Bacchus restaurant says with conviction.

“As the home of Dom Pérignon in Queensland at Bacchus we use Champagne as an aperitif and as part of our degustation menus. It is very versatile and can accompany almost any section of the menu from entrée through to dessert.”

Giblin believes a good wine list should include the big houses from the great regions of Champagne as well as different styles from those regions.

“There is now an expectation from diners to be able to try many styles and varieties from around the globe and a willingness from customers to experiment with new products and as yet relatively unknown varieties and regions,” he says.

Bacchus’ most popular Champagnes continue to be the big houses of Dom Pérignon, Moët et Chandon and Louis Roederer.

“The wine list is constantly evolving and developing. I change the list at least every month and sometimes more often,” Giblin says.

Not everyone agrees.

Mark Pollard is wine director at Naked Wines Australia and he says, “I think Champagne is still more of a celebratory beverage, but sparkling wine in general is more an everyday drink.

“Although prices have come down on Champagne, it is still much more than the average person pays for an everyday drink. Sparkling wines from our big local producers are definitely now sitting in the everyday drinks category.

“Sparkling wine priced under A\$15 (US\$13) is probably our hottest wine at the moment – we can’t supply enough.”

The company funds talented, independent winemakers who want to set up their own business, but don’t have the cash to do so.

“Naked Wines customers invest A\$40 (US\$35) a month into their Naked Wines account towards future orders, which we invest in grapes, winery space, barrels, bottles and other direct costs in return for exclusive wines at wholesale prices,” Pollard explains.

“Demand for luxury wine is growing as the prices have come down in recent years,” he continues.

“I think the big players like Verve, Mumm, Moët etc are spending lots of money to get their brands out there, so they continue to be the most popular.

“We don’t see many of the small producers here in Australia, but the selection is slowly growing.”

Pollard agrees that increased sophistication plays a part in this growth with more people in the region travelling and trying wines in other countries, then returning home and wanting to find similar things.

“It is still a relatively small proportion of the population who are able to do this in Australia though, and who can afford to drink these wines back in Australia at Australian prices.”

### **The next big thing**

Naked Wines has several sparkling white wines already selling well, with Jean Philippe Moulin Champagne Brut and Jean Philippe Moulin Vintage Champagne 2005 coming in for Christmas.

Outside of sparkling wines Pollard is seeing growth in organic and biodynamic wines across the board.

Naked Wines’ best selling sparkling wine is Jen Pfeiffer’s Rebel Bubbles NV, priced at A\$9.99 (US\$8.7).

The multi award-winning 137 Pillars House in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is a luxurious 30-suite boutique hotel, which has recently become the first Caveau de Sabrage there.

“A caveau is an establishment where Champagne bottles are opened in the historical way with a golden sabre,” explains general manager Manfred Ilg. “This time-honoured ceremony enhances the experience of drinking Champagne.”

Sabrage is the technique of opening a Champagne bottle with a special sabre or sword. The sabre is slid along the body of the bottle to break the entire neck away from the bottle, leaving only the base of the bottle open and ready to pour.

“All this is done under much pomp and ceremony with the sword bearers wearing elaborate capes with rich gold brocade,” Ilg says.

Just after the French Revolution, the sabre was the weapon of choice of Napoleon’s light cavalry. During their victory celebrations across Europe the cavalry would open the Champagne with their sabre.

“With an ever-growing number of Champagne drinkers in Chiang Mai, 137 Pillars House wanted to offer them a venue to enjoy drinking Champagne,” says Ilg.

137 Pillars House will also offer the Sabrage service to corporate MICE clients, as well as to groups of Champagne lovers.

“We feel Sabrage is a unique service that will help make our guests’ experience a memorable one,” Ilg adds. A licensed Maître Sabreur, Ilg is qualified to teach this traditional art himself.

Delamotte Brut, Pol Roger Reserve Brut, Louis Roederer Brut Premier, Moët Chandon Brut Imperial, Moët Chandon Brut Imperial Rose, Cliquot Brut, Dom Pérignon, Krug Brut Grande Cuvee, Louis Roederer Crystal Brut are on the hotel’s Champagne menu and may be sabred, upon guest request, by prior appointment.

### **The naked winemaker**

Making sparkling wine is not necessarily more challenging than traditional table wines, but it does involve a different set of winemaking skills, and takes more time says Naked Wines winemaker, Jen Pfeiffer.

“It is important to start by making a base wine specifically for sparkling wine – the fruit is picked earlier to retain natural acidity. This acidity keeps the wine fresh and clean in the mouth, which is very important for a sparkling,” Pfeiffer says.

The winemaker likes to use the traditional varieties, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

“Both the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are hand picked and whole bunch pressed to ensure the delicacy of the fruit is retained, and to limit the colour pick up from the Pinot Noir skins.”

The price of sparkling wine is determined by its inputs, Pfeiffer explains.

“The grape cost can be higher than some traditional varieties, and the winemaking involved can take years, especially if wines are blended across different vintages, or made in the traditional method. The bottles used are also heavier, to withstand the pressure, and are more expensive. The aspirational nature of the product contributes to the higher price.”

Nevertheless, Pfeiffer agrees Champagne and sparkling wines have become more popular in recent years.

“Particularly sparkling white wine, including traditional styles and more modern expressions such as Prosecco and Moscato. Consumers are now enjoying sparkling wine over a meal, and not just as an aperitif or to accompany canapés.

“My trade clients are looking for sparkling wines to be fresh and vibrant, with a gentle creamy complexity and an ability to be paired easily with food.”

For Pfeiffer, the future “looks bright” for Champagne and sparkling wines.

“As a category it is growing faster than any other. Australia’s premium sparkling wines are starting to compete with those from Champagne in terms of quality, which is wonderful to see. Consumers seem more willing to try both new styles and new producers.”