



Sparkling

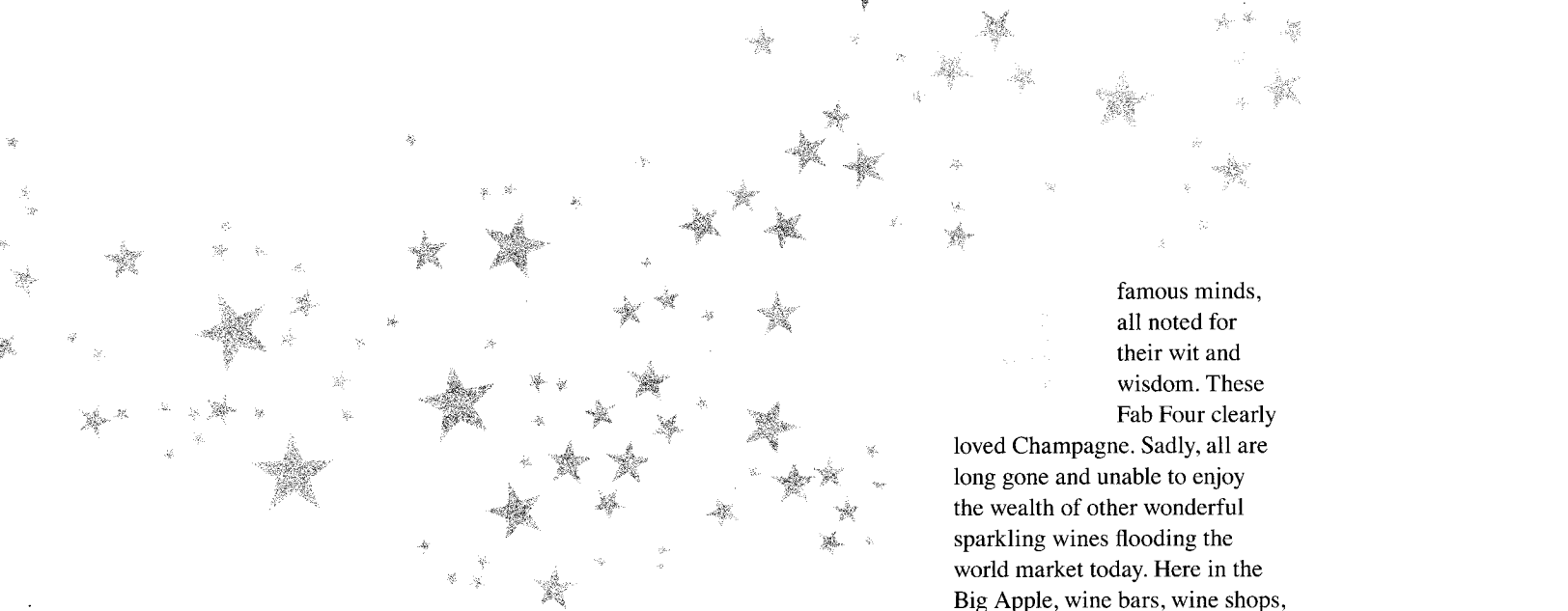
WINES

IN THE SPARKLING CITY

New York City is Bubbling Over

- By David Orange & Joel Leffert -





"My only regret is that I did not drink more Champagne."

- John Maynard Keynes, on his deathbed.

"Three be the things I shall never attain - ease, content and sufficient Champagne."

- Dorothy Parker

"Why do I drink Champagne for breakfast? Doesn't everyone?"

- Noel Coward

"Champagne is the best address in Europe!"

- Winston Churchill

famous minds, all noted for their wit and wisdom. These Fab Four clearly

loved Champagne. Sadly, all are long gone and unable to enjoy the wealth of other wonderful sparkling wines flooding the world market today. Here in the Big Apple, wine bars, wine shops, restaurants and lounges are a sparkle with Proseccos, Cavas and Spumantes as never before. If Dorothy Parker were alive today the Algonquin Round Table would be littered with Sparkling Shiraz as well as Champagne. Noel Coward would be out to lunch on Lambrusco. Winston Churchill would be warning of the "curtain" of Cremant that had descended across Europe. And the only bubble theory in Keynesian economics would involve the ones in a long-stemmed glass of wine. There has never been such a demand for sparklers before and such a succulent supply to enjoy.

We wanted to know why sparkling wines were so popular today. Is it just a fad? Are "sparklers" no longer just for birthdays and special occasions? And what about all the Proseccos, Cavas, Lambruscos and other bubblicies out there? Will they ever match the cachet of Champagne? How do they compare? When are they the drink of choice? For the answers to these and other questions we polled a group of top wine directors at some of Manhattan's finest food emporiums.

Eric Zillier is the Wine Director at Alto, 11 East 53rd St., Scott Conant and Chris Cannon's sleek, dramatic, temple to Northern Italian cuisine. Recently refashioned is more popular than ever under the guidance of executive chef Michael White. Eric's list of over 2,500 selections received the Wine Spectator Grand Award for 2008. "It's definitely not a fad," Eric said.

“People’s perceptions are changing, incorporating sparkling wine into their dining experience. Whereas before, Champagne or sparkling wine would be reserved for special occasions, as the quality levels go up and the prices remain approachable it’s becoming more of an everyday practice. Never has the quality of Prosecco and Cava been better and consumers recognize this and restaurants are adding these wines to their lists. As for Lambrusco, it still has a bad reputation, but there are some great ones out there. You just have to work a little harder to find a good Lambrusco. In terms of best quality for the price,” Eric continued, “I’d put Cava just ahead of Champagne. Although Franciacorta and California sparklers can be excellent only a precious few are of similar value. As for Cava vs. Prosecco, for my taste the quality of the best Cavas exceeds that of the best Proseccos. That being said, I enjoy drinking a good glass of Prosecco because it hits the spot for an everyday, relaxing drink. As for California vs. French, while there are some excellent California sparkling wines, the distinct qualities of Champagne will forever set them apart. The Champenois would probably be happy to have the warmer, sunnier days that California enjoys but the soils of Champagne are not found in California. That makes a huge difference.”

All-Star chef Scott Conant’s most recent success story is *Scarpetta*, which opened to raves this summer at 355 W. 14th St in the Meatpacking District. The name means “little shoe” and refers to the chunk of bread used to sop up sauce and we doubt there’s any left on the plate after one of his blissfully delicious meals. Jeff Tascarella is General Manager and Wine Director. “In the past, you would see your sparkling sales confined to pretty much Champagne only, and mostly for celebrations,” Jeff explained. “Now, the trend has definitely moved to an every day kind of mentality - especially in the female market. A few years ago, I remember explaining what Prosecco was to guests - the average guest had never heard of it. Now, you find people actually seeking it out. They recognize that it is one of the great “value” wines you can come across at a restaurant. I do my best to make available some unusual sparklers, things like a Nerello Mascalese spumante from Sicily, or a deliciously fruity frizzante Malvasia, but it will definitely be difficult to unseat Champagne. We’ve had a lot of success at *Scarpetta* with our Prosecco, especially our Prosecco rose which is a big hit with the ladies (90% Prosecco, 10% Pinot Poir, producer is Collabrigo). Obviously Champagne has been called the “ultimate food wine” by a number of people, but I think Prosecco gets the job done. Cava is great for a low-commitment sparkler, and some of the sparklers coming out of California (Mumm comes to mind) are simply wonderful, though at that price point, Champagne makes more sense.”

Marseille, at 630 Ninth Avenue, is one of the Hell’s Kitchen/Broadway area’s hottest spots. Chef Andy D’Amico, also of *Nice-Matin*, was inspired by the great Mediterranean melting-pot city to create a cuisine flavored with French, Italian, Greek and North African influences. The carefully crafted wine list concentrates mostly on Mediterranean countries and is the work of Wine Director Jonathan Charnay. “Sparkling wines in general are being ordered more often,” Jonathan told us. “The average costumer doesn’t consider it only for special occasions. However, I think it is different for Champagne, which is not an everyday wine, due to its price. People prefer to drink Prosecco or Cava because they are affordable and in general of decent quality. Personally, I like Cava better than Prosecco for its acidity and refreshing character. Cheap Prosecco can be very disappointing. As for the pricey ones, I’ll take Franciacorta anytime.”

*Champagne
may be
the most
successful
wine region
in the world.*

Herve Rousseau opened his Champagne lounge, *Flute*, in 1997 at 205 West 54th St, near Broadway. The Champagne business is booming. As he says, “Champagne may be the most successful wine region in the world.” He can sense the excitement in Champagne itself. The Champenois are notoriously understated, but on a recent trip, one wine maker actually admitted that, “Business is good.” High praise indeed! Herve likes Prosecco. “It’s a good alternative to Champagne - festive and cheaper. That said, I still come across more good champagne than good sparkling wine. And Champagne goes so well with different foods. I favor a full-bodied Brut with spicy Thai, a rosé with smoked fish and a blanc de blancs with parmesan cheese. And for dessert, perhaps a

demi-sec on ice. Besides Champagne, we have over 20 other sparkling wines from France alone. And our cocktails are very popular, especially Champagne Mojitos. One of my favorites is the Antoinette : Absolut Red Ruby, Piper Heidsieck and lemon juice." Santé !

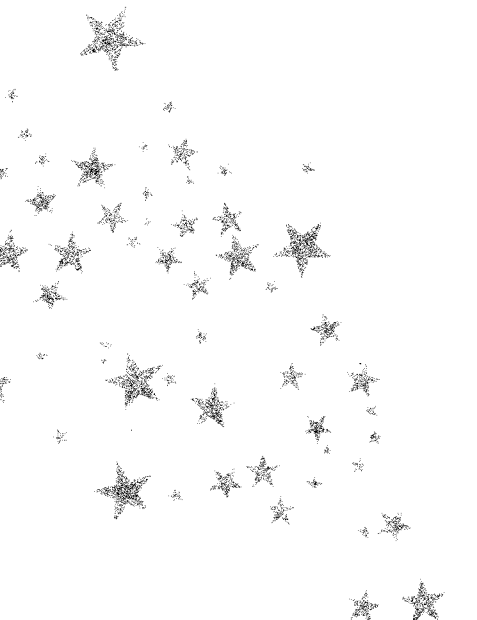
Martin Markovitz is the chef and a partner at the busy *East of Eighth*, 254 West 23rd Street, in Chelsea. He says : "Of course sparkling wine sales are more robust during the holidays but this does not mean that it is just a fad. We have many occasions where we sell sparkling wines. Birthdays and anniversaries occur throughout the year. Brunch is a natural for sparkling wines from any region and we push the three that we have by the glass as aperitifs. There is always a bit of magic in a wine that sparkles. For the professional wine taster, the good news of recent vintages is the increased level of winemaking in almost every region of the world. The growing interest in alternatives to Champagne is because there are other sparklers that give similar pleasures for fewer bucks. Our biggest competitor to Champagne is a sparkling pinot blanc from Alsace. The grapes are picked early to retain acidity and it drinks very well, especially for the price."

Dylan Prime is the great steakhouse at 62 Laight St. in Tribeca. Robert Smith is the personable Wine Director. "Although it's true that sparkling wine consumption increases during the holidays," Robert agreed, "I've noticed a huge increase in our sparkling wine by the glass program. As American consumers become more wine savvy, they tend to reach out more to alternative and new wine experiences. Recently I've noticed several guests (male and female) starting their meal with a glass of Champagne or Prosecco.


Also, the highest consumption time for Prosecco seems to be shifting to the warmer summer months. It's an inexpensive way to beat the heat ! "It is still true that Champagne is king. It's so simple to say, 'I'll have a glass of Champagne.' Recently, however, a more experienced clientele has been asking specifically for Prosecco by the glass, which was never the case. Prompted by so many requests we capitulated and provided one. The result is that everyone is happy. The guest enjoys a quality product that is cost effective and the restaurant has an item that allows for a good profit margin." Robert added, "For years the automatic answer to food pairing with sparkling wine was shellfish and oysters. But recently we have seen sparkling wines with all types of food. The trend as of late for all wine styles is to drink whatever you like, and abandon all the "rules" of food pairing. This summer we have seen a huge increase in champagne and Prosecco sales as guests continue to drink it throughout their meal."

The Four Seasons at 99 W. 52nd St. has been the restaurant extraordinaire for over two decades. Being voted by *Town and Country Magazine* as the "Most famous restaurant in the world" says it all. We have always associated this temple to indulgence with high-end Champagne. One of the times David dined here, he overheard a fellow at a table next to him say, "If I had a dollar for every champagne cork popped here, I'd be richer than Bill Gates !" This high-end, food palace always seems to be celebrating something, for the bubbly flows endlessly. If owner, manager and wine sommelier Julian Niccolini ever decided to give up the restaurant business, he could take his high energy, fun-filled showmanship and be a hit on Broadway. Julian has a devilish twinkle in his sparkling eyes and is a huge draw for their patrons, as is co-owner Alex von Bidder. Mr. Niccolini said, "For the twenty plus years I've been here, Champagne has always been a major star. I may have been the first in the city, a few years back, to push in a big way for rose Champagne, which I love. It caught on here at Four Seasons in a big, big way, especially Moët Rosé."

Kingswood is the hot new wine bar and restaurant this year in the West Village at 121 W. 10th St. The knowledgeable Craig Atlas is the Wine Director. "To a certain extent sparkling wine is still a special occasion choice, but I think the food pairing versatility of quality sparkling wines is better understood than ever before. Guests always ask for pairing suggestions and a party of four rarely orders four of the same appetizers, entrees or desserts. I'm always recommending sparkling wine,



*If I had
a dollar
for every
champagne
cork
popped
here, I'd be
richer than
Bill Gates !*





My favorite way to open a bottle of champagne is by far, sabering the bottle.

particularly anything 'méthode champenoise'. People are shocked at how well sparkling wine works with dinner and I think the trend is towards sparkling wine as an everyday selection. I know my mother keeps cracks of Taittinger in her fridge at home, so clearly she's leading the trend."

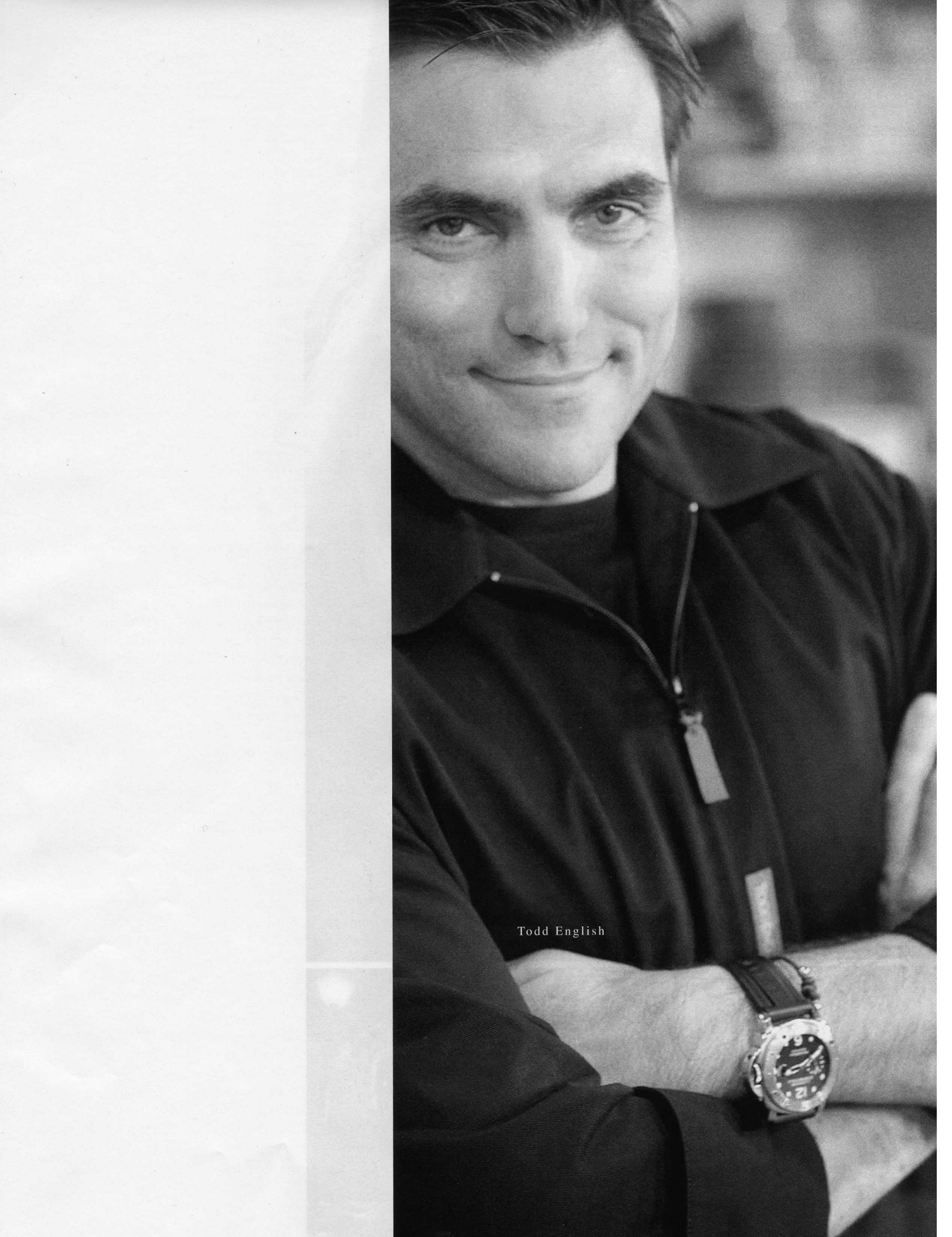
Craig added, "After Champagne, Prosecco has the largest mass appeal and is most frequently asked for by name. It has the strength of so many people being aware of it. I always get a kick out of people bellying up to the bar at a "non-Italian" restaurant or wine bar and point blank asking for a glass of Prosecco. It seems to have graduated to the level of a lifestyle product. No one assumes I'm pouring Cremant d'Alsace by the glass. Also, the resurgence of Lambrusco in the city has opened the way for a lot of sparkling red wine sales. We see a fair bit of interest in our Australian sparkling Shiraz. People love the color and the wines have a certain novel feel."

The New York Champagne Bar & Company, better known as the *Bubble Lounge*, at 228 West Broadway in Tribeca, opened in 1996 and quickly became a mecca for lovers of champagne and sparkling wines. Owners Eric Benn, Eric Macaire and managing director Emmanuelle Chiche have created an intimate, sensual space for trying over 300 different varieties of sparklers. Here, Champagne is for all occasions - to celebrate major milestones or the simple joys of everyday life. We asked

the Bubble Lounge's manager, the astute Cornel Borsan, what was behind the amazing growth in so many different sparkling wines? "The demand for bubbles," he quickly answered. "In the past ten years the global production of champagne and sparkling wine has doubled. Of course their individual character and price have a big impact on the market as well, but people are finding that these wines are a great way to enjoy life in general. I have seen people having Champagne with a slice of pizza, a burger or even chicken wings. Which is fine, because it goes with all kind of foods. Don't forget that, after all, champagne is just a wine. As any white wine, all the sparkling wines that are made predominantly of Chardonnay will go better with fish, seafood and white meat. Same thing for sparkling wines that are made mostly of Pinot Noir grapes: cheese, red meat, charcuterie, etc."

"As far as cocktails go," he went on, "even though we have more than 16 Champagne cocktails on our list, 3 are by far the most popular: Bellinis, Kir Royal and Champagne Mojitos." When it comes to removing the cork, Cornel confessed, "My favorite way to open a bottle of champagne is by far, sabering the bottle. For an additional price, we offer customers a lesson in how to do it." Finally, we asked Cornel, "Who is more attracted to the bubbly: men or women?" "Women," he insisted. "Men have more taste though, they are more sophisticated."

We next ventured to *Olives Restaurant* at 201 Park Avenue South in the *W Hotel* at Union Square. We met with Todd English - celebrity chef, author, entrepreneur, TV personality (Iron Chef USA) and once named by *People Magazine* as one of its "50 Most Beautiful People" - and asked him to compare sparklers. "A well-made Cava is capable of exhibiting some of the strength and qualities associated with Champagnes," Todd said. "Prosecco, on the other hand, is not designed to be as serious. Generally speaking, Prosecco is more accessible to the casual drinker and this 'weakness' is its strength. Prosecco is a great aperitif; it awakens the palate with its youthful vigor." When asked what foods go best with sparkling wines, Mr. English said, "Some of the best pairings my wine director has chosen for Olives are Escargot flatbread with Montrachet goat cheese, which is brilliant with Champagne and Alaskan King Crab papardelle and sweet corn ravioli, which is amazing with Cava." Todd also felt that though it isn't actually "new," sparkling Shiraz is pretty darn good and works well with a really broad range of foods.

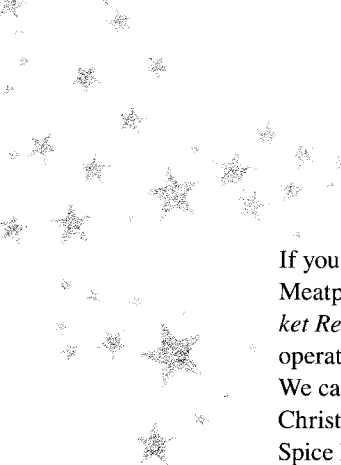


Todd English



Christy Canterbury





If you head due west from Union Square you end up in the Meatpacking District, where the scintillating *Spice Market Restaurant* is located at 403 W. 13th Street, owned and operated by another famed chef, Jean-Georges Vongerichten. We caught up with the enchanting corporate beverage director Christy Canterbury of Culinary Concepts by Jean-George, Spice Market being among this stellar group. We asked Christy for her take on the sparkling wine phenomenon. "Champagne recently enlarged its region of production," she informed us. "The reason they needed to do so was due to rising consumption ! Sitting with Patrice Boyelle, Managing Director of Pol Roger on Bastille Day, he spoke at length about the competition among the Grandes Marques for quality grapes... It's definitely not a fad ! Even rosé sales have been skyrocketing over the last 18 months." Christy said this about sparklers other than Champagne : "More consumers are increasingly open-minded to all sorts of new wine styles, and bubbles are no exception. Lambrusco is making a serious comeback in NYC. I've seen it listed by the glass in quite a few high-end restaurants. In fact, I just listed Carafoli Lambrusco Toccacielo at Spice Market New York and can't wait to see the response. It's incredibly food-friendly and with all the Europeans swarming to the Meatpacking District, I expect it to flow like crazy !" Christy mentioned Spice Market's two highly popular Cava-based cocktails, the Lychee-Raspberry Bellini and the Pattaya (Passion Fruit Puree, Crème de Mûre and Cava). We shared a laugh over a bottle of just popped bubbly after the cork went ballistic.

"The best way to open sparkling wine is by sabering the bottles !" she explained. "There is so much pressure in a bottle you could probably even use a toothbrush to make the cork go flying."

We headed around the corner to a new/old wine store at 1802 Broadway (between 58th and Central Park South) *Columbus Circle Wines & Spirits*. Owner Steve Villani has a great location just across the street from what is arguably the grandest condo building in Manhattan- the Time Warner Center. Columbus Circle Wines is deep in tradition, going back to 1938 when the store opened. They used to be at 57th street, but recently moved to their current address. We met up with Steve and his affable general manager Phil D'Ancona, (who has a knockout country rock band called The Shade.)

Steve and Phil seemed to speak in unison : "Sparkling wine isn't just a fad. Our purchasing records show a steady growth in sales. We see more and more people drinking Prosecco and Cava on a regular basis." Steve added : "Prosecco is growing at a good rate and really leading this trend. Lambrusco is also picking up as people discover it at a restaurant, and then come to me to purchase retail." When asked what foods he likes to pair his wine with, he answered, "I like to recommend a rosé Champagne with fresh fruit, especially raspberries. I also like Prosecco with cold antipasti because it's fresh and fun. Customers seem to enjoy it most during the hot summer months. And I always enjoy a good French Champagne with a simple steamed lobster."

At *67 Wines & Spirits* on Columbus and 67th St., manager Bart Hopkins and sparkling wine specialist Evelyn Wing greeted us. Before Evelyn had to run off to tend to a group of customers in the store's bustling bubbly section, she said: "Sparkling wines are a big hit. And Cava are really becoming quite popular. During this past year they have tripled in sales at 67." Bart said : "In this country, sparkling wines specifically Champagne, have taken on a celebratory role that generally excludes them from wine drinker's everyday regimen. Of course, price is a major factor, as a bottle of Champagne exceeds most people's budgets for daily consumption. And that's a shame because sparkling wine is one of the best complements to a wide variety of foods and cooking styles. But the good news is there are many affordable sparkling wines that fit perfectly into a budget, from fruity, dry and off-dry Prosecco to creamy, yeasty flavored Cava. And, they're not just for Sunday brunch or orange juice, either ! Besides, shouldn't every day be celebrated in some small way ?"

We asked Bart what his favorite food pairing was with a tasty Lambrusco. His answer had our stomachs rumbling. "If you ask someone from Genoa who is drinking a dry, sparkling or frizzante Lambrusco, the answer is the local specialties of the region. Lambrusco offers a refreshing complement to prosciutto, as well as the wide array of cured and salted meats of Parma, and especially the sharp, crumbly Parmaggiano-Reggiano cheese. And, it's subtle flavors of dark berries and bright effervescence offers a perfect counterpoint to the herbal, aromatic flavors of balsamic vinegar, which enhances the flavor of everything but is notoriously difficult to pair with wine."

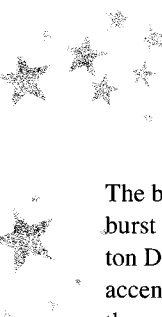
Harlem Vintage is at 2235 Frederick Douglass Boulevard at 120th St. On this very upscale block is an impressive wine shop, owned and operated by Jai Jai Greenfield. This astute young lady also owns the fabulously hip *Nectar Wine Bar* two doors away. This is one of the most sought after areas in the city, with new and exciting restaurants, businesses and condos springing up all over. Proof of that is seeing the city's biggest realtor, Corcoran Group, open an office just across the street. "Harlem has a rich tradition in embracing Champagne," says Jai Jai. "Recently I was told by a good source that a wine store around 145th and Broadway sold more of the millennium 2000 Edition Moët Champagne than anywhere in the city." "Prosecco is also hot these days," she added, "especially for Bellini cocktails. Another favorite with us is the sangrias with sparkling wine as their base. We recently added a Lambrusco, which is doing great as well. The sweet Lambrusco is now a drink of the past. The dryer, semi-sweet ones are right up there with the popular sparklers, especially during the summer time."

We took to the skies again as we sailed downtown to *Tribeca Wine Merchants* at 40 Hudson Street. This eclectic wine store opened right after 9/11. Once the area rebounded from that horrific day, Tribeca Wine Merchants dedicated themselves to creating a very special environment for their fellow wine enthusiasts. We caught up with assistant manager Ben Aneff to get his viewpoint on sparkling wines. "There is certainly a great push on Champagne during the holiday season," he said. "But with so many incredible wines coming out recently, (Salon 1996, Krug 1996, etc.) Champagne is on the radar of more and more customers simply looking for great wine, whether to drink now or cellar." Ben feels that Champagne can be a really versatile food wine. It has great acidity which helps cut through anything salty such as caviar. It's a natural pairing for sushi, and the yeastiness in some champagne makes it a great accompaniment to dishes with soy. Certain champagnes can also be incredible with dessert. He told us of recently having a 1998 Dom Pérignon with a nougat tort, and it was perfect. "The flavors matched each other so well you would have thought they were designed for each other."

Cibar Lounge is at 51 Irving Place between 17th and 18th streets in Gramercy Park. This "with it" place is cool, hip personified. We had to rub against beautiful skin to reach the appealing personable manager Gina Fasulo and moved off in a corner, by one of their multiple fireplaces, to chat.

Gina feels that sparklers are beyond being a fad. "They work well all the time," she said. "For a little something to accentuate your mood, any sparkler will do!" At Cibar, they especially love serving a sparkler with a first course of lobster salad or in between courses as a palate cleanser. It also sets the right mood during dinner parties. "We love making our martinis using Prosecco as the final ingredient," Gina continued. "It's the popular choice with our clientele year round, but especially during the warmer months." Her favorite at the moment is the Blood Orange Martini (Hendricks gin, fresh blood orange puree, topped with Prosecco). When Gina was asked who was more attracted to the 'bubbles' at Cibar, she stated emphatically, "Definitely women. Champagne is sexy and glamorous. Every glass helps!"

Uva, at 77th St. and Second Avenue, on the Upper East Side, is a hot spot wine bar that does something quite unusual with certain sparkling wines. Owner and wine sommelier Massimo Lusardi serves it in a bowl! "Sparkling wine in a bowl is popular again," said Massimo. "Uva is using this northern Italian tradition with wines like Vanzini Sparkling Bonarda. Drinking wines in a white porcelain bowl allows easy examination of its color. A few too many might lead to a stained red thumb, but in Italy this was a symbol of wealth. Uva patrons have fun with it.



The bubbly wine phenomenon is one bubble that's not going to burst any time soon." The talented and busy bartender, Stanton De Toit, added this comment in his distinct South African accent, "Prosecco and Cava are catching up to Champagne and the quality is getting better and better."

We walked southward to the Christopher Street Pier in the West Village and then eastward across Seventh Avenue to a bar with a real sense of history - *The Stonewall Inn*. This is the iconic, world famous, gay bar that was the site of the "Stonewall Riots". In 1969, police and alcoholic control board agents raided the place. While looking for violations of drinking laws, they made the usual homophobic comments and, after checking the various patrons for identification, began throwing them out the door, drag queens, biker types, college students, et al. But the gays fought back in a massive ruckus that included fist fights. For three days, people protested. And for the first time, after years of oppression, the chant "Gay Power" rang out. The six foot-five inch, 69-year old bartender is simply known as "Tree." The younger looking and very likeable Tree has been there for 40 years and is a legend in the bar community, as he tells it, "Because I've outlived everybody!" "Here at Stonewall we really drink Champagne for birthday parties and at holiday time," Tree informed. "However, the small Champagne Pops - a one drink bottle - is quite popular year round." Tree added that one of the biggest events of the year for both gays and straights, for which he is one of the organizers, is the "Night of a Thousand Gowns." Thousands of drag queens and tuxedo men attend, along with many big name show biz celebrities. As Tree tells it, "On this night the bubbly flows and flows!"


Back in Midtown, we made a quick stop at one of our favorite steakhouses, *Rothman's*, at 3 East 54th St, to speak to the Wine Director, Tom Gannon. He's always quick to spot a trend. This was his observation: "I would say that the number of tables that now choose to end their meal with a bottle of champagne rather than port or other traditional after dinner drinks has surprised me. Typically these are bigger spenders going for Krug or Dom Perignon, powerful champagnes after a big meal but occasionally someone will finish with a bottle of Franciacorta or more to the sweet side, a bottle of Brachetto. Even in a steakhouse, even in times of economic distress, bubbles are never far from most wine drinkers' minds or palates."

A couple of blocks west, at *Abbotto Ristorante*, 136 West 55th St., the astute Wine Director Caterina Berbotta told us, "We are finding that people have fallen in love with sparkling wines. A hit for us are the fine Champagnes and the rose type, and also the Italian dry Prosecco and Lambrusco. The Prosecco is always great straight, but also a real refresher when served as a cocktail. Adding the juices of watermelon and sorrel is wonderful, and we always are ready to experiment with other fresh

fruit juices in season such as mango and pomegranate."

Our next stop was Times Square and the *Montenapo Ristorante*, a sumptuous new Broadway hot spot in the new New York Times Tower, at 620 Eighth Avenue, a stunning 51-story building designed by the renowned Renzo Piano. We caught up with the very likeable manager - Josef Juck, who also manages *Bice Ristorante* on East 54th street. «Montenapo is named after Milan's world famous fashion street,» he said. «Although we sell Champagne, Prosecco seems to flow endlessly for us, both here and at Bice in midtown. These sparklers and others are excellent for sipping by the glass, and also go well with nearly all foods, especially caviar. We use our Prosecco for Bellini cocktails and Mimosas all year long.»

Back in Greenwich Village, with the end of our quest in sight, we pulled aside Dan Amatuzzi, the wine director at *Otto's*, at One Fifth Avenue, for a quick chat about pairing sparkling wines with food. Dan feels that, "One of the more underrated food and wine pairings is sparkling wine with fish. The effervescence of sparklers cuts through proteins and omega acids, while the minerality and fruit compliment the various flavors of fish, as well as the numerous seasonings and sauces used in modern culinary preparations." When it comes to dessert wines, Dan has a clear favorite. "The Piedmont region in Italy is most famous for the red wines of Barolo and Barbaresco, but it is also responsible for the classic frizzante (slightly sparkling) dessert wine, Moscato d'Asti. Topping out at 5.5% alcohol, the wine is a sweet, sparkling treat, with flavors of elderflower and orange that can tackle just about any chocolate or citrus component in your dessert."





DE VISU-REIMS

While we were in the Village, we met Helio San Miguel for a drink of bubbly and some conversation. Helio is an expert on Spanish wines and teaches the enormously popular wine seminars at the *Instituto Cervantes*. He is a writer and a scholar and we were excited to hear his take on the sparkling wine renaissance. Helio is a great fan of sparkling wines, particularly from California, but he feels that they haven't fully arrived yet. He believes, "There is still a great divide between wine aficionados and the general public. Unfortunately, for most people, sparklers are still just celebratory wines." We asked Helio about the Cava business these days. "Cava," he told us, "is the second leading sparkler after Champagne. Cava and then Prosecco. Codorníu and Freixenet are the two largest sparkling wine producers in the world, followed, I believe, by Moët. Their strategy, launched a few decades ago, was to conquer the inexpensive segment of the foreign market. As a result, Cava is generally perceived as a cheap sparkler, whereas inside Spain we have both, inexpensive and very expensive ones. "As in Champagne, we have the industrial producers and the artisans. Most people believe the fallacy that industrial producers are generally bad and artisan producers are good by definition. This is hardly true of any wine, but is especially false in sparkling wines as they require such technical winemaking. In both groups, in Champagne and Cava, there are great sparklers made by the large houses and also bad ones from artisan makers." "The name Cava comes from the Catalan word for "cellar". Most Cava is made in Penedés, with local grapes : Xarelo, Macabeo and Parellada. Most wineries add Chardonnay to their top wines, and lately Pinot has been allowed so now there's a new generation of Pinot based rosé Cavas. The minimum aging in bottle before release is a bit shorter than in Champagne, nine months. Then there are also Cava Reserva with a 15 month minimum, and Gran Reserva, with 30 months and of course it has to be made using the traditional method, in bottle only, to be called Cava. In Spain, many people mix fruit sorbets with Cava as dessert. Nice, especially in the summer." We asked Helio about his other favorites. "In my opinion the most underappreciated sparkling wine in the world is the Californian. The top bottles give a run for the money to other sparklers, including Champagne that costs two or three times more. I have showed this in blind tastings. Besides, they are more reliable vintage-wise and are made with similar grapes." His favorite food pairings ? "Many. Sparkling wines are good with sushi and sashimi. Demi-sec, so looked down upon, is actually great with fruit. Moscato d'Asti with strawberries and clementines makes for an ideal brunch on weekends. When I teach 'Intro to Wine' courses, that's the homework for the first week." His favorite sparkling anecdotes : "Just seeing the faces of people when Californian sparkling wine beats top Champagnes in blind tastings."

It was time now to pop a bottle of 'bubbly' and think of what we had learned. Different regions have their rabid fans and different foods their preferred pairings, but in the end all this competition is great for the Sparkling city's lovers of bubbly. Call it frizzante, mousseaux, semi, demi, blanc or brut, it means more choice in both taste and price, a situation dear to