

HOME TEAM BUBBLES

AMERICAN-MADE SPARKLERS ARE ALSO ENJOYING THE BUBBLY WAVE

BY W. BLAKE GRAY

As stores prepare to stack up cases of sparkling wine for the holiday season, U.S. bubbly producers are rubbing their hands with glee.

Even without a competitive boost from the U.S.-E.U. trade war—sparkling wines are exempt from tariffs imposed in October—the market for U.S.-produced sparkling wine has never been better. Some of this is the rising tide of bubbles in general. Sales of all sparkling wines in the U.S. rose 5.6% by volume and 9.6% by value between 2014–2018. The U.S. now spends more money on sparkling wine than any other country—25% more than France, which is second—and is third in the world in consumption by volume, after Germany and Italy, according to IWSR Drinks Market Analysis.

But even in this sparkling market, the growth in American bubbly stands out. “The domestic portion of the sparkling wine market is one of the fastest growing slices of the market,” says Schramberg vintner Hugh Davies. “It is exciting. It’s not that people are celebrating more. Sometimes they’re just drinking sparkling wine because they like how it tastes.”

In recent years at industry forums, speakers have tended to dismiss rising sparkling wine sales as a by-product of a boom in Prosecco. But now, some of Prosecco’s early adopters among consumers are looking to move up.

“More people are drinking sparkling wine every day,” says Enore Ceola, CEO and Managing Director of Freixenet Mionetto USA (which also owns Gloria Ferrer). “They’re looking for what’s next. What’s next after Prosecco? If you’re not ready to jump to Champagne, the next level is quality sparkling wine from California. Many producers from Sonoma [County] can provide a high-quality wine on the level of Champagne for half the price.”



MID-TEENS SWEET SPOT

Indeed, many of the fastest-growing U.S. bubbly are priced in the sweet spot between \$15 and \$30—right in between Prosecco and Champagne. Gruet Brut sales rose 21.7% between August 2018 and 2019, the highest growth rate of U.S. sparkling wines over \$15, according to Nielsen. Gruet Brut Rosé was second at 19.8%.

“You have your Prosecco that’s \$10 or \$12. You have Champagne that starts at the \$30 price point. And Gruet slots in right between that,” says Brad Mayer, Senior Vice President of producer and marketer Precept Wine. “Where American sparkling wine is finding its cadence is in that price point. I think when American sparkling wine starts to be too pricey and starts to compete more directly with Champagne, that’s when it becomes a more difficult battle.”

But there is also some movement on higher-priced U.S. sparkling wines. This

Freixenet Mionetto’s Enore Ceola, who has experience with bubbly on both sides of the Atlantic, believes that taste itself is a significant factor in California’s recent success. // Opposite page: scenes from Scharffenberger Cellars, Roederer Estate and Gloria Ferrer; all three have well-made bubbly priced advantageously between Prosecco and Champagne.



A FEW GOOD SPARKLING WINES IN THAT \$15-\$30 SWEET SPOT:

Argyle Vintage Brut (OR)



Domaine Carneros Brut Rosé



Gloria Ferrer Blanc de Noirs



Gruet Blanc de Noirs (NM)



Roederer Estate NV Brut



Scharffenberger NV Brut



is partly because there has been an explosion in the number of small premium sparkling wine brands, aided by the fact that it has become practical to make sparkling wine at custom crush operations. There are also now cult U.S. sparkling wine brands like Ultramarine and Caraccioli that sommeliers seek out. Those wines might not be important to retail stores, but they do help convey to diners the message that U.S. sparkling can be special and worth paying more for.

OH, THE VARIETY!

One of the subtle but important distinctions of American sparkling producers is that they have managed to have their cake, and their Cupcake, too, so to speak. In other words, there are many faces worn by U.S.-made bubbly—and Americans seem A-OK with that.

Naturally, price has a way of framing expectations. Consumers can shrug at the notion that Cupcake Vineyards' bubbly is actually Italian, just like they can respect the way the California producers with European counterparts are capable of producing top-shelf bubbly that deserve higher price tags.

You might say American bubbly has become a playground for monikers—from Fizz to

Bubbles to Brut to Sparkling—as well as a veritable rainbow in presentation. Witness Bronco Wine Company's Blanc de Bleu—a vibrant Mousseaux whose hue reflects a delicate blueberry flavor. House Wines of Washington turned to bubbly in cans when they wanted to create a rainbow-dressed product to support LGBTQ equality.

Indeed, the ascendant popularity of cans has given fresh juice to American bubbly. In retrospect, Francis Coppola's Sofia was way ahead of the times. And now, Sofia has plenty of company, including can-centric brands like Archer Roose and (gasp!) spritzers that make purists look away.

Back at the high end, the domestic bubbly scene recently welcomed a Comeback Kid of sorts: Paula Kornell, whose



father Hanns Kornell was among the very first in California to produce sparkling wine using the traditional method, is making her own now. She is teaming with Vintage Wine Estates to launch Paula Kornell 2017 Napa Valley Blanc de Noirs Méthode Champenoise (SRP \$50). American bubbles sure have come a long way since 1958, when the family founded Hanns Kornell Champagne Cellars....



American bubbly isn't just succeeding on price, though. California, and also Oregon in its new warmer climate, have developed a taste profile that seems to fit American drinkers even better than Champagne.

"The depth of fruit and the essence of fruit in California is pretty darn exciting," says Schramsberg's Davies. "At the end of the day, the essence of fruit from Pinot Noir that you get from coastal areas of California is really exciting. That's not to say anything negative about Champagne. But it's pretty exciting to taste all this fruit. We're only making 11% alcohol base wines. They're not that ripe."

Ceola, whose company produces and sells millions of cases of bubbly from Italy, Spain and California, agrees, saying, "Generally speaking, people feel that sparkling wines from California, they're more approachable. They're not overly toasty or overly yeasty. They're more fruit-forward."

READY FOR A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT?

Indeed, it's possible that U.S. sparkling

wine might be on the cusp of a Napa Cab-like moment. In the 1980s, much Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon was made more like Bordeaux and had an inferiority complex. (Indeed, the whole Meritage category sprang from this dialectic of modeling after Bordeaux but wanting to break free.) In the 1990s, first vintners and then consumers began considering the possibility that while stylistically it was different from Bordeaux, fruit-forward Napa Cabernet might be equal or even better than Bordeaux for their personal taste. The Napa Cab market took off and has never looked back.

The time is nearly (dare we say it) ripe for a similar reconsideration of the taste profile of California and Oregon sparkling wine.

"I don't think anybody in the California sparkling wine industry is singing the blues about sales," says Eileen Crane, CEO and founding winemaker of Domaine Carneros. "We're always busy at the chateau. We occasionally have to turn people away." ■