

Beverage Journal

The background of the entire cover is a high-contrast photograph of two champagne glasses clinking together. A large, dynamic splash of golden-brown liquid and fine bubbles erupts from the point of contact, filling the upper half of the frame. The glasses are filled with a sparkling beverage, and the bubbles are clearly visible throughout. The lighting highlights the rim of the glasses and the texture of the liquid.

DECEMBER 2025

A SPARKLING TOAST



SPARKLING REGIONS TO WATCH

BEST BRUT NATURE
CHAMPAGNES



Beverage Journal

Maryland Edition

DECEMBER 2025



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Cover Credit:
Adobe Stock

STEVE PATTEN PUBLISHER

THE CALM
BEFORE THE STORM

By the time you read this, the holiday season will be in full swing ... a busy, profitable time for our industry. But it's also the calm before the storm. On January 14th, the Maryland General Assembly will reconvene, and as always, beverage alcohol will be on lawmakers' radar. Whether it's chain-store licensing, tax proposals, or new regulations wrapped in "safety" language, your business could easily become the next legislative target.

That's why now (not January) is the time to reach out to your state legislators. Before the session begins, legislators are back in their districts attending community events, holiday gatherings, and business roundtables. They're listening. And the voices they hear now often shape the priorities they take to Annapolis next month.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN MAKE
YOUR VOICE HEARD BEFORE
THE GAVEL DROPS:Introduce Yourself
(or Re-Introduce Yourself).

Take a few minutes this month to write or email your Delegate(s) and Senator. Let them know who you are, where your business is located, how many people you employ, and the role your establishment plays in the local community. If possible, invite them to stop by before the holidays.

Share Your Impact.

Through the American Beverage Licensees (ABL) website (ABLUSA.org), members can generate reports showing local job creation, wages, and tax contributions. All are broken down by legislative district. These numbers give your story real weight.



Be a Resource, Not a Stranger.

Lawmakers are far more likely to call someone they know when industry issues arise. By establishing a positive relationship now, you can help ensure that the next bill affecting our trade includes your perspective ... not just someone else's agenda.

Connect Locally.

Your county beverage association and the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA.org) remain your first lines of defense and information. If you haven't yet joined, make it your New Year's resolution to do so.

Engagement doesn't have to wait for crisis. The most effective advocacy begins long before a bill is drafted. Over the past several years, I've spent a lot of time in legislative halls and committee rooms ... watching, learning, and engaging with policymakers. One thing I've learned is that influence doesn't come from titles or lobbyists alone; it comes from relationships and respect. Legislators remember the business owner who took the time to visit, who spoke with knowledge and civility, and who followed up with facts instead of frustration. Those are the voices that quietly shape outcomes.

So, between the rush of December customers and the first toast of the New Year, take a few minutes to invest in the relationships that protect your livelihood. Write the note. Make the call. Extend the invitation. Because when the legislature convenes next month, you'll want to be more than aware. You'll want to be ready, respected, and already part of the conversation. ■

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1



2



3



4



5



6

1. WOODFORD RESERVE

Drawing inspiration from the rye whiskeys that permeated the country's early days, Woodford Reserve master distiller Elizabeth McCall opted for a pre-Prohibition style mash bill of 53 percent rye for the limited-edition Barrel Strength Rye. It's the same bill used for the 90.4-proof go-to Woodford Reserve Rye, but this release, the distillery's highest proof rye yet, is bottled at 125.1-proof, showcasing baking spice notes of clove and nutmeg.

\$ SRP: \$129.99 per 700-ml bottle

🔗 woodfordreserve.com

2. TWO STACKS

Two Stacks, one of Ireland's sole independent whiskey bonders and blenders, has debuted a 35-proof double Irish cream liqueur containing eight times more whiskey than other leading brands. Developed in partnership with longtime Irish cream liqueur producer Robert A. Merry & Co., it melds Two Stacks' The First Cut signature blend Irish whiskey from Great Northern Distillery with a rich Irish double cream. Flaunting a 48 percent butterfat content, it gives way to silky cocoa- and toffee-inflected Irish Coffees.

\$ SRP: \$35 per 700-ml bottle

🔗 twostackswhiskeyus.com

3. LAELIA TEQUILA

First, Laelia Tequila made a splash with its blanco and reposado expressions from the lowlands of Jalisco. An añejo, the newest addition to the collection of tequilas distilled from 100 percent Blue Weber agave at Casa Natima, keeps the momentum going. Matured in French oak for 12 to 14 months depending on the tasting team's close monitoring of reposado liquid in barrel, each batch of the añejo is pulled at peak complexity, when it expresses layers of vanilla, caramel, and cooked agave.

\$ SRP: \$79.99 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 laeliatequila.com

4. HOLIDAY VODKA

Melding 100 percent soft Italian wheat grown in Piedmont and pure alpine spring water from the Maritime Alps, Holiday Vodka transports imbibers straight to Italy. The vision of Giancarlo Mancino, the founder of Mancino Vermouth, Rinomato Aperitivo, and House of Negroni, the vodka is distilled in small batches and filtered through charcoal, quartz, and silica at the fourth-generation, family-owned La Canellese distillery in Piedmont's Canelli. Exhibiting toasted cereal notes with hints of almond and minerality, it can be sipped neat, over ice, or woven into cocktails.

\$ SRP: \$39.99 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 holidayvodka.com

5. BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY

Jerry Brassfield immediately saw the potential of High Serenity Ranch, located in California's Lake County, when he purchased it in 1973. Today, the Brassfield Estate spans 5,000 acres across the High Valley AVA, as well as Round Mountain Volcano, and turns out wines that benefit from the high elevation. Consider the Kendra 2021, a Cabernet Sauvignon rounded out with Malbec and Petit Verdot. Named for Brassfield's youngest daughter, it illuminates fruit from the estate's prime vineyard blocks.

\$ SRP: \$250 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 brassfieldestate.com

6. MADDALENA WINES

Lena by Maddalena, the latest sustainable innovation from Riboli Family Wines, comprises a trio of premium boxed wines from the Central Coast of California. The varieties—a Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Monterey and a Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon—are housed in sleek boxes outfitted with BPA-free plastic liners crafted from recycled fiber. They conveniently fit in refrigerator door compartments, stay fresh for up to four weeks, and are embellished with cotton handles that make it easy to carry.

\$ SRP: \$24.99 per 1.5-liter box

🔗 maddalenawines.com

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HOLIDAY OFFERINGS



Item Description	Price
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Boeira, Ruby Port - NV 6/750ml	\$104.00
Boeira, Tawny 20 Year (decanter) - NV 6/750ml	\$264.00
Boeira, Tawny 40 Year (king bottle) - NV 6/500ml	\$320.00
Boeira, Tawny 40 Year Special Edition (decanter) - NV 3/750ml	\$360.00
Boeira, Tawny 50 Year (decanter) - NV 3/750ml	\$776.00
Boeira, Tawny Port - NV 6/750ml	\$104.00
Boeira, Tawny Reserve Port (midi bottle) - NV 6/200ml	\$104.00
Boeira, White Diamond - NV 6/750ml	\$208.00
Boeira, White Ruby Tawny (gift pack) - NV 3/300ml	\$174.00

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7. HARDIN'S CREEK

Where a whiskey is aged is just as profound as the cask it's maturing in. Take the Hardin's Creek limited-edition Warehouse Series, for which eighth-generation master distiller Freddie Noe placed identical mash bills across all three campuses. The result is a trifecta of 110-proof whiskeys with markedly different personalities—Warehouse R: The Mushroom, Warehouse W: The Beaver, and Warehouse G: The Owl—heightened by label illustrations from surrealist artist Max Loeffler that depict those identities.

\$ SRP: \$149.99 per 700-ml bottle
beamdistilling.com

10. JYPSI

Ahead of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, Whiskey Jypi has released the limited-edition Legacy Batch 003: The Declaration, the third installment in its Legacy series. An ode to Maryland-style rye, the 115.74-proof whiskey is composed of 60 percent Indiana rye finished with an apple brandy top note courtesy of barrels sourced from George Washington's Distillery at Mount Vernon. Thirty percent Canadian corn whiskey and 10 percent eight-year-old American single malt from Virginia complete the mash bill.

\$ SRP: \$199.99 per 750-ml bottle
whiskeyjypi.com

8. FORDS GIN

Just in time to brighten cocktails served at holiday festivities, Fords Gin has re-released its ruby-tinted sloe gin—first launched in 2022—in limited quantities. At London's Thames Distillers, hand-picked sloe berries grown in England and France are steeped in Fords Gin for 12 weeks. The spirit is then sweetened with natural cane sugar and bottled at a slightly higher proof to highlight its tart, dried-fruit character. The classic British liqueur is ideal for libations like Jeffrey Mоргenthaler's Sloe Gin Silver Fizz.

\$ SRP: \$34.99 per 700-ml bottle
fordsgin.com

11. TIERRA DE ENSUEÑO

Only 2,000 bottles are produced for each batch of Tierra de Ensueño blanco tequila, but given the terroir of the family-owned estate in the highlands of Jalisco, no two are the same. Batch 8, the most recent arrival from master distiller Sergio Cruz and master blender Oscar Vasquez Camarena, matures for 30 days in exceptionally rare wheated bourbon casks, eliciting notes of orange blossom and, because the liquid is only a month away from reposado classification, a jolt of toasted oak and vanilla bean.

\$ SRP: \$59.99 per 750-ml bottle
ensuenotequila.com

9. NEW YORK COCKTAIL COMPANY

Some of New York City's finest Martinis are savored at the Manhattan bar Martiny's. Now, The New York Cocktail Company is bringing that elevated experience home with a four-serving, ready-to-drink Vesper Martini hatched in collaboration with Martiny's founder Takuma Watanabe. Combining Brooklyn gin, Charbay vodka, and Mancino ambrato vermouth, this botanical-laden spin on a favorite is best served ice cold and garnished with an expressed lemon or grapefruit peel.

\$ SRP: \$29.99 per 375-ml bottle
newyorkcocktailcompany.com

12. THE GLENLIVET

First up in The Glenlivet's Beyond Speyside series, which channels alluring destinations around the world through distinctive cask finishes, is the 12-year-old Jamaica Edition. A portion of the 80-proof single malt whisky was finished in barrels that previously held Jamaican rum, garnering notes of mango, pineapple, coconut, and vanilla that conjure the laidback atmosphere of Treasure Beach on the island's southern coast.

\$ SRP: \$54.99 per 750-ml bottle
theglenlivet.com



BOB HENDRICKSON

A MESSAGE FROM MARC SACHS, PARTNER & BOARD MEMBER, RNDC

"It is with a very heavy heart that I share the passing of my dear friend and our Interim Chief Executive Officer & President, Bob Hendrickson, on Friday, October 17.

For more than three decades, Bob helped shape the very heart of RNDC — our growth, our culture, and our purpose. From the early days of Republic Beverage Company in 1997, through the 2007 merger that created the RNDC we know today, Bob's leadership, integrity, and passion guided every chapter of our story. With more than 42 years of experience in this industry, his influence reached far beyond our walls, touching suppliers, customers, and colleagues across the country.

Those of us who had the privilege of working with Bob know that he believed success was never a solo effort — it came from the strength of the people around him. He led with loyalty, humility, and deep respect for his teams. The culture of collaboration, accountability, and high performance



that defines RNDC today is a direct reflection of his leadership.

As we navigate this difficult time, the Board of Directors has asked me to serve as Interim CEO & President during this transition. I am humbled by the opportunity to help guide us through this moment, sup-

ported by Jay Johnson, formerly Region President West, who will be assisting as special advisor to me to ensure continuity and stability.

Before his passing, Bob played an active role in the vetting process for our next CEO. His thoughtful approach and long-term perspective have laid the foundation for a smooth and deliberate transition. The Board will continue that process, and we will keep you informed as it progresses.

Over the coming days and weeks, I encourage all of us to remember Bob not only for the results he achieved, but for the way he achieved them — with care, conviction, and an unwavering belief in RNDC's mission and people. Let's honor his legacy by living those values each day, supporting one another, and carrying forward the work he loved so deeply.

Please keep his family and loved ones in your thoughts and prayers as they navigate this unimaginable loss." ■



BUNNY'S BUCKETS & BUBBLES

HOPPING DOWN THE FELLS POINT TRAIL

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

"For anyone who has never been here before, we've been taking the combination of fried chicken and champagne – one of the greatest combinations of things ever – and mashing it together! Fried food and bubbles just go so great together. You have the high brow and the low brow. Creating the core business model from that and then building it out from there has been a lot of fun."



So says Brian Acquavello, who opened Bunny's Buckets & Bubbles in the Fells Point neighborhood of Baltimore city in the summer of 2023 with partners Jesse Sandlin and Matt Akman. They had each taken inspiration from a restaurant named Leon's in Charleston, South Carolina, and thought it would be a fun concept for Maryland's Charm City. So far, they have been proven right.

During a recent interview with the Beverage Journal, Acquavello said, "We took a pretty iconic space in Fells Point that was just a bottom floor. We took it over and completely redid the whole entire space. We built a full-kitchen upstairs, and today it's kind of a modern-style diner that is very bright when

Brian Acquavello
owner / operator
Bunny's Buckets & Bubbles



you walk in. Very bright and very fun.”

With this being the latest installment in our ongoing series of articles on bars, restaurants, pubs and taverns in and around Maryland with funny and quirky names, the question thus became . . . why Bunny's? Acquavello was quick to answer: “Bunny is our chef-partner. Jesse Sandlin. She was on ‘Top Chef,’ season six. We became friends a long time ago, and we’ve been working together for a while. Conceptually, we just thought throwing her out there as the namesake would be the best way to go. Then, the Buckets & Bubbles plays off putting fried chicken in a bucket and bubbles in a bucket.”

Bunny's Buckets & Bubbles serves more than just fried chicken, of course. The menu features an array of Southern comfort food. And the cocktail list is an extension of the establishment's overall feeling of fun and escapism.

Acquavella remarked, “We have bartenders and bar managers who do a great job putting things together. We do focus somewhat

on cocktails with bubbles, of course. But as we’ve been going these first two and a half years, we have been finding the drinks that our guests love the most, and we keep those and have them on our anchor list that we rotate frequently. Mostly seasonally. But we also try to push the envelope a bit and let our bartenders and staff show off their creative sides and not get bored doing the same thing



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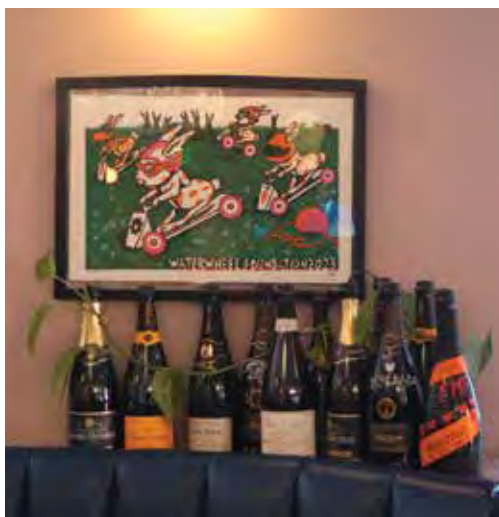
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every day.”

Bunny’s top-selling drink, for instance, is called The Fix Is In. “It’s our take on an espresso martini,” Acquavella said. “It’s basically a Bananas Foster-flavored espresso martini that is named after a phrase one of our partners’ fathers would utter whenever something would go wrong while watching a sporting event. ‘The fix is in!’”

As for clientele, Acquavella calls Bunny’s customers a “true melting pot. We get a lot of people from the neighborhood to start. They’re our regulars who we see two or three times a week. But we see everyone. When the



Ravens played Chicago recently, we had so many Bears fans in. I love seeing the eclectic mix of people on any given day that come in. We just had 20 people from Canada come in last Monday who were in town for some convention. I asked them, ‘How did you find us?’ And one of them said, ‘Oh, this guy’s wife follows you on Instagram.’ So seeing them sitting next to some of our local neighbors, it’s just really cool.”

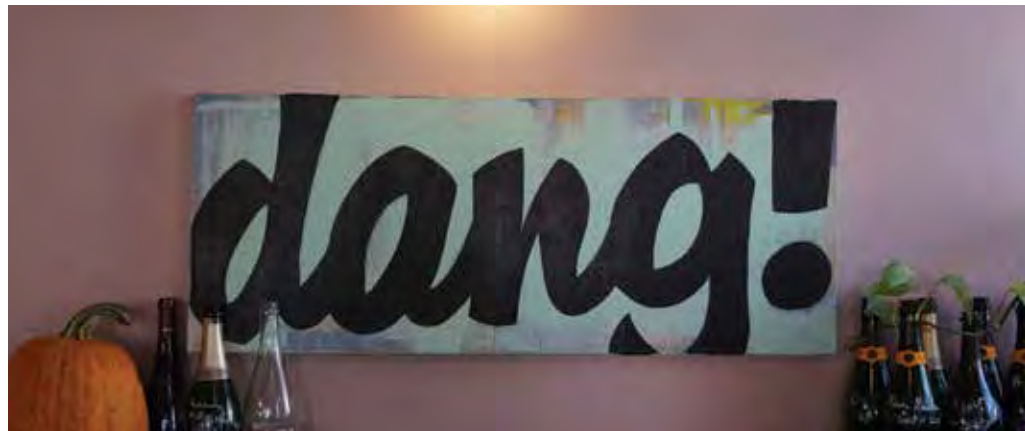
He continued, “The reason I’m in this industry is the people. I love hospitality. My brain defaults to ‘How do I help people?’ If you tell me who your favorite sports team is, I think, ‘What can I do to help you enjoy that team more?’ It’s a strength and a weakness sometimes, but I love it. It makes me happy to make others happy, and to make a career out of that has been pretty rad.”

And when times get tough – and they get tough frequently in the business of hospitality – Acquavella leans on lessons he’s learned over a lifetime. One of the best pieces of advice he ever got was when he was a teenager and working his first job on a Christmas tree farm. “My boss said: ‘No one is coming to help you.’ It sounds pretty negative, but I never took it as such. To me, it means if you want something, you’ve got to go get it. You’re not going to get it for free. You’re going to get it with hard work, with putting in the hours. My first restaurant I bought, I probably slept in it 100 times that first year. I probably worked two years straight. But it was fun. It was mine.”

Paying it forward, Acquavella has some words of wisdom for anyone reading this who dreams of opening his/her own place someday. Whether you are currently a bartender or a server or an assistant manager, he urges, “Learn everything! If you want to own a bar, you better be the busboy. You better be the barback. It’s not a matter of ‘I’ve been a good bartender, and now I’m going to own a bar.’ That’s the easy part. Once you open, you don’t

get to lay your head down for a second. When you think you have a moment to relax and think of fun, creative ideas, the toilet will overflow or the dishwasher will break. Owning a business is not as glamorous as most people think. And even then, sometimes hard work doesn't work. Sometimes you get a pandemic."

That said, Acquavella is optimistic about the remainder of 2025. "At least in Baltimore and the Fells Point area, there seems to be a lot of positive momentum," he concluded. "But there are a lot of question marks in the world right now, too, so who knows about the new year? January, February, and March are usually hard months in the restaurant business, in general. We're just going to be prepared as much as possible and navigate the best we can to keep people employed and the bubbles fizzing!" ■



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WAITING GAME

For the first time, Louisville distillery **Angel's Envy** has released an age-statement whiskey. The limited-edition Angel's Envy 10 Cask Strength, overseen by master distiller Owen Martin, is matured for 10 years in new American oak and port wine casks. Bottled at 122.6-proof, it's bold yet elegant, its palate of juicy apricot and Cognac culminating in a rum raisin cake finish.

SRP: \$249.99 per 750-ml bottle

CONTINUOUS EXPLORATION

Curiosity has always propelled **Westland Whiskey**. A decade ago, the Seattle distillery introduced Garryana American Single Malt, and now there's the 100-proof Garryana 10th Edition, the brand's inaugural age-statement offering. The limited release showcases a mash bill of Westland's signature five-malt and Washington pale-malt barleys and is aged in rare *Quercus garryana* oak native to the Pacific Northwest, bolstered by Pedro Ximénez, rum, and ex-bourbon casks. Mulled wine and walnut fudge brownie aromas pave the way to a warm spice profile evocative of the region.

SRP: \$149.99 per 700-ml bottle



THE PIONEERS

In 2000, California's **St. George Spirits** rolled out Lot 1 of its single malt whiskey, long before the American single malt movement took off. Like previous editions, the 86-proof Lot 25 stays true to the signature mash bill hatched by master distiller Lance Winters all those years ago, featuring a range of roasted two-row barley. But this time around, head distiller and blender Dave Smith chose 28 American oak, French oak, and California Sauternes-style wine casks for the blend, even incorporating some whiskey from the distillery's first-ever single malt.

SRP: \$100 per 750-ml bottle

AFTER DINNER

Crème Brûlée, one of France's most famous desserts, dates to 17th-century Versailles, and **Compass Box's** 98-proof Brûlée Royale blended malt Scotch whisky honors that palatial history. Tasting of clotted cream, broiled peach, and tarte tatin, the limited-edition expression is an ideal nightcap, especially when accompanied by New York City-based French pastry chef Dominique Ansel's Brûlée Royale Fondue, a recipe whipped up exclusively for the whisky blending house.

SRP: \$159.99 per 700-ml bottle



JAPANESE CRAFT

Japan's **Fuji** Gotemba Distillery, which ambitiously produces malt and grain Japanese whiskeys in Scottish, Canadian, and American styles in just one place, has unveiled a 92-proof single malt Japanese whisky characterized by flavors of white peach and oatmeal cookie. Developed by master blender Jota Tanaka, the blend of 100 percent Japanese malts born from Mount Fuji's snowmelt-fed waters, is aged in a variety of barrels, including American white oak and French oak red wine casks.

SRP: \$99.99 per 700-ml bottle



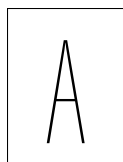


FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Sicily's Etna region; Marlborough, New Zealand; Corsica, France; and Willamette Valley, Oregon

SPARKLING WINE REGIONS TO WATCH

TAKE A SECOND LOOK AT THESE FOUR REGIONS FOR SPARKLING WINE THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, FROM COUNTRIES THAT ARE INCREASING THEIR BUBBLY EXPORTS, TO ISLANDS DIPPING A TOE INTO THE LANDSCAPE

BY VICKI DENIG



As the wine industry looks for opportunities to spark sales amidst declining wine consumption, many point out the success of a specific category: sparkling wine. Worth about \$290.1 billion in 2024, sparkling wine maintained a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of six percent between 2017 and 2022, even as wine as a whole experienced a one percent decrease in CAGR over the same time period, according to IWSR.

Going into the important holiday season, when about 20 percent of all sparkling wine is consumed, according to IWSR, it's worth looking to less common bubbly regions for inspiration. While they vary

in size, recognition, and sparkling wine production history, these four regions are making waves in the U.S. for different reasons—and their sparkling wine cultures are ones to pay attention to.

ETNA: ATTENTION TURNS TO SPARKLING

Sparkling wine production in Etna isn't new, says Antonio Benanti, the co-owner of Benanti Winery; it dates back to 1989, when Cantine Murgo began experimenting with bubbly expressions of Nerello Mascalese. But it wasn't legally allowed to be labeled as Etna DOC until 2011, when Spumante and Spumante Rosato were



The volcanic, mineral-rich soils of Etna in Sicily make it a natural fit for bubbly.

added to the DOC. According to DOC regulations, the wines must be made from a minimum of 80 percent Nerello Mascalese using the *metodo classico*.

While sparkling wine comprises a tiny proportion of the more than five million bottles of Etna DOC wine produced each year, production is growing. According to data from the Spumanti dell'Etna association, production of Etna Spumante Bianco has more than doubled between 2019 and 2024 (from about 87,000 bottles to 199,000 bottles). Etna Spumante Rosato is smaller but also increasing; over the same time period, production has increased from 34,500 to 65,000 bottles.

Those numbers don't account for sparkling wines made by Etna producers that fall outside the DOC, such as Benanti Winery's Noblesse cuvée; because it's entirely made with Carricante, it is labeled as Terre Siciliane IGT. "Our production has grown from just a few hundred bottles of Noblesse to about 4,000 bottles today," says Benanti.

Buyers and producers alike attribute the growth in Etna's sparkling wines to the confluence of two popular categories: Etna itself, and sparkling wine as a whole. "We believe that sparkling wines from the region are gaining popularity now because Etna wines in general have become among some of the most appreciated and respected wines in the Old World," says Benanti. Fabrizio Germano, the general manager of Millesima in New York City, says that the region's volcanic, mineral-rich soils make Etna a natural fit for sparkling wine. "Their bubbles are generally fine and persistent, and the palates are dry, fresh, long, and creamy," he says.

NEW ZEALAND: EXPORTS ON THE RISE

While most eyes in Marlborough locked on Sauvignon Blanc in the 1970s and '80s, which would soon propel New Zealand into the international spotlight, Champagne native Daniel Lebrun saw something different when he first encountered this land. After planting Chardonnay, Pinot



In New Zealand, Clos Henri was finally able to export its sparkling to the U.S. in 2022.

Noir, and Pinot Meunier, Lebrun launched his first traditional-method sparkling wine in 1985, thus kicking off New Zealand's sparkling wine culture.

Wineries across both islands make high-quality, traditional-method sparkling wine today, but most of it is consumed within New Zealand, leading these sparklers to remain under the radar among American buyers. That's changing, however. According to the 2025 New Zealand Winegrowers Annual Report, published in September, there's been an uptick in sparkling wine exports since 2021. In 2024, 2.3 million liters of New Zealand sparkling wine were exported, versus an average of 1.2 million liters exported between 2016 and 2020. Ranit Librach, the U.S. market manager for New Zealand Winegrowers, credits the wines' "exceptional value for the quality" as one of the likely reasons for their growing attention abroad.

The trend has been similar at Marlborough wine estate Clos Henri, which first made 120 cases of traditional-method Blanc de Noirs in 2014. Most of the production either remained in New Zealand or was sent to Scandinavian countries until 2022, when winemaker Damien Yvon increased production to 700 cases, allowing some of the wine to go to the U.S. "We are confident this market could grow, as consumers will discover and appreciate the lively profile of our Blanc de Noirs,"

says Yvon, crediting the region's fertile soils and diurnal temperature shifts as the backbone to the wine's freshness and fruit expression.

Still, sparkling wine makes up a tiny fraction of the New Zealand wines that land in the U.S. In the 12 months leading up to June 2025, just 147,000 liters of New Zealand sparkling wine were exported to the U.S.—more than any other market except Australia, but just 0.14 percent of the country's total exports to the U.S.

CORSICA: CREATING A SPARKLING WINE CULTURE FROM SCRATCH

Corsica doesn't have a culture of sparkling winemaking—in fact, AOC and IGP rules on the island don't allow for sparkling wines—but one producer wants to change that.

"Corsica has all of the elements—diversity and relevance of terroirs, strong sense of place, culture, and soul—and yet no precedent in sparkling wine," says Richard Geoffroy, the founder of IWA Sake and the former chef de cave for Dom Pérignon, describing the opportunity as a rare and exciting blank page. Together with his son Charles Geoffroy and former Corsican marketing ambassador Vincent Cervoni, Richard Geoffroy launched Avvizzà with the 2023 vintage, aiming to showcase the



Richard Geoffroy, a longtime chef de cave in Champagne, believes that Corsica could have a bright future in sparkling wine production.

“Corsica should be able to build quick momentum, and soon become one of the most interesting new voices in the world of sparkling wines.”

– Richard Geoffroy, Avvizzà

island’s potential for high-quality, dry sparkling wines.

Corsica’s few sparkling wines have primarily been made from Muscat and vinified into sweet or semi-sweet bottlings, according to Charles Geoffroy; some other neighboring winemakers, including Jean-Charles Abbaticci, have experimented with traditional sparkling wine production. Avvizzà is the first to dedicate itself to Corsican bubbly, bottling its wines as Vin de France. Using an extended Charmat method, the wine is made using Sciacca-

rellu, Biancu Gentile, and Vermentinu.

The Geoffroys hope that this is the beginning of a bright future for Corsican sparkling wine, particularly as more wineries look to diversify beyond the plateauing rosé segment. “For a long time, there was little incentive for Corsican producers to explore sparkling wine,” says Charles Geoffroy. Sparkling wine, one of the few growing wine segments, offers a natural path forward. “Beyond its natural suitability, Corsica has the open mindset needed to unlock such potential,” Richard Geoffroy says. “Corsica should be able to build quick momentum, and soon become one of the most interesting new voices in the world of sparkling wines.”

WILLAMETTE VALLEY: MORE ACCESS FOR SMALLER PRODUCERS

“Sparkling was still a relatively small part of the Willamette Valley’s overall portfolio until around a decade ago,” says James Frey, the winemaker and founder of Tri-
saetum Winery. But more recently, that has changed. The Willamette Valley Wineries Association reports that 108 of its producers make sparkling wine today, compared to under two dozen in 2018.

Just a handful of regional producers were making sparkling wines in the early 2000s, says Kate Payne Brown, the head winemaker at Argyle Winery. “Argyle was by far the dominant player in volume, producing about 20,000 cases, which represented a strong majority of the total regional production,” she says. They now make around 40,000 cases annually. Early trailblazers like Argyle, Elk Cove, and Domaine Meriwether leaned into the Willamette Valley’s cool climate and specialization in classic sparkling-wine grapes Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

But this momentum has led sparkling wine experts to create new companies that facilitate production for a wider range of producers; earlier this year, custom crush winery Vinovate acquired The Radiant Wine Company, a sparkling wine specialist that brought mobile tirage, disgorgement, and bottling services to producers. “We now have the infrastructure and technical expertise that allows even small producers to craft high-quality sparkling wines, and consumers’ palates have evolved,” says Payne Brown. “In many ways, we’re now seeing the rewards of years of belief and persistence; the faith that sparkling wine could truly thrive in the Willamette Valley is finally being realized.” ■



More Willamette Valley producers are now able to follow in the footsteps of early trailblazers like Argyle Winery and Elk Cove.



HUNTING FOR CHAMPAGNE'S FORGOTTEN BOTTLES

WHETHER FOR MARKETING, CAPITAL, OR TO CRAFT A SPECIFIC STYLE, PURCHASING BACK-STOCK CHAMPAGNE STILL AGING ON THE LEES—A LITTLE TALKED ABOUT PRACTICE—HAS BEEN GAME-CHANGING FOR TWO WINEMAKERS

BY SHANA CLARKE

For some Champagne producers, the most valuable wines aren't the ones slowly aging in the house's caves. Instead, they are the abandoned bottles, squirreled away in cellars throughout the region.

In recent years, Champagne producers have shown a growing interest in purchasing this back stock of wines *en tirage*, or not yet disgorged. These wines can benefit a producer in many ways, such as helping a new producer build a brand, or making it possible for a winemaker to craft a specific style.

This type of production is possible thanks to French law: "If we look at the law, the winemaker is the person who disgorges the bottle," explains Juliette Alips, the winemaker for Domaine Les Monts Fournois. Even so, this practice is a fairly hush-hush part of the industry, but two producers proudly tout the role

these wines play in their business. Here's how they are utilizing these rediscovered stocks of Champagne to their benefit.

BUILDING A CHAMPAGNE BRAND

Launching any new wine brand can take years. For Champagne, given the time required to age a wine on the lees—a minimum of 15 months, but often as long as 10 years—the process is even more time-consuming. But working with purchased back stocks of Champagne can help a producer accelerate that timeline.



For example, Juliette Alips, along with her cousins Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche of Champagne Bérêche et Fils, are in the process of launching Domaine Les Monts Fournois, a new Champagne brand sourced from a 22.2-acre premier cru vineyard in Ludes. The Bérêche family has worked with the site for many years, and they are now slowly buying up the vineyard for estate production. While the project started 10 years ago, the first vintage of Les Monts Fournois, 2022, is expected to be released in 2027.

It's challenging for a business to have so much stock tied up in cellars, so in the interim, Domaine Les Monts Fournois is building awareness and financial capital in two ways. The first is through the production of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay Côteaux Champenois from the Monts Fournois vineyard. These still wines don't have the same aging requirements as Champagne. The second is through sales of their Crus Sélectionnés Champagnes, a line under the Monts Fournois brand, which comprises old stock of *en tirage* Champagne from other producers.

LEFT: Juliette Alips, the winemaker for Domaine Les Monts Fournois, is building brand awareness using old stocks of Champagne *en tirage*.

Working with brokers, they buy wines aging on their lees but not yet disgorged. After obtaining bottles, they select the final dosage and disgorge the wine. “We are searching for treasures that are sleeping in cellars,” says Alips. There are several reasons why these bottles may have been abandoned; sometimes the winemaker didn’t have the time or resources to finish and sell the wines. “Or the winemaker died and all the stock is in the cellar,” adds Alips.

They source only from premier cru and Grand Cru sites from three subregions: Côte des Blancs, Vallée de la Marne, and Montagne de Reims. They also only buy vintage wines. “We think of this collection as a selection,” says Alips. It’s also an extension of the brand ethos. The goal is to express the terroir of the three regions, much as Les Monts Fournois is meant to be a terroir-driven cru Champagne.

CRAFTING A SPECIFIC STYLE OF CHAMPAGNE

While Les Monts Fournois is focused on brand creation, Rodolphe Péters, the winemaker of Pierre Péters, uses old stock of Champagne to craft an ideal style for Fleur de Miraval, a rosé Champagne.

Working with the Perrin family, who produce the Miraval line of wines in conjunction with actor Brad Pitt, Péters sought a style that “shows the qualities we love in old Champagne—the pastry flavors, buttery brioche, plus the toast and roasted nut flavors, because we all agree that we love that,” he says. But at the same time, the family sought fruity, fresh elements and juiciness often found in rosé Champagne. “I said to Jean-Pierre [Perrin], ‘you ask for a kind of magic,’” recalls Péters. “You like showing maturity, but with very fresh flavors. It doesn’t exist, you know?”

They eventually struck upon a three-part cuvée. Using purchased bottles of 100 percent vintage Grand Cru Chardonnay still on the lees, Péters imparts a technique known as *remise en cercle*, where bottles still on the lees are opened and then blended with vins clairs. He looks for a blanc de blancs that’s at least 15 years old

to blend with their estate-produced vins clairs to provide the desired rich, autolytic qualities to the fresh, fruitier base.

The *remise en cercle* component, which accounts for approximately 25 percent of the cuvée, is blended with a perpetual reserve of 100 percent Grand Cru Chardonnay from the Côte des Blancs (approximately 50 percent of the overall Fleur de Miraval blend). Saignée of Pinot Noir from Vertus rounds out the rest. The wine then ages on the lees for four years, with a final dosage of about five grams per liter of sugar.

HOW BACK-STOCK CHAMPAGNES CAN BENEFIT A BRAND

Les Monts Fournois and Fleur de Miraval are the rare labels that are transparent about their use of purchased wines, although rumors abound that several brands have started this way. However, Shannon Coursey, the executive vice president of sales and marketing at Wilson Daniels, the importer of Les Monts Fournois, says a project like Crus Sélectionnés Champagnes strategically sets a new brand up for success in a foreign market.

“We’re really trying to help them build excitement for something that’s not even here yet,” says Coursey, referring to the first release in 2027. “We are building a brand and anticipation by using the Crus Sélectionnés wines.”

Strategically, Coursey is bringing the wines to markets that already know and love grower Champagnes. For markets where bigger houses dominate, she’s been pouring Les Monts Fournois as a welcome glass at events as an introduction to the brand.

She also notes that the Crus Sélectionnés provide something special for a Champagne list. “These get wines with age out there on the market, while usually you’re spending quite a bit of money to get a 10 or 15-year-old Grand Cru wine on a list,” says Coursey. “And yes, these are not inexpensive, but I think they’re a great value because they’re coming right from the winery. They’re not traveling around or found at an auction.”



Rodolphe Péters, the winemaker for Pierre Péters, purchases back-stock Champagne to craft a specific style for Fleur de Miraval.

There’s also the rarity factor: once these wines are gone, they’re gone for good. By offering something with an interesting story and unique selling point, it builds brand affinity for Les Monts Fournois.

A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE?

Given that en tirage Champagnes are quite limited in quantity, will there be a point when houses can no longer rely on back stocks?

Péters says *remise en cercle* is often done by houses with their own reserves of Champagne, and the goal is to build the same useful library at Fleur de Miraval. “Every year, we struggle to find en tirage bottles,” he says.

For the past four years, they’ve started bottling a portion of the perpetual reserve on its lees to replace a portion of purchased bottles. The hope is that the aged qualities they seek in the en tirage wines will still come through with a higher percentage of reserve wines in the blend.

But given that the purchased stock is all vintage Champagne, whereas the perpetual reserve is multivintage, Péters notes that purchased wines en tirage will always have a role in Fleur de Miraval in order to maintain the integrity of the style.

At Les Monts Fournois, it remains a big question mark. Coursey, for her part, is a champion. “It’s just such a cool opportunity to have wines of age from these sites,” she says. “So I’m hopeful.” ■

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TOP BRUT NATURE CHAMPAGNES

CHAMPAGNES MADE WITH NO DOSAGE ARE INCREASINGLY POPULAR AMONG WINEMAKERS, AND CONSUMERS ARE CATCHING ON. HERE ARE SOMMELIERS' FAVORITES

BY CAITLIN A. MILLER

While Champagne is a year-round staple at many bars and restaurants, the celebratory nature of bubbles makes this classic French wine a perennial holiday favorite. To boost sales during the busy festive season, it's important to be well stocked with the most in-demand producers and categories. Increasingly, that category is the driest style available: non-dosage Champagne.

Once a niche offering, more and more Champagne producers are exploring lower dosages. To legally be considered a non-dosage (or brut nature or brut zero) Champagne, the wine must have less than three grams per liter of residual sugar. While higher levels of sugar were once needed to balance the very high acid levels found in grapes from cool-climate Champagne, that's not always the case these days. As temperatures rise and winemaking becomes ever more fine-tuned, many Champagnes simply don't need the extra sugar to reach the perfect balance.

With so many interesting non-dosage options now available, *Beverage Media* asked on-premise Champagne-focused wine buyers from around the country for their top picks in the category. Their selections highlight the exciting diversity and quality of this increasingly popular Champagne style. (All wines are listed with suggested retail price per bottle.)

1 Guy Larmandier Cramant Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut Zéro NV; \$60

Selected by Adele Corrigan Wade, general manager, 13 Celsius, Houston

Houston's 13 Celsius is touted as a "haven for curious drinkers," thanks to their focus on unique wines and various serving sizes from large-format bottles to tasting portions. General manager Adele Corrigan Wade has been leading the charge for almost two decades, and has compiled a deep and thoughtfully curated sparkling selection that includes several brut nature Champagnes. Her current favorite is Guy

Larmandier's Cramant Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut Zéro.

"This Champagne just sings to me," says Corrigan Wade. "This is one of the long-standing niche producers from the ever-impressive Rosenthal portfolio. This is 100 percent Chardonnay from the Grand Cru of Cramant. With all fruit grown on limestone



soils and no dosage, the incredible minerality shines through. It's aged on the lees for three years, which adds just that perfect amount of yeasty texture to balance the acidity."

2 Champagne Clandestin 'Boreal' Blanc de Noirs Brut Nature NV; \$85

Selected by Isabel Kardon Neuhaus, sommelier, The Modern, New York City

Sommelier Isabel Kardon Neuhaus has been guiding guests through The Modern's extensive wine list for four years. The two-Michelin-starred restaurant in New York City is known for its robust, wide-ranging list, which includes a generous selection of Champagne, from stalwart Grandes Marques to up-and-coming producers doing things differently, like Champagne Clandestin.

"Unlike most beloved Champagnes, Clandestin has not been in a family for generations on an especially sacred plot of land," says Neuhaus. "Instead, winemaker Benoît Doussot is doing things his own way—championing bio-certified, progressive growers with serious untapped potential across Champagne and exploring vinification based on specific soil types and expositions. The Boreal cuvée is 100 percent Pinot Noir from north-facing slopes in the Côte des Bar. It embodies everything I want with a blanc de noirs: tension, fruit, texture, and balance."

3 Champagne Piollet 'Colas Robin' Brut Nature 2018; \$100

Selected by Raymond James Irwin, chief champagne officer, Fizz Champagne Bars + Wine Club, multiple locations, California

With the enviable job title of chief Champagne officer, Raymond James Irwin, of Fizz Champagne Bars and Wine Club in



California, surely knows his bubbles. The well-curated Champagne list offers a mix of new and familiar names, but Irwin calls attention to the small, family-owned producer Champagne Piollet, which he recently featured in the Fizz wine club.

"I love this because it's rare to have a 100 percent Pinot Blanc Champagne, let alone one that's also brut nature and biodynamic," says Irwin. "This is a small grower-producer from the southernmost part of Champagne. It's from one of the best years in the last 50—2018—and it's aged for more than five years and from a single village. If you want top-tier, unique, but just delicious brut nature Champagne with the zing, zip, and balance, this is the Champagne."

4 Tarlant Zero Rosé NV; \$75

Selected by Mary Martin, general manager and sommelier, Tasting House, Los Gatos, California

Tasting House, a wine bistro and Champagne bar in Los Gatos, California, has a wine list that includes over 100 Champagnes, which can be served alongside a full tasting menu or simply with some caviar. When recommending Champagnes to guests, general manager Mary Martin gravitates towards grower-producers that compliment the globally inspired menu.

"One of our favorite brut nature Champagnes that fits both of these criteria is the multi-vintage Tarlant Zero Rosé," says Martin. "For having zero dosage, it has a lovely weight and texture to it, which allows



for a nice range of pairing options from appetizers to entrées and even dessert. The grapes are hand-harvested from 63 different parcels across four villages near Oeuilly. Twelfth-generation winemaker Benoît Tarlant has a hands-off approach to winemaking, using indigenous yeasts and no filtering, allowing the terroir to express itself quite beautifully in the glass."

5 Christophe Mignon 'ADN de Foudre Meunier' NV; \$90

Selected by Sean Dickinson, beverage manager, Sunny's, Miami

Since the pandemic-era pop-up reopened in a permanent space in 2024, Sunny's has been one of Miami's most talked about steakhouses. While the food is a big part of the draw, the restaurant is equally well known for its beverage program, which features fancy cocktails, plenty of big reds—and a brut nature Champagne from Christophe Mignon, which beverage manager Sean Dickinson even recommends alongside a filet.

"Don't let the Comic Sans on the label fool you: this is serious wine," says Dickinson. "Mignon is notoriously scrupulous in the vineyard, employing one person per hectare to oversee stringent biodynamic practices. This rare amount of attention produces fruit with optimal ripeness and nothing to hide. A specialist



BUYER PICKS

in [Pinot] Meunier, Mignon's brut nature is laced with aromatics of red fruit and chock-full of minerality and acid. It is a perfect food wine and can pair with even the sturdiest of proteins. Mignon and filet mignon, anyone?"



6 Drappier Brut Nature NV; \$60

Selected by Evan White, wine director, Bludorn Hospitality Group, Houston

At the modern American restaurant Bludorn in Houston, wine director Evan White also leans toward food-friendly Champagnes that can stand up to the richer dishes on the menu, which can range from short rib ravioli to dry-aged duck. His top pick is currently Drappier's brut nature.

"It's a blanc de noirs made from 100 percent Pinot Noir, coming from the Côte des Bar, the southernmost subregion of Champagne," says White. "The wine is savory and salty, incredibly brisk and refreshing, but with some real body and substance to it. Even though it's brut nature, it's not a light wine and is a wonderful Champagne with food. This retails for around \$60, which, for a wine of this quality, is an incredible steal."

7 Benoît Déhu 'La Rue Des Noyers' Brut Nature NV; \$125

Selected by Michael Seward, wine director, Pop's For Champagne, Chicago



With the vast majority of their menu dedicated to the category, Chicago-based Pops for Champagne is no stranger to recommending great Champagnes. Their educational menu spans nearly all styles, with helpful explainers on bottle sizes, regions, and sugar levels. As the longtime buyer for Pops, wine director Michael Seward has developed a few favorites, like Benoît Déhu's La Rue Des Noyers Brut Nature, which is 100 percent Pinot Meunier from the village of Fossoy.

"I am incredibly fond of the wines from Benoît and find his interpretation of [Pinot] Meunier, especially in La Rue Des Noyers, driven and electrifying," says Seward. "It's a great example of how terrific [Pinot] Meunier can be on its own, and his dedication to farming really shows through on the end product with a fruity, terroir-driven, soulful wine."

8 Philippe Gonet '3210' Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV; \$95

Selected by Madeleine Thompson, beverage director, Coupes, Dallas

The Dallas-based Champagne bar, Coupes, dedicates no less than 10 pages of its wine list to Champagne, and is recognized as one of the top destinations for enjoying Champagne stateside. Therefore, beverage director Madeleine Thompson has a full list of non-dosage Champagne ready to recommend, including the 3210 Extra Brut from Philippe Gonet. While technically labeled as extra brut, the wine has zero grams of sugar and therefore qualifies as brut nature (Champagne labeled extra brut can have between zero and six grams of sugar per liter).

"This Grand Cru expression of Chardonnay has been aged three years, from two terroirs, one variety, and zero dosage," says Thompson. "The ripeness of the fruit results in a balanced and bright cuvée with notes of lime blossom, lemon tartlet, and stone fruit." ■

