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This Nose Knows Bubbles: Salgue's Sparkling Secrets

by Laura Ness - HerVineNess on January 20, 2011

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If you ask Michel Salgues, heralded sparkling winemaker and veteran of the French Champagne industry for nearly 30 years, both here and there, Americans, and especially Californians, don't drink enough of the really good bubbly. And it might not be our fault.



Salgues, now sparkling winemaker for Caraccioli Cellars in the Santa Lucia Highlands, has had too many bad experiences with supposedly good labels from his native France that are totally tanked by exposure to the two things that destroy wine faster than Prohibition and Teatotallers: heat and light.

It's probably happened to you and you didn't even realize it. You paid really good money for a special bottle of Veuve Cliquot, or something in that vaulted sphere, and, lo and behold, it was *blecchy*. Sorry!

south of fun, woefully west of zest, and noticeably north of "nope," which would translate to "no, thank you." Not to mention east of "what the *f* is this? My dead goldfish wouldn't piss in this!" Alas, you will never sneak anything by anyone from New Jersey, even if they are dead.



Instead, your very polite (perhaps not from Jersey) companions pronounced this all too costly Champagne, "yeasty" and so "French," but you knew it was, well, too tired to take out the trash, too tired to find the remote, too tired to do the dishes. In fact, just too tired. Because it was. Too many wine shoppes (the smaller the shops, the more the "p's"), stack their premiere wines in plain sight, out in the open and in the light. *Wrongola*. This is the worst thing for wine. So, always try to buy that bottle of good Champagne right out of the fridge (preferably from a reputable retailer), and never, ever buy a bottle of Champagne off a shelf that sees enough daylight to charge your solar water heater. If the rack is near a window, walk away. If you are browsing a wine selection in the setting sun, it's already done.

Some little secrets: the French don't always send us their best stuff. Ok, not so secret. But something Salgues quickly points out, is that NV Champagnes are really pretty darned good values overall. He should know: he spent 18 years perfecting them for Anderson Valley's Roederer Estate. He suggests there should be nothing derogatory about the term "non-vintage," despite the fact that many American sparkling makers do routinely make pretty boring cheap stuff under this nomenclature. Unlike their French counterparts, they almost never make a "vintage" sparkling to highlight a particular year. And beware of those "vintage" releases from France: snap them up right away, for they could end up losing their unique character. Often, they reflect the moment, and, like their bubbles, are best enjoyed in that moment.



He argues that the NV term would be more informative and correct were it "multi-vintage," reflective of the practice of keeping a bit of each wine from successive vintages to layer up year by year, adding dosages of the past to the present, creating a sparkling of more balance and complexity than the typical single vintage can achieve. You won't be surprised to hear that he suggests any Roederer sparkling you can find, as long as it was properly stored. Frankly, a place like Safeway or Bev Mo are probably decent bets, as their ratio of shelf to window space is extremely low, and their turnover, relatively brisk.

The true secret to a really good sparkling, though, is to harvest grapes at the proper acid level: and then, not to press them too hard. Gently, gently, down the stream, life is but a dream...of perfect bubbles. I asked Michel, what makes those beautiful little bubbles that buoy the world's finest occasions from year to year? He smiled and said, "It's the Chardonnay. It has no tannin to get in the way of the foam. Have you seen how it foams when you press it?" Turns out that tannin attacks the protein in the foam, which breaks down the bubbles. Pinot has bigger bubbles, and more tannin, so it is inherently more challenging to make a fine-bubbled Pinot-based sparkler, which is why the best of the best of true Champagne comes from Chardonnay.

So, if you seek the creamiest bubbles to tickle your nose, look for *Blanc de Blancs*, always made from 100% Chardonnay.

Just make sure it hasn't been window dressing.

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[Jim Wallace](#) [January 21, 2011 at 7:09 am](#)

Woefully west of zest? I love it.



[Jerry Starr](#) [January 22, 2011 at 11:53 am](#)

Where (other than at the winery) can one find this nectar o' the gods?



[Laura Ness - HerVineNess](#) [January 23, 2011 at 3:09 pm](#)

Jerry – direct from website is best:
<http://www.caracciolicellars.com>
They also sell at Zeph's in Salinas.
and new tasting room in Carmel!

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