

# A New World of Bubbly

*The latest releases from U.S. sparkling wine producers balance tradition and innovation*

BY TIM FISH

American sparkling wine producers boast about their tête de cuvées and late-disgorged bottlings—and rightfully so, since they present the ultimate expression of the house style. But these rarefied offerings, which often fetch \$100 or more a bottle, are not the producers' most important wines. That honor is reserved for their non-vintage cuvées.

"Your non-vintage is your bread and butter," explains Roederer Estate winemaker Arnaud Weyrich. The Anderson Valley winery sometimes skips a vintage of its tête de cuvée, L'Ermitage, for that reason. "Even if it's a good vintage, you have to hold back some of the best lots to keep your non-vintage to the standard."

That seems consistent with my recent tastings of nearly 100 sparkling wines from the U.S. for this report. In many cases, the non-vintage wines show surprisingly well compared with the tête de cuvées. Since my previous report ("Sparkling Traditions," Dec. 31, 2023 - Jan. 15, 2024), I have reviewed wines from California, Oregon, Washington and New Mexico in blind tastings at our Napa office.

Unlike still wine producers, which generally release a new vintage about the same time every year, bubbly houses have an eclectic schedule of releases. Non-vintage cuvées—blends of multiple vintages—are released first. In California, non-vintage wines are typically about two years old, meaning a bottle you buy in 2024 is mostly wine from 2022. Even the many U.S. producers that don't make non-vintage wines maintain their own release schedule for vintage bottlings. Some have 2021s out now, while others are releasing 2019s or older vintages. It all depends on the type of bubbly being made and the house style.

The best non-vintage cuvées offer both quality and value. The Roederer Estate Brut Anderson Valley NV (93 points, \$32) frequents the top ranks every year, and the current release is dynamic yet sleekly elegant. The Schramsberg Brut North Coast Mirabelle 33rd Bottling NV (91, \$31) is plush yet vibrant, with a lilting mix of baked apple and strawberry flavors. Paula Kornell's Brut California NV (90, \$22) is expressive and vivacious, while Louis Pommery's Brut Rosé California NV (89, \$27) is fragrant with rose petal and strawberry blossoms. Snappy and sleek, Mumm Napa's Brut California Prestige NV (89, \$24) features expressive Meyer lemon and strawberry notes.

"Winemakers from the world of Champagne and sparkling wine want to limit the effect of vintage," Weyrich says. "We don't want every vintage or cuvée to taste identical, but we are providing a house style that people like, and we don't want to erase that." Branding is important in Champagne, he explains. "Customers aren't saying, 'I'm drinking Champagne.' They are very specific: 'I am drinking Bollinger or Roederer,' or 'I'm drinking Taittinger.'"

U.S. sparkling wines may not have reached the same level of devoted exclusivity as Champagne, but they have built an impressive track record with their own tête de cuvées. No winemaker had a better year than Weyrich, who made several top sparklers. The Roederer Estate Brut Anderson Valley L'Ermitage 2017 (94, \$75) is opulent yet detailed, with pear and cherry flavors accented by roasted hazelnut, brioche and fresh ginger. More classic is the luxurious Roederer Estate Brut Anderson Valley L'Ermitage Late Disgorged 2006 (95, \$120), showing notes of baked apple, brioche and roasted hazelnut.



Roederer Estate winemaker Arnaud Weyrich

Other leading sparklers in this report include Domaine Chandon's sumptuous and vivacious étoile Tête de Cuvée Los Carneros 2015 (94, \$111), which shows richly layered flavors of baked apple and Asian pear, and J's plush and decadent Brut Russian River Valley Late Disgorged 2015 (94, \$110), with crème brûlée and roasted hazelnut accents. The Schramsberg J. Schram Rosé North Coast 2015 (94, \$180) is rich and extravagant, with generous apple pie and cherry flavors laced with roasted almond brioche.

Late-disgorged cuvées particularly stood out this year, starting with the J Brut. Several others impressed me as well. The Argyle Brut Willamette Valley Extended Tirage 2013 (93, \$85) is a handsome sparkler that reveals maturity but remains vibrant; the Domaine Carneros Brut Carneros Late Disgorged 2017 (93, \$59) blends freshness with hints of maturity and creamy richness; and the Gloria Ferrer Rosé Carneros Cuvée Late Disgorged 2018 (93, \$95) is plush yet crisply styled, with strawberry pie and rose petal tones.

This style of late-disgorged bubbly is aged for additional years in the bottle and on the yeast, typically 10 to 20 years longer than standard cuvées in California. The chemical explanation is complex, but the upshot is that the yeast and its byproducts help protect the wine from oxidation. After extended aging, the bottle cap—like seal is removed, the dead yeast extracted and the dosage added before corking. "There is a sense of richness from that yeast contact," Weyrich says. "It tastes younger than it is, but it's richer than a young wine."

Grower Champagnes have caught the fancy of Europe and America alike, but U.S. producers have been slow to claim a similar title. The phrase refers to wineries that grow, vinify and age their own wines. They're often smaller, family-owned houses making a very personal statement

on sparkling wine. There are some sparkling houses that would fit that bill—Iron Horse and Roederer Estate both use only estate grapes—and perhaps the category will be more important in the future.

An extension of the grower-producer movement is a focus on single-vineyard bubbly. Single-vineyard versions of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay are common, but they are rare with sparkling wine. That's starting to change as a handful of producers explore the idea. Argyle in Oregon has made them in the past, while Weyrich is trying his hand with two new offerings, the Roederer Estate Clark Road Vineyard Sparkling Anderson Valley 2020 (92, \$55), a refined and handsomely structured cuvée, and the yet-to-be-released Roederer Estate Apple Alley Vineyard Sparkling Anderson Valley 2020.

While Champagne has farmed vineyards for generations, California is a young wine region. The first Roederer Estate vines in Anderson Valley were planted in 1984. "After 40 years, we feel more confident of being able to talk about very specific parts of the vineyards," Weyrich says.

Clark Road is on the west end of Anderson Valley, closest to the ocean. Planted in 1999, it produces some of the estate's best Pinot Noir. "It gets more fog cooling early in the day and then fog later in the day. It's always the vineyard picked last in the season, so there's a slightly longer hang time of that fruit on the vines, which is a good thing," notes Weyrich.

Apple Alley vineyard is near the winery on the estate ranch, which was originally an apple orchard. Predominately Chardonnay, it was planted in 1984, and some of the vines are still producing.



The cellars at Schramsberg

"I can get that citrus-driven acidity from the Chardonnay, but it can ripen nicely without becoming flabby," Weyrich says.

I look forward to tasting Apple Alley when it's released late this year. Meanwhile, I'll be watching for other sparkling producers to try their hand at single-vineyard bottlings now that their vineyards are maturing. I'll be excited to see what new offerings emerge in the future.

## TIM FISH'S RECOMMENDED U.S. SPARKLING WINES

Nearly 100 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/SparklingAlpha123124](https://www.winespectator.com/SparklingAlpha123124). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>ROEDERER ESTATE</b> Brut Anderson Valley L'Ermitage Late Disgorged 2006 A luxurious version, with baked apple, brioche and roasted hazelnut flavors highlighted by steely acidity and ending with a luscious finish.	95	\$120	<b>ROCO</b> Brut Willamette Valley RMS 2020 Bright and vibrant, this version offers refreshing apple, lemon and yeasty spice flavors that zip along the finish.	91	\$65
<b>DOMAINE CHANDON</b> étoile Tête de Cuvée Los Carneros 2015 A vivacious sparkler, with richly layered baked apple and Asian pear flavors highlighted by caramel brioche, roasted hazelnut and spices.	94	\$111	<b>CUVAISON</b> Brut Cuvée Los Carneros 2020 Precise and expressive, this offers rich flavors of baked apple accented by strawberry and toasty spices before finishing on a zesty note.	90	\$60
<b>J</b> Brut Russian River Valley Late Disgorged 2015 Plush and appealingly decadent, delivering rich baked apple, crème brûlée and roasted hazelnut flavors that finish on an opulent accent.	94	\$110	<b>GOLDENEYE</b> Brut Rosé Anderson Valley 2020 This rosé bursts with vivid cherry blossom aromas, showing vibrant, refreshing cherry and lemon flavors that zip along the bright finish.	90	\$72
<b>SCHRAMSBERG</b> J. Schram Blancs North Coast 2015 Dynamic, with polished flavors of baked apple, Asian pear, brioche and roasted hazelnut that build richness on the plush finish.	94	\$150	<b>PAULA KORNELL</b> Brut California NV Expressive and vivacious, showing pretty apple and lime flavors laced with notes of vanilla and spices before finishing on a zesty accent.	90	\$22
<b>ARGYLE</b> Brut Willamette Valley Extended Tirage 2013 This handsome sparkler reveals maturity but remains vibrant, with baked pear and Meyer lemon laced with roasted hazelnut and spices.	93	\$85	<b>BON VIVANT</b> California NV A steely and vibrant version, with lively citrus and apple flavors that zip along the refreshing finish.	89	\$20
<b>DOMAINE CARNEROS</b> Blanc de Blancs Carneros Le Rêve 2016 Vivacious and elegantly luxurious, showing Asian pear, brioche, fresh ginger and blanched almond flavors that glide on the sleek finish.	93	\$125	<b>GRUET</b> Blanc de Noirs American NV Festive and lively, offering apple and strawberry flavors that build richness and gain spice notes toward the finish.	89	\$17
<b>GLORIA FERRER</b> Rosé Carneros Carneros Cuvée Late Disgorged 2018 Plush yet crisply styled, with strawberry pie, rose petal, roasted hazelnut and spice notes that show freshness plus a touch of maturity.	93	\$95	<b>MUMM NAPA</b> Prestige Cuvée Napa County NV This attractive sparkler is well-crafted and lively, with flavors of apple, lemon, spices and fresh ginger that linger on the snappy finish.	89	\$33
<b>SOTER</b> Extra Brut Willamette Valley Reserve NV Delicate and sleek, with elegant Meyer lemon and strawberry flavors accented by blanched almond and honeysuckle on the steely finish.	93	\$70	<b>GRUET</b> Blanc de Blancs American NV This is appealing for the generous, zesty flavors of baked apple and nectarine that build richness and spice notes on the finish.	88	\$17
<b>IRON HORSE</b> Blanc de Blancs Green Valley of Russian River Valley Reflection 2019 This sparkler is graceful yet dynamic, featuring detailed flavors of lemon, green apple, saline and blanched almond.	92	\$75	<b>SCHARFFENBERGER</b> Brut Rosé Mendocino County NV A fruit-forward quaff, with lively strawberry, lemon and graham cracker flavors that zip along the refreshing finish.	88	\$29
			<b>DOMAINE STE. MICHELLE</b> Brut Columbia Valley NV This snappy sparkler features flavors of pear, lemon and spices.	87	\$13