



Sparkling

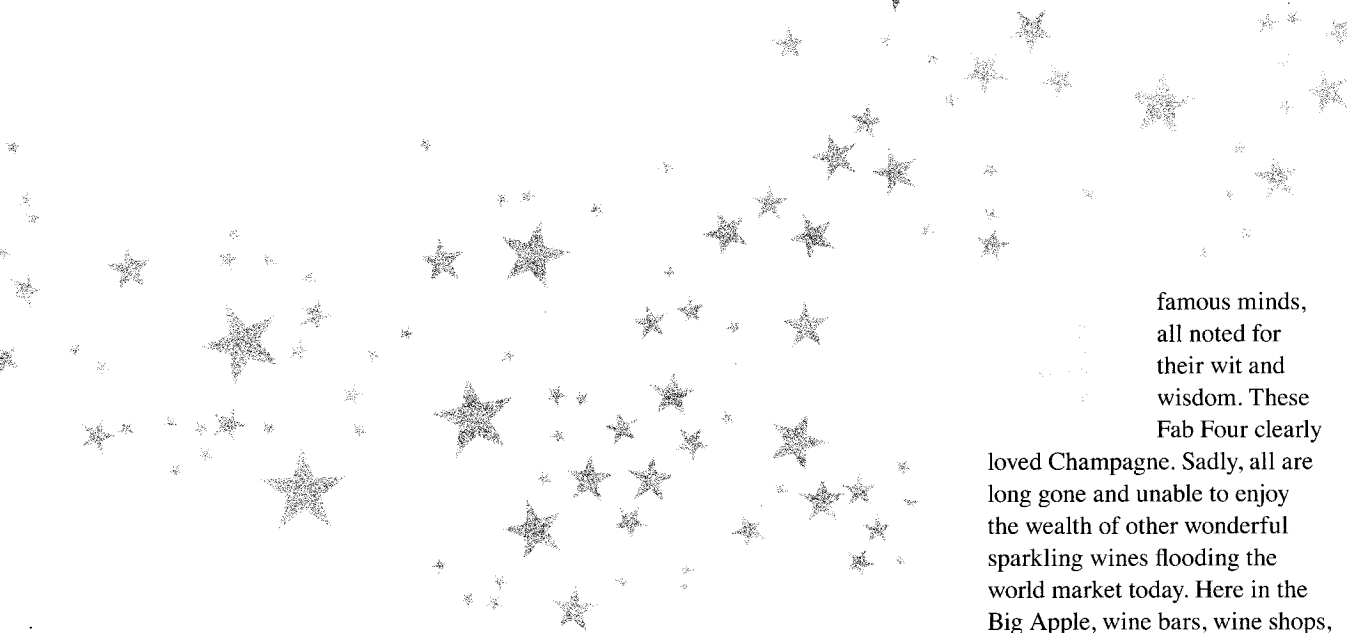
WINES

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.”

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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 !

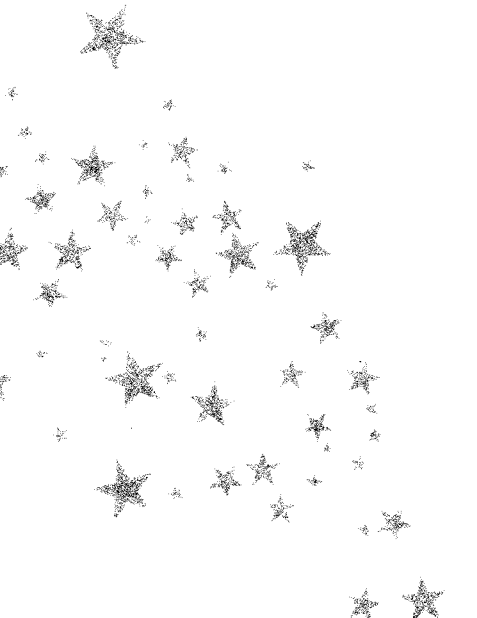
Martin Markovitz is the chef and a partner at the busy *East of Eighth*, 254 West 23rd Street, in Chelsea. He says : "Of course sparkling wine sales are more robust during the holidays but this does not mean that it is just a fad. We have many occasions where we sell sparkling wines. Birthdays and anniversaries 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,



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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.

