

# THAT LITTLE WINE BAR

## Sparkling Wine for the Festive Season

Nothing sets the tone better for the festive season of Christmas, New Year and Chinese New Year than champagne, or one of champagne's bubbly cousins, prosecco or cava. After champagne's invention by French Benedictine monks in 1531, it quickly defined itself as the drink of celebration, and as the height of luxury, served at high-end festivities including the anointing of French kings. This association with power and luxury spread like wild fire throughout European royalty, nobility and aristocracy, building the legend that is Champagne.



But should you serve and drink champagne itself, or another sparkling wine? And what is the difference anyway?

For a sparkling wine to be called champagne it must be produced in the region (appellation) of France called Champagne, in the Northeast of France, and use specifically permitted grapes, primarily Pinot noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier. Champagne may be vintage (all the grapes used are from one specific year that has had a particularly good harvest) or non-vintage. Non-vintage champagnes are a blend made up of wines produced in different years. The advantage of non-vintage champagne is that the blending ensures a uniform quality. It's much easier for the winemaker to balance tastes when he or she can draw on different wines to produce a champagne with flavours similar to those for which the label is known. There is pressure on wine makers to declare regular vintage years due to the price premium vintages command, but this sometimes leads to vintages from not-particularly-special years, whose flavour may not be much better than non-vintage. My value-for-money advice is to stick with non-vintage. Good but lesser known non-vintage champagnes to try

that are good value for money in Malaysia are Nicolas Feuillatte and Ayala.

Other French sparkling wines (not from the Champagne region) tend to use the same grapes and methods as champagne (including the second fermentation, which produces the bubbles, taking place in the bottles rather than in a steel vat), but usually better in flavour for this price range are Spanish sparkling wines (called cava). Cava uses different grapes (macabeu, parellada and xarel•lo) but in blind tasting comparisons (and in my opinion) scores more highly than most French non-champagne sparkling wines, though lower than champagne itself. Castellblanch Cava Brut is an excellent choice in this bracket.

Then there is prosecco, from Italy, cheaper to produce (as the secondary fermentation is in steel vats rather than in the bottle) and in recent years, increasingly good in quality. Unlike champagne, the point of prosecco is to be light, fresh and simple, to be enjoyed by everyone on any occasion. A classic example of this is Prosecco di Valdobbiadene DOC Ca' De' Rocchi.

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at

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