



## HIGH LIFE DECODED: COMMON CHAMPAGNE MYTHS, DEBUNKED

As popping bottles season reaches its pinnacle, Pearl & Ash sommelier Patrick Capiello lets us in on the truth about bubbly.

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In the 17th century, a monk by the name of Dom Perignon set out to resurrect the vines in France's once-forsaken Champagne region. His early trials with winemaking were thwarted by carbon dioxide, which produced bubbles—then considered a major flaw in one's winemaking.

Centuries later, bubbles have become a symbol of celebration. Using state-of-the-art facilities, major Champagne houses like Perrier Jouët and Moët & Chandon created expensive cuvées that were celebrated for their crisp carbonation. These labels dominated the market for years, until the late '90s to early 2000s, when menus began featuring wine from small growers, whose owners produced Champagne from start to finish and sold their limited batches for as little as \$20 a bottle. However, as demand for "grower Champagnes" has increased, so too have prices—once again reinforcing Champagne's reputation as the drink of the elite.

Bubbly experts like Patrick Cappiello, *Imbibe's* Wine Person of the Year for 2014, think it's time to look to new regions for value-driven sparkling wines. Winemakers in the mountainous region of Jura and the Loire Valley in France and the Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara, CA—where Rajat Parr, the former wine director for Michael Mina's 18-restaurant empire, is making well-received Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs—are quickly building a reputation for their rich, unctuous wines made in the traditional Champagne method.

"I think we are going to see a new trend this year," says Cappiello. "We are coming out of tough economic times and still pinching pennies—people are looking for value. There are great sparkling wines being produced all over the world that will only become greater as they continue to get more attention." Before you go out to buy bottles for this year's celebration, **check out Cappiello's primer on real facts you need to know about bubbly.**



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**The expert:** Prior to becoming partner and wine director at Manhattan's Pearl and Ash Restaurant and *Imbibe's* Wine Person of the Year for 2014, Patrick Capiello was the wine buyer for Gilt at the New York Palace hotel. When he came on board, the Champagne list was saturated by the major labels. Capiello says he seized the opportunity to experiment with introducing grower Champagnes to the New York market. "Of course I got a little heat for it, but I buy for my guests not for big business," he says. "At the end of the day, I want to be proud of what I've written on my wine list."

## **8 COMMON CHAMPAGNE MYTHS, DEBUNKED**

**THE MYTH:** Champagne makes you drunker and gives you a worse hangover than other wines.

**THE VERDICT:** False

**Capiello says:** Carbonation makes people drink fast. Maybe it's a psychological association from childhood that soda is the best thing, so you want to chug it. Most people drink Champagne very fast and do not drink water—that is what makes you drunk and gives you a hangover. If you want to avoid hangovers, you should drink two glasses of water for every one glass of Champagne—or any alcoholic beverage, for that matter. Your body just doesn't want to do that because it's a lot of liquid and you don't get a buzz.

**THE MYTH:** The size of the bubbles indicates the quality of the Champagne.

**THE VERDICT:** True

**Capiello says:** Traditionally, finer bubbles are an example of finer Champagne. Think of Pellegrino versus soda: The former has finer and more delicate bubbles. The same goes for a *cava* made by a mediocre mass producer versus a high-end Champagne, where you can immediately taste and feel the finer bubbles as a result of great winemaking.



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**THE MYTH:** Champagne is the only wine with naturally-occurring bubbles.

**THE VERDICT:** False

**Cappiello says:** Every wine becomes bubbly as it is fermenting, but it eventually dissipates. Fermentation yields three byproducts: Heat, alcohol, and gas. Most winemakers re-incentivize fermentation after they bottle the Champagne by adding a dose of yeast. Once the second fermentation happens, they gorge the bottle to get the sediment out and then quickly cork it. This extra couple of steps is known as *Méthode Champenoise* (as indicated on labels)—or, the traditional method of making Champagne. The process is a major factor in the elevated price of sparkling wines. Some of the cheaper Champagne producers re-incentivize fermentation in the entire batch all at once, while it's still in the large barrels, and bottle it after.

**THE MYTH:** Vintage Champagnes are more expensive and generally taste better.

**THE VERDICT:** True

**Cappiello says:** When there is an exceptional vintage, the Champagne will contain wine only from that year—otherwise known as vintage Champagne. Additionally, vintage Champagnes have to be aged for at least seven years in cellars before release. (So the earliest vintage you could find now is of 2006.) They are more expensive because they have to be stored in proper facilities. And any time you age a wine, it softens the edges and creates a smoother taste. In years where the vintage is inconsistent, non-vintage Champagnes are made, using wines from three- to five vintages—one that is a little riper, one that is brighter, and so on—to create consistency in taste.

**THE MYTH:** Champagne can only be made using Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Mouniee.

**THE VERDICT:** False

**Cappiello says:** There are actually seven grape varieties grown in the Champagne region—including Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Petit Meslier, and Arbane—but Moutard is the only winemaker that I've seen use all of them. Most producers only work with those top three varieties, with Blanc de Blanc being a Champagne made entirely from Chardonnay (white) grapes, and Blanc du Noir being made using the latter two (red grapes that are white inside). Rosé Champagne is made pink by leaving some of the red skins in through fermentation.

**THE MYTH:** The proper way to serve Champagne is in a flute.

**THE VERDICT:** False

**Cappiello says:** While the flute is traditional, there is no reason for it in terms of taste. I serve Champagne in white wine glasses, because the flute really limits you—it's like playing music off of a mono-speaker. Wine glasses can really amplify the flavor and aroma of what is inside the glass, and to me the flute constrains the complexity that Champagne can offer.



**THE MYTH:** Champagne is sweet.

**THE VERDICT:** True and false

**Cappiello says:** For a long time, winemakers were producing Champagne with a higher sugar content to send to the U.S. because our palates tend to favor sweeter things, so that became part of the formula. Just like any wine, there are Champagnes that are dry and those that are sweet—you need something to drink with dessert! They are offered on a spectrum of sweetness so you know what you are going to get:

- **Brute Nature** is completely dry, containing less than three grams of residual sugar.
- **Extra brute** is the next step, with 6 grams of sugar.
- **Brute** is probably what you grew up drinking (these are like your Reislings) and have 12 grams of sugar.
- **Sec** has 17 to 32 grams of sugar.
- **Demi Sec** Champagne would be more of your dessert wine, with 32 to 50 grams of residual sugar.

**THE MYTH:** Champagne should be served on ice.

**THE VERDICT:** False

**Cappiello says:** Ice buckets were invented at a time when people didn't have refrigeration. Today, most people drink Champagne too cold. Of course, you don't want to drink it warm because the bubbles will dissipate. But like any wine, if it is served too cold, it will lose its flavor and aroma. When it is just out of the refrigerator, that is enough. Once you pull it out, there is no need to keep it chilled unless you plan on drinking it over the course of several hours.

*Photos courtesy Pearl & Ash*