

WHEN YOU CAN'T GET WHAT YOU WANT

GET WHAT YOU NEED . . .

BY DALLAS C. GALVIN

Champagne: In success you deserve it and in defeat you need it.

-Winston Churchill

In an uncertain world, this we know: champagne is for lovers . . . and also for lobster-eaters and cheese-munchers. It's ideal for Bellini-quaffing Gossip Girls, and de rigueur for robber barons and holiday-makers. Champagne is the elixir we choose for the grinning horse inside the winner's circle. But in defeat, what could assuage sorrow more than to drink the very stars? Napoleon Bonaparte announced at every opportunity: "In victory, you deserve champagne; in defeat, you need it. I drink champagne when I win, to celebrate . . . and I drink champagne when I lose, to console myself."

The wisdom of visionary old warriors might be revisited in these less-elegant but equally parlous times. As the British, the French, and many others will gladly tell you, champagne is for drinking with whomever, wherever—over lunch, under a bridge, at a polo meet. Winston Churchill, the great British statesman who led his country from the shattering defeat of Dunkirk to victory in World War II, required that cases of Pol Roger champagne (especially the 1928 vintage) accompany him, even when he flew to visit the troops in war zones.

His quaff was a rich, full-bodied style of champagne preferred by the European aristocracy for its fruit and slight sweetness—easy to drink as an apéritif or with casual foods. Pol Roger now produces a premium champagne, Cuvée

Sir Winston Churchill 1996, made from pinot noir and chardonnay grapes, whose vines were producing during Churchill's lifetime.

That was the last century. Lately, a spate of champagne stories has graced

the news: Virgin-Atlantic CEO Sir Richard Branson was seen spraying bottles of Dom Perignon at the cast of *Entourage*. Rapper and Def Jam Records President Jay-Z, once fanatically fond of Louis Roederer Cristal, announced he has changed allegiance and now drinks Krug and Dom Perignon.

Which brings us to a signal point: while it's easy to spend hundreds of dollars for a "Grande Marque" bottle—say, the 1998 Billecart Salmon Cuvée Nicolas François, or the more commercial Dom Perignon that Branson tossed about—champagne can be drunk (perhaps in less heroic quantities than Churchill's) in the same way as a lovely Chateau Neuf-du-Pape Blanc—and for about the same price. True champagnes from venerable houses, such as Pommery, start at about \$25. They are "food-friendly" and just delicious.

In the medium price range, try the Jacquesson Cuvée No. 73. The vintner prides itself on its "traditionalistic" style of viticulture, free of herbicides. It is made exclusively from grandes and premiers crus, from pinot noir, pinot meunier, and chardonnay grapes, and its alcohol content, at 12 percent, is not overwhelming.

A boutique or "single grower" house—champagne's version of a single-malt brewer that I love is A. Soutiran, in Ambonnay, France. This is one of only 17 houses granted grand cru status. The vintner, Alain Soutiran, cultivates 21 of his own organic acres, but also buys grapes from neighboring family members to make his champagnes. My favorite is his luscious Perle Noire. The taste is full and reminiscent of blackberries, yet the champagne has the acidity to pair well with cheeses and heavier foods. Soutiran's bone-dry Blanc de Blancs Brut is a rich and creamy chardonnay-based wine that is perfect for a meaty



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white fish entrée, like mahi mahi with a fine wasabi mustard sauce.

Another highly-regarded French pinot noir-based boutique champagne is the Philipponnat NV Brut "Royale Reserve." Faintly sweet, it works well on its own, but pairs gorgeously with strong cheeses and seafood. Savor it

with garlicky pork dishes.

Of the "household name" champagnes, Moët & Chandon Imperial, Louis Roederer's Brut Premier NV (non-vintage), and the Nicolas Feuillate Rosé, also non-vintage, are all delightful, easy-to-drink champagnes, that complement every kind of food, from soufflés to risottos, and run in price from the mid-\$30s to around \$60.

While only wines from the hilly region northeast of Paris are permitted to be called "champagne," the style of grapes and the process of fermentation that makes a wine sparkle belong to the world: the Italians tout their prosecco from the Veneto region, the Spanish have cava, and the English-speaking world has its "sparkling wines."

Among my favorites is the Gruet Blanc de Noirs, a terrific, organically-made sparkling wine from New Mexico. It is pale salmon in color and very rich in taste. From the Napa Valley, try Cuvée M from Mumm Napa; and from the Loire Valley, try the light, fine fizz of Blanc Foussy Brut. It is a late-harvest, crisp and delicate Chenin blanc wine.

However cosmopolitan our lives may become, our notions of champagne run to the grand occasion, cinematic locales, and vaguely seductive intent, especially during the holidays: that Christmas joint of beef with Daddy Warbucks, and magnums of Taittinger's 1998 Vintage Comtes Blanc de Blancs set out like rows of stout soldiers beneath the chandeliers; the exotic Thanksgiving dinner, with sparkling flutes of Laurent-Perrier Rosé accompanying duck merguez and a couscous royale laid out on a deck overlooking Casablanca's bit of the Mediterranean... But in relegating champagne to the rarified, we miss a great treat for the "every" days of our lives. Try some of both. You'll be endlessly pleased you did. ☺

