

The Vine Guy » **Scott Greenberg**

## Champagne – more than a wine – a place

*Editor's note: Part one of a four-part series*

The first thing most people think of when they think of Champagne is a bubbly wine reserved for birthdays, weddings and New Year's Eve. Until recently, I was no exception.

Having just spent five days in the heart of the Champagne region of France, I am now firmly convinced that Champagne is much more than a sparkling wine. It is Champagne. And in order to really understand and appreciate Champagne, it is important to know where it comes from and how it is made.

I was among a group of journalists invited by the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne, the trade association representing all of the houses and grape growers of Champagne, to tour the region and learn about the history and rules that govern the production of Champagne.

It is essential to note that Champagne is both a place and a style of wine. Within its borders — beginning about 90 miles due east of Paris, near the city of Reims, and running south about 100 miles to Chaumont — there are 319 villages, or Crus, covering roughly 84,000 acres. The unique white-chalk subsoil that runs throughout the appellation is critical to the success of the vines, absorbing water in the winter months and providing perfect drainage during the wet spring months. In addition, the white surface absorbs heat during the day then slowly releases it back during the night, leading to even maturation of the grapes.

Ninety percent of the land is owned and farmed by a collection of about 15,000 "growers" while the remaining 10 percent is owned by "houses." Together, they produce about 350 million bottles of Champagne each year. While most growers sell their grapes to Champagne houses, which produce about two-thirds of the wine, or cooperatives, about one-third of the growers produce Champagne under their own label using only their own grapes.

As you can imagine, there is an interesting dynamic that exists between the growers and the houses. One role of the CIVC is to act as an organization that aligns both parties' interests. Together, they make financial contributions to the CIVC (based on either crop yield for growers or bottle production for houses) and make decisions that regulate their industry, support



COURTESY PHOTO

Growers in the Champagne region of France produce about 350 million bottles of bubbly each year.

agricultural research from two experimental vineyards, promote sustainable farming techniques, develop viticultural guidelines and police the industry to ensure compliance.

They are also passionate about ecology and have invested in studies that investigate how to reduce their carbon footprint and adopt strict recycling/reclamation policies. For example, one recent study showed that one-third of the carbon emissions produced in Champagne was a result of product packaging. Today, the CIVC is developing bottles that are lighter and more ecological, resulting in a 7 percent reduction in CO2 output. Additionally, wine producers are required to reclaim and reuse most of the water used for cleaning tanks and other equipment in the winery. Efforts are also under way to utilize alternative energy sources such as solar, wind and thermal convection in wineries. Lastly, there is a growing movement among growers and houses to adopt organic and biodynamic farming techniques in order to reduce the effect of pesticides on the environment.

Last but not least, the CIVC is passionate about its name and wants consumers around the world to enjoy the proverbial fruits of its labor. To this end, members are dedicated to pursuing legal action against counterfeiters and trademark infringements. Only wines produced under the strict guidelines in the Champagne region are allowed to use the word "Champagne" on the label. Most wine-producing countries now use the term "sparkling wine," and many have signed an agreement that protects the Champagne name abroad.

### EATS

## Brenton Balika: The big cheese

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Turns out pastry chef Brenton Balika at Bourbon Steak in the Four Seasons Hotel also has become something of a master cheesemaker.

When you order dessert or a cheese course, know that Balika, somewhere deep in the interior recesses of the hotel has crafted an artisanal cheese that may well startle you with its genuine flavor and character.

A native of Chicago, Balika was destined to become an artisan. "I grew up in a family of artisans, who were into sewing, making pottery, and cooking six nights a week," he said. "We also had gardens all the time. I had a love for food growing up." And, it turns out, he developed an early passion for eating cheese.

He translated this love into his studies at the Culinary Institute of America. With a degree in hand, Balika set out to work for some of the nation's leading chefs, starting with Charlie Trotter's namesake restaurant in his native city of Chicago. "Charlie Trotter took care of cheeses for his restaurants," Balika said. "I saw then cheeses from all over the world. That's when I got interested in how and why a cheese develops a flavor profile."

### IF YOU GO Bourbon Steak

» **Where:** 2800 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
» **Info:** 202-944-2026  
» **Hours:** Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.



COURTESY PHOTO

"I had a love for food growing up," says Bourbon Steak chef Brenton Balika.

Balika also was hired by chef Bradley Ogden to work in the Caesars Palace restaurant in Las Vegas (where, incidentally he met Bourbon Steak's Executive Chef Adam Sobel). Eight months later, after the restaurant earned a James Beard Award, Balika launched himself into learning every aspect of cheesemaking. "I really started doing cheeses seriously," he explained. "Goat, cow, and sheep milk, though that is harder to get now."

From Las Vegas, Balika worked as the sous chef for the Celebrity Cruise Line, and took advantage of days spent in foreign ports, sampling different cheeses. Sobel called him back a year ago to Las Vegas to work at RM Seafood where Balika started making cheeses plus his pastries full time. "I

started making cheese like soft, ripened cheese and some blues," he said.

At Bourbon Steak, Balika does oversee the pastry program — making modern and refined renditions of classic pastry — but his heart is really in his cheese cellar. "I make 15 different cheeses," he said, "from ricotta to blues. I will get presses to make hard cheeses. I am going to change the cheese program to match the season. Cows get different feed in the winter."

His love for cheese really reflects his passion for food and anything about the dining experience. "The more knowledge you have about each ingredient," he says, "the more respect you have. ... It gives you a sense of place, as with Charlie Trotter and Bradly Ogden. They have an identity with the terroir."

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