

National Champagne Day



I will never understand why so many wine enthusiasts resist popping the corks on bottles of sparkling wines or Champagne unless they are celebrating a special occasion or New Year's Eve. It's a shame, really, since these wines are incredibly versatile and pair well with a variety of. Famed author and bon vivant, F. Scott Fitzgerald, once proclaimed, "Too much of anything is bad, but too much Champagne is just right."

However, even I occasionally struggle with reaching for a bit of the bubbly, and I know better! But if ever there was a day to start a new Champagne habit, the today is the perfect day, since it is National Champagne Day!

Now, it's only logical to assume that National Champagne Day would be celebrated annually on December 31st, and that's a good day to pop open a bottle of bubbly as well, but thanks to clever marketing and just a darn good excuse to drink great wine, today is being promoted over social media as a day to drink Champagne for no good reason other than it's great wine that should be enjoyed for its own sake.

Now, before diving into specific recommendations, a quick primer on sparkling wines is in order. While there is plenty of bubbly available from Italy, California and even Australia, it is useful to know that only wines made in the tiny Champagne region in France can be called Champagne (as denoted by the capital "C" in the name), using the strict **Méthode Champenoise** where the secondary fermentation, responsible for those wonderful bubbles, occurs in the bottle. All other champagne-style wines are referred to as "sparkling wines."

The most popular designation is brut, a dry style that is usually a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir. Blanc de Blancs (white from white) is a wine made solely from chardonnay while a Blanc de Noirs (white from black) is made with pinot noir. Rosés are usually produced using pinot noir grapes whose juice is allowed to stay in contact with the grape skins just long enough to impart a pinkish hue.

So today is your day to make a new tradition to drink more Champagne any time of the year. After all, according to wine writer Willie Gluckstern, "In a perfect world, everyone would have a glass of Champagne every evening." And what a wonderful world it would be.

The best values for authentic Champagne will be Non-Vintage, where wines are blended from several different years in order to maintain a certain consistency – or house style. A wonderful example is the **Non-Vintage Montaudon Brut from Epernay, France**. The tiny, precise bubbles add a certain degree of elegance as they deliver lovely notes of apple, pear, citrus and roasted almonds across the entire palate. Toasted hazelnuts are featured on the crisp, balanced finish. **\$30**

Champagne "Houses" produce about two-thirds of the wine in Champagne. They achieve a level of consistency by holding back bits and pieces of previous vintages and use them in non-vintage blends to create a "house style" wine. One classic example is the **Non-Vintage Moët & Chandon Imperial Brut**. Aromas of ginger and lemon dominate the nose while flavors of apple, lime and roasted nuts sit lightly on a frame of honeyed-butter toast. The finish is delicate and charming, leaving a graceful impression on the tongue. **\$37**

Many vineyard owners in Champagne sell the majority of their grapes to houses, but some growers actually keep the fruit and produce wines for their own label like the Gimmonnet family, who has been vinifying their own fruit for over half a century. Their **Non-vintage Pierrer Gimmonnet & Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut** from France is made exclusively from chardonnay and boasts flavors of creamy lemon and nectarine are elegantly woven around a core of acidity and tight bubbles giving the wine wonderful balance and structure. **\$40**

A "Vintage" champagne is always designated by a specific year on the bottle and is made from grapes that were harvested exclusively from that year. A very reasonable way to stick your proverbial toe into the pool of expensive vintage Champagnes is the **2007 Louis Roederer Brut Champagne**. The fragrant scents of green apple and buttered toast on the nose lead to flavors of baked apple, ripe pear, roasted hazelnuts and candied ginger on the palate. The structure is full-bodied and the finish, featuring notes of toasted almonds, is round, full and exceptionally clean. **\$75**