



pouring for profits

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Champagne Supernova

Bubbly is not just for New Year's anymore, offer it by the glass

by alan mcginty

At the giddy height of 1,150 feet, customers are often in a celebratory mood inside the CN Tower's 360 Restaurant. Master sommelier Doris Miculan-Bradley gets the party started by offering 12 champagnes and five sparkling wines from the cellar in the sky. (Bottles range from \$36 for Codorniu Brut Classico from Spain to \$620 for the Louis Roederer 1996 Cristal Brut.) Miculan-Bradley, who has been at 360 for 21 years, notes the taste for champagne has grown. It's not just for New Year's and anniversaries anymore. "We're noticing a trend toward having a glass of champagne or a half-bottle of champagne before dinner," she says.

CHAMPAGNE COCKTAILS



Toronto's Splendido has created a new cocktail that sommelier Carlo Catallo says is its top seller, even with a \$27 price tag per glass.

Monsieur Doucet's Canadian Royale

3 1/2 oz champagne
1 oz. icewine
1/2 oz. cognac

With prosecco costing less than a third of the price of champagne, it makes a great substitute, and keeps the cocktails below \$10. Here are two favourites from Seven in Halifax

Mango Fizzle

1 oz. mango juice
1 oz. cranberry juice
3 oz. prosecco

Blue Champagne

3/4 oz. Stolichnaya Vodka
1/4 oz. Bols Blue
1 oz. lime juice
3 oz. Prosecco

About 90 miles north-east of Paris, Champagne is one of the northern-most wine regions in France. The cool climate translates into acidic grapes, and the chalky soil gives champagne its special flavour. Chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier are the varieties used to make champagne; the wine itself requires a multi-stage production process that takes three years and includes a second fermentation in the bottle — that's where the bubbles come from. Over the years, champagne has become drier, so nearly all producers add a sweetened reserve wine, which removes the sharper edges and boosts alcohol levels. Ayala, an independent champagne house that has been in business since the 1850s, recently introduced a "zero brut," with no added sugar — it's available in Western Canada through Renaissance Wine Merchants of Calgary. The company's president, Mark Ferrier, acknowledges it's a niche product, but says "it's a perfect aperitif; it's clean, tight but definitely more tart." (By "tight," he means it's not too fruity.) Not only is zero brut the logical step in the trend towards drier champagnes, the fact it's sugar-free will no doubt appeal both to supermodels and wannabes.

One might assume Halifax lacks a sophisticated wine bar similar to what you'd find in Montreal or Toronto, but that changed when Seven Restaurant opened its doors there three years ago. The sumptuous space is a draw. "It's the only true wine bar in Halifax," boasts proprietor Costa Elles, "and it's just



received the Two Goblets Award of Excellence from *Wine Spectator*." Earlier this year, Elles offered a six-course meal with champagne ranging from entry-level Met & Chandon Brut to Dom Perignon Vintage 1998. Sixteen guests paid \$250 each. And it was easy to fill the spots. "We've found the champagne market is incredible. In the past, champagne might have been seen as a ladies' drink, but our clientele is getting more educated and it's not unusual to see a gentleman order it now," says Elles, who sells between eight and 12 bottles weekly. Elles suggests selling the bubbly at a mark-up of 100 per cent or more. "We buy Met for around \$60 and sell for \$105, a 75 per cent mark-up."

Sparkling wine is not top-of-mind among Canadian diners. But a few tricks will help put patrons in the mood. Toronto-based John Szabo, a master sommelier who runs a beverage

Photo by George Couin / Graphically Correct Media

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FUN facts

- Number of countries in which champagne is sold: **160**
- Bottles sold in 2005: **307 million**
- Total value of worldwide sales in 2005: **C\$5.4 billion**
- Percentage sold within France: **57%**
- Bottles sold in Canada in 2005: **1.2 million**
- Canada's share of total sales: **0.4%**
- Canada's rank among export markets: **12th**
- Bottles in reserve as of July 31, 2005: **1.1 billion**

SOURCE: Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne, Epernay, France

consulting company, says the most effective way to whet the palate is to display the bottles. "The visual cue is powerful," he says. "As soon as people see it they start thinking about it." Szabo suggests using a champagne trolley, complete with ice bucket and champagne. But admits such displays are reserved for higher-end operations, and not bistros, for instance.

At Splendido, an upscale Toronto restaurant, general manager Yannick Bigourdan was inspired to offer a champagne trolley after a visit to the George V in Paris. After unsuccessfully

scouring Toronto for a huge silver bowl that would hold six or more bottles — similar to what he'd seen in Europe — he decided on a standard champagne bucket that holds up to three bottles, after the restaurant's sommelier and manager Carlo Catallo suggested it. He also recommends offering trolley service at the beginning of the meal, which is a good idea since sales are higher before the meal. Who could resist the trolley with its elegant champagne buckets, stamped with famous brand names, glistening with condensation in the soft candle light and the tops of

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bottles poking out? Prices range from \$25 to \$35 per glass for champagne. And how did it help sales of champagne by the glass? "Up tenfold," says Catalo.

SELLING BY THE GLASS

Selling sparkling wine by the glass can be more profitable, but there is also more waste. Although five glasses usually equal one bottle, Szabo says four glasses per bottle is more likely. He also says elaborate systems of re-sealing are not necessary if you can be confident of selling leftover wine within a day or so. "A sparkling wine seal and immediate refrigeration will help a lot in preserving the effervescence," he says. But if there's any doubt, throw it out. "It is never acceptable to serve a sub-standard wine," he says.

Mario Evangelista, vice-president of Toronto-based Select Wine Merchants, one of Canada's leading champagne distributors, says Mœt's latest promotional campaign aims squarely at Canadians' idea that champagne is only for special occasions. "Our message is why not create a special occasion anytime?" says Evangelista. "The current advertising campaign is all about being fabulous. The beautiful people drink champagne, why not you?" Besides, a glass is more affordable than a bottle.

Evangelista says Select Wines wanted more restaurants to offer champagne by the glass about six years ago and was met with "incredible resistance." He was disappointed by the reaction. "People were afraid it wouldn't sell and they'd have to

throw out half of each bottle," he says. "We encouraged people to start with half-bottles. We provided full staff training on selling and serving it, and supplied re-sealers that keep the wine for up to two days. The waiters are happy to sell a glass at \$20 — they get a bigger tip. Many of those restaurateurs thanked us afterwards."

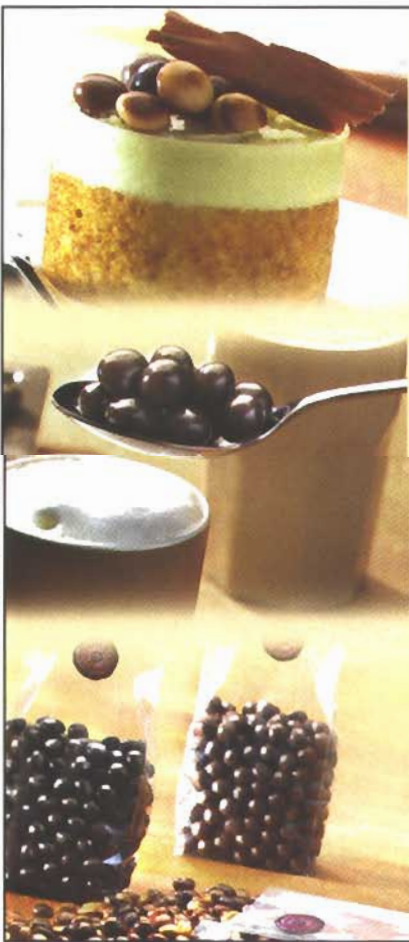
Szabo's business partner, Zoltan Szabo (no relation), also advises starting off with half-bottles and reminding people that champagne is a good match for almost any type of food. As with other wines, there are trends to follow, and Zoltan says the way to go this year is rosé, which he coyly describes as "the shimmering colour of love."

OTHER SPARKLERS

With its high price, champagne is not for everyone, but there are plenty of other fun sparkling wines. Prosecco and Cava, from Italy and Spain, respectively, are great lower-priced alternatives. "And don't forget there are some great Canadian sparkling wines too, from both Niagara and Okanagan," says John Szabo. "Henry of Pelham's Cuvée Catharine and Stellar's Jay Brut from Sumac Ridge spring to mind."

If sparkling wine sales have been a little flat this year, holiday season is the time to add fizz. Evangelista says December is a good time to introduce champagne — or another sparkler — by the glass. "People are more receptive, and then hopefully they keep buying it in the New Year." □

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