



## THE INSIDER

## Champagne Tastes on a Beer Budget

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Break out the bubbly with these sparkling wines under \$30

by **Trae Bodge**



With New Year's Eve right around the corner, you're probably planning your regular trip to the liquor store for Champagne. French bubbly is certainly festive, but we drink it every year! Why not mix things up a little and experiment with other tasty sparklers?

Although I enjoy drinking Champagne, I'm kind of clueless when it comes to the finer points. I asked wine expert Suzanne da Silva, from New York City-based wine and spirits marketing firm [Deussen Global](#), to give me a quick primer.

"While Champagne can come *only* from the Champagne region of France," da Silva says, "sparkling wines can be produced anywhere. The grapes in sparklers may be the traditional ones used in Champagne, like chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier, or they may be indigenous varietals."

When it comes to sparkling wines, where should you begin? After tasting several (I know, poor me), I chose my favorite categories and my picks in each one.

### SPARKLING WINES

#### Crémant d'Alsace

"After Champagne, Crémant d'Alsace is the most popular sparkling wine in France," da Silva says. "The grapes used are mainly pinot blanc but could also be pinot gris, pinot noir, Riesling or chardonnay."

**My pick:** [Lucien Albrecht Brut Blanc de Blancs](#) (\$16.99). Made of 100 percent pinot blanc, this versatile wine has a light, delicate palate and can be paired with many foods.

#### Cava

Cava is the Catalan name for sparkling wines made using the traditional Champagne method. Mostly produced in the Spanish region of Catalonia, these wines incorporate local grapes like parellada, macabeo and xarel-lo, but some producers are turning to traditional chardonnay and pinot noir.



**My picks:** New from the Ferrers, of Freixenet fame, the [Elyssia Pinot Noir Brut](#) (on sale for \$22.62) is an ultra-premium sparkler that is a blend of traditional Spanish cava grapes and classic chardonnay and pinot noir. The delicate rose color and fresh and fruity flavor make this a festive choice.

If you prefer a white wine, try the lovely (and inexpensive) organic [Tarantas Cava](#) (\$14.99), which *Wine & Spirits* listed as one of 2010's best cavas.

#### Prosecco

Prosecco refers to the sparkling wines made from the glera ("prosecco") grape in the Veneto region of Italy. Unlike Champagne, Prosecco is made using the Charmat method, meaning that the second fermentation takes place in tanks, not in the bottle. This method gives prosecco its characteristic crispness.

**My pick:** The [Pizzolato Fields Prosecco](#) (\$9.99) is made from 100 percent certified organic prosecco grapes. This is a nice dryish wine that can be enjoyed before or after a meal and also with chilled first courses.

#### Lambrusco

Da Silva says that lambrusco "refers to both a red wine grape and an Italian wine made primarily from this grape." She says that the highest-rated lambruscos are of the frizzante (slightly sparkling) variety. Lambrusco can be dry or slightly sweet.

**My pick:** Mionetto's [IL Lambrusco](#) (\$10.99) is a dry frizzante that pairs well with food and has a rich ruby color with dark berry flavors.

#### Moscato

This sparkling white is made from the moscato bianco grape and is produced mainly in northwest Italy. The wine is sweet and usually enjoyed with dessert.

**My pick:** Mionetto's [Il Moscato](#) (\$9.99). This frizzante is quite light and delicious when paired with dessert or spicier cuisine. The bottle is sealed with an easy-to-open "crown" cap, much like you'd find on a soda bottle.

#### Sparkling Pinot Noir

If you love a dry, red sparkling wine, look for pinot noirs that are dark cherry in color, like the delicious and unusual Mumm Napa [Sparkling Pinot Noir](#) (\$30; available only online). To achieve the deep hue, the delicate pinot noir grapes undergo a process similar to still wine, where most of the grapes are left uncrushed until the juice enters the press. The result is a ruby red wine with flavors of plum, clove and chocolate.

### ALTERNATIVES TO SPARKLING WINES

#### Punches

Punches really feel like a party drink. Check out these [Freixenet punch recipes](#) made with sparkling wines, or click here for [punch recipes](#) made with Mionetto wines.



#### Nonalcoholic

If you're not inclined to totally booze it up on New Year's, be sure to have some sparkling water on hand. My pick is [Ayala's Herbal Water](#) (\$24 for 12 bottles). These lightly carbonated waters are infused with organic herbs resulting in exotic but very delicate flavors like lemongrass mint vanilla, cinnamon orange peel, ginger lemon peel and lavender mint. Delicious before, after or during your New Year's meal. (Get [Ayala's Herbal Water coupons](#).)

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