



JANUARY 2003

ELLEENTERTAINING

tiny bubbles

Looking for the new status suds? Try the champagne nobody's ever heard of

When it comes to champagne, there is perhaps no social currency as reliable as the one with the striking pumpkin-colored label. "People buy Veuve Clicquot because it's the most recognizable, so they feel safe," says Bart Hopkins, wine buyer at New York's 67 Wine. "When they give it as a gift, they want the recipient to know it's something good; they want people to know what they spent."

Other parts of the world, however, are not quite so label-conscious. "We drink champagne in France from the aperitif all the way down to dessert," says Nathalie Vaché, wine director of Boston's Grill 23 & Bar. "We look for champagnes with different character for different occasions."

Quel concept. But just as Americans are becoming more experimental with food and wine—we're no longer a nation solely of chardonnay drinkers, but one that's begun to appreciate the wines of the Rhône Valley, for example—it's becoming more acceptable to trust one's own palate. "If you come into a party proclaiming that Bruno Paillard is your favorite champagne, it implies that you've tried a lot of different ones," says Leslie Brenner, author of *Fear of Wine*. "Being sure of your own taste carries a certain status these days."

On the advice of experts, we tasted champagnes from small, lesser-known producers (many of them "grower champagnes," in which the grapes are from the vintner's estate, where the wines are made). We also looked beyond champagne (which must come from the Champagne region of France and be produced using the *methode champenoise*) to sparkling wines from California (typically less rich than champagnes); crisp, dry Cavas from Spain; and light, often floral Proseccos from Italy. Many of these can be had for \$15 to \$35. At these prices—labels be damned—the time to bring bubbly should come around with far greater frequency.—LIZA SCHOENFEIN



AFFORDABLE FIZZ

**Schramsberg
Blanc de Blancs**

The Reserve 1993 was ranked number one at blind tastings (pitted against Dom Perignon and Cristal). The non-vintage is exceptionally light and delicate; great with seafood. \$26

**Nicolas Feuillatte
Brut Premier Cru**

One of Nathalie Vaché's favorites. Flavorful and creamy, with berry notes on top of a crisp citrus flavor; Vaché recommends it with dessert. \$26

**Egly-Ouriet Brut
Grand Cru**

This "grower champagne" smells like Veuve Clicquot—rich and nutty. The flavor is similar, too—apple and citrus, but with hints of pear, vanilla, and oak. Also ideal with dessert. \$32

"J"

Sonoma winemaker Judy Jordan's popular sparkling wine is lighter than champagne, with lots of good bubbles and crisp fruit. \$36