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\$1 beyond the greater New York metropolitan

What's Best Served Icy and Opens With a Bang?

The Wine Panel Sips Champagnes For \$40 or Less

By FRANK J. PRIAL

CHAMPAGNE is the wine of legends: the widow Clicquot setting off for St. Petersburg in a coach and four with her case of samples. Edward VII's servant following him around the golf course with a bottle at the ready; his son George V serving Pol Roger in magnums to the seven reigning monarchs of Europe after his father's funeral; Moët & Chandon sending a trainload of Champagne to the San Francisco earthquake survivors.

With less intrigue perhaps but no shortage of seasonal enthusiasm, the Dining section's tasting panel sipped and nosed its way through 26 nonvintage brut Champagnes last week, all costing \$40 or less. Still, Champagne being what it is, some of the panelists supplied their own romance.

Amanda Hesser imagined tasting her Champagne with cured ham. Eric Asimov opted instead for sushi, or fried chicken. Well, to each his own. In addition to Ms. Hesser, Mr. Asimov and me, our panel was joined by Howard Horvath, the wine director at Esca in Manhattan.



Mary Ann Smith

As esteemed as Champagne may be, we all agreed that Champagne was, strangely enough, underrated. Its unmatched status as a wine for celebrations has also kept it confined to parties. "It goes well with lots of different foods," Mr. Asimov said. "Champagne has been pigeonholed." Mr. Horvath quickly chimed in, "And that is a mistake."

Most Champagnes are nonvintage. Instead of using a wine of a single year, they are complex blends that can contain wine from 20 different vintages and as many vineyards. Winemakers manipulate the blends until they achieve the qualities they are seeking, whether light-bodied, heavy-bodied, fruity, yeasty or somewhere in the middle. In all those nonvintage

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Sipping Champagnes at \$40 or Less

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blends, all the big houses blend toward a norm, seeking consistency year after year. These Champagnes do not have the same individuality that vintage Champagnes have, and after a while the panel felt a bit panicky trying to find different terms to describe the often subtle differences between bottles.

What we were looking for from these nonvintage brut Champagnes was freshness and liveliness, and from a good many of them, that's what we got. "I wouldn't refuse any of these," Mr. Horvath said, and Ms. Hesser echoed that sentiment, saying, "They're all perfectly drinkable." We also all agreed that a few of them did leap out, and that the prices were right.

Even though Champagne is a complicated wine to make, it remains relatively inexpensive. While it is possible to spend \$250 on a bottle of Dom Pérignon rosé or \$300 on an older bottle of Krug Clos du Mesnil, in our recent tasting the most expensive bottle was a Ruinart at \$40. Average price per bottle was \$29.60. Vintage Champagnes are invariably higher priced, but even with their proliferation in recent years, most houses base their reputations on their nonvintage wines.

"Brut," the most common style of Champagne, means raw or untreated in French, and indicates that the Champagne is dry, that it contains

little or no added sweetness. Paradoxically, "extra dry" Champagne is sweeter than brut, and "sec," which means dry, is sweeter than extra dry. A Champagne even drier than brut might be called "brut nature" or, in one case, "brut sauvage."

Our tasting panel was generally enthusiastic about the Champagnes we tasted. Our favorite, garnering 3½ stars on our 0-to-4-star scale, was a Louis Roederer Premier Cuvée Réserve at \$32.50. Two wines received three stars, Bollinger Spécial Cuvée, also \$32.50, and the Nicolas Feuillate Gold Label Premier Cru at \$23. This Feuillate also was chosen the tasting's best value.

The Roederer and Bollinger wines were consensus winners, a rarity among our generally contentious group. The Roederer was an elegant wine with, Mr. Asimov said, "power, finesse and complexity, yet with a creamy texture to it." Ms. Hesser described it memorably as "taut and springy." The Bollinger, as Bollingers often do, "mixed power and grace" and, Mr. Horvath said, displayed attractive "toasty" aromas. I called it brawny, but with a touch of elegance.

It's worth noting that Champagne is made only in the Champagne district of France, 90 miles east of Paris. "La" Champagne is the region; "le" Champagne is the wine.

Once it was common to use the name Champagne on wines made anywhere from California to the Crimea, but the European Union cracked down, threatening trade sanctions against offenders. It also banned the use of the term "méthode champenoise" to describe sparkling wines made with the same techniques used in Champagne.

This represents an understandable but slightly holier-than-thou attitude on the part of the Champagne producers, who once had to contend with riots over their illegal use of grapes trucked in from other parts of France and who still buy and affix their labels to bottled Champagne purchased from other producers within the region.

Five of our nonvintage bruts took home 2½ stars, and in describing almost all of them, the terms that kept popping up were "lemony" and "toasty." Of the three rosés we tasted, two received 2½ stars: a Jacquesson & Fils (\$37) and another Nicolas Feuillate (\$30). It was also eye-pleasing to see some salmon-colored liquid in a sea of straw-colored glasses.

The Jacquesson I particularly liked. I thought it had extra body, and then said it had that *je ne sais quoi*. Luckily, my panel mates didn't ask me exactly what I meant.

Ms. Hesser enjoyed the crisp fla-

vor of the Feuillate rosé. A total of 11 Champagnes made our chart below, with three wines tied at two stars apiece: A Laurent-Perrier (\$30), Veuve Clicquot (\$36), and from Moët & Chandon, its Brut Impérial (\$36).

At our tasting, some of the bottles were poured into Champagne flutes, others wound up in wine glasses. Writing recently in *Gourmet* magazine, the critic Gerald Asher quotes Jean-Hervé Chiquet, one of the two managers of Jacquesson & Fils, on the use of the flute. "Flutes are pretty," Mr. Chiquet told him, "and they are fine for looking at the tiny bubbles. But to fully appreciate a Champagne as a wine, you must use a wine glass."

I have long felt the same, and our rather ambitious tasting confirmed that view. We ran out of flutes and employed about eight standard wine glasses. We found that they made judging the wines much easier. They were easier to fill and drink from and rarely tipped over. If nothing else, they were certainly easier to stick one's nose into to smell the wine. And they retained the wines' bouquets longer than the flutes.

Still, the flutes are more attractive. And since few Champagne drinkers are seriously evaluating the wines, there is no compelling reason to switch. And flutes are themselves a vast improvement over the flat short-stemmed glasses still favored in Hollywood films and on cruise ships. They are for shrimp cocktails, not good Champagne.

Nonvintage similarities.



Mary Ann Smith

Tasting Report: Sometimes Light, Sometimes Full-Bodied, but Always Lively

Louis Roederer **\$32.50** **★★½**
Brut Premier Cuvée Réserve

High praise from all: Frank J. Prial called it elegant, and Eric Asimov found power, finesse and complexity. Taut and springy, Amanda Hesser said, while Howard Horvath detected good acidity and aromas of fruit and vanilla.

Bollinger Brut Spécial Cuvée **\$32.50** **★★★**

Another consensus winner, mixing power and grace: Hesser likened it to a ripe persimmon. Asimov found it full-bodied yet fresh and exuberant. Brawny but elegant, Prial said. Horvath liked the toasty aromas.

BEST VALUE

Nicolas Feuillate **\$23** **★★★**
Gold Label Premier Cru

Hesser and Asimov were big fans of this one. Asimov called it lively with a long finish, while Hesser called it clean and crisp. Horvath enjoyed its freshness, but Prial found it merely correct, with no faults.

Piper Heidsieck **\$28** **★★½**

Beautiful and well balanced, Horvath said, and Prial liked its body and long finish. Asimov found it pleasant, with a yeasty aroma, but not complex.

Taittinger Brut La Française **\$29** **★★½**

Hesser found it dynamic, full, clear and powerful. Asimov liked its finesse and long finish. Prial called it harmonious, but for Horvath, it was too sweet.

Guy Larmandier **\$28** **★★½**
Premier Cru à Vertus

Asimov and Horvath found it lively and well balanced. Prial called it attractive and liked its touch of sweetness. A pretty Champagne, Hesser said.

Jacquesson & Fils Rosé **\$37** **★★½**

Prial found extra body and substance. Asimov detected an herbal complexity in the flavor, and Horvath liked the combination of fruit and acidity. He felt

this would go well with chocolate. Hesser called it bitter and fragmented.

Nicolas Feuillate **\$30** **★★½**
Rosé Premier Cru

Perhaps influenced by the pale red color, Hesser, Horvath and Asimov detected raspberry and strawberry aromas. Asimov liked the full body, Hesser and Horvath the crisp flavors. But Prial found a flat middle.

Laurent-Perrier Brut L.P. **\$30** **★★**

Light-bodied and fresh, Asimov said. Prial, too, liked the body and texture, while Horvath found clean grapefruit notes. Hesser settled for clean and nice.

Veuve Clicquot **\$36** **★★**

Prial called it big-bodied and substantial, while Horvath, who pegged it as Veuve Clicquot, detected peach and apricot flavors. Hesser found it pleasant with some sweetness, and Asimov, too, tasted a little sweetness.

Moët & Chandon Brut Impérial **\$36** **★★**

Vivacious, springs out of the glass, Prial said. Asimov liked the soft, light bubbles, floral aromas and long finish. Toasty, with citrus notes, Horvath said. But Hesser found it dense and bitter.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

(None) Pass It By
★ Passable
★★ Good
★★★ Excellent
★★★★ Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the panel's reaction to the wines, which are tasted with names and vintages concealed. The panelists this week are Frank J. Prial, Amanda Hesser, Eric Asimov and a guest, Howard Horvath, wine director at Esca. While the number of wines tasted will differ depending on the category, they will represent the selection of wines generally available in good retail shops and restaurants. Prices are those paid in wine shops in the New York region.

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