



Serious Wines in Silly Bottles

Mini Champagnes are a great idea--even if they don't look like it

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They say that good things come in small packages. But if you're making a good thing in a small package, that doesn't mean the package has to look so ... *dumb*.

Though some have been out for a few years, in the past six months some of Champagne's most well-known houses--including [Nicolas Feuillatte](#), [Piper-Heidsieck](#) and [Pommery](#)--have been heavily promoting their wines in 1/4-size bottles. I know Champagne is usually reserved for special occasions, but in recent months it's become a more regular guilty pleasure for me, so I love the small bottles. However, Champagne producers aren't trying to please scruffy-looking thirty-somethings like me. Mostly they're trying to appeal to the hip, club crowd. Which is why the bottles all look like My First Champagne or the sort of thing Paris Hilton would give to her Chihuahua to play with.

And it's a shame, because these are seriously good wines. But with Dayglo, Barbie-and-Ken packaging, I have a feeling that the clubbers won't ever realize that they're drinking something special. They may never look beyond the miniature bottles to the rest of the great Champagnes that will be available to them once they get older and trade Bungalow 8 for '21' Club. Of even more concern, however, is that people who do like Champagne might take one look and dismiss these wines as being solely for hipsters. Which they may very well do, especially considering that each of the producers promotes the wines as good to drink through a straw.

Seriously. The bars and clubs that serve the mini Champagnes are even supplied with plastic straws (usually hot pink, of course). Even sillier is the fact that the straws have to be kept cold or the bubbles make them rise right out of the bottles and fall on the floor. But more on straws in a minute.



For now, it's time to make the point that these wines aren't just good. They're *very good*. The most obvious reason is that they're the real McCoy—sparkling wines produced in the region of Champagne. The second reason is that French law requires that the wine be made in regular 750ml bottles and disgorged. The producers claim to have custom-built bottling lines that pull the wine from the 750s and run them directly into the minis. So there's no artificial carbonation or secret ingredients--it's real Champagne.

In fact, the mini Nicolas Feuillatte Brut and Rosé are exactly the same blend as in the normal 750ml non-vintage bottlings. Same with Piper-Heidsieck and Baby Piper. Pommery, however, decided to give the people what they want. Winemaker Thierry Gasco, on a recent visit to New York, told me that he conducted focus groups and taste tests with clubbers, and he discovered that the Pommery Brut Royal and Brut Rosé weren't sweet or creamy enough to hold the hipsters' attention. So for the Pommery Pop minis he produces special blends--both have a touch more Chardonnay and slightly higher residual sugar (so they're extra dry, not brut).

To prove that these wines can hold their own, I set up a blind tasting for *Wine Spectator's* lead taster on the wines of Champagne, [Bruce Sanderson](#). He could only see the glasses of wine in front of him, not the packaging. In the lineup, from first to last, were Piper-Heidsieck Brut (750ml), Baby Piper, Nicolas Feuillatte (750ml), Nicolas Feuillatte mini, Pommery Pop mini, Nicolas Feuillatte Rosé (750ml), Nicolas Feuillatte Rosé mini and Pommery Pop Rosé. Nothing scored below 87 points, and two out of three times the minis scored a point or two higher than the 750s. Most of the minis are even bottled under screw cap. Pommery Pop is bottled under cork, however, and Bruce thought it tasted corky. I had a replacement handy, and the untainted Pommery Pop mini wound up being the highest-scoring wine of the entire tasting--Sanderson rated it outstanding on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale.

Once I revealed the packaging, he made an especially important point: That if you drink the wine through a straw, you lose the textural feel in the mouth. The better the Champagne, the better the texture. Looking at his notes from the tasting, he described several as being "creamy," "silky," "chalky," "lush," etc., none of which would come through if he or anyone else were drinking the wines through straws.

So to serious wine drinkers who would probably judge the book by the cover given their prior experience with Champagne, don't be dissuaded by the Mary-Kate-and-Ashley-looking bottles. These are great wines. And to clubbers already drinking these Champagnes: Please, either get a glass or at least drink 'em straight from the bottle (that's what I do). You already know what to do with the straws.