

Gourmet

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DRINKS

OLD BUBBLES IN NEW BOTTLES Rollin Soles, of Oregon's Argyle Winery, makes one of the best sparkling wines in America, and it will come as no surprise that his benchmark is Champagne. But Soles does one thing that is virtually unheard of: He bottles to order. "Whenever I visit Champagne," Soles says in his soft Texas accent, "and one of my buddies opens a bottle that has those nutty flavors you always read about, they dump it down the drain. They say, 'It's not fresh. Let's get a fresh one.' I want to make a wine and get it to the consumer so it tastes as good and as fresh as what I drink when I'm with my buddies in Champagne." Bottling on demand isn't an option for most Champagne houses, but a few of the best do offer something that comes close. Knowing what to look for and understanding why this wine—even more than other types—seems

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to taste so much better near the chalky soils of its birthplace can help avoid disappointment and assure us the level of pleasure we've come to expect.

Of course, expectation is part of the problem. In the U.S., Champagne is usually reserved for special occasions. If it's old, that adds to the anticipation. Here's where things start to get complicated. Old Champagne can be sublime, but it can also taste dull or even downright unpleasant. Given the expense, is it worth the risk? Absolutely. Because, properly aged, it can be incredibly complex, with all the fruit of a great white wine combined with the unique fresh-baked-bread aromas and savory flavors that seem to come only from high-end Champagne.

Every bottle of wine is a biology experiment waiting to go wrong. Grape juice is a very friendly environment for spoilage; that's why it ferments so well. But the way Champagne is made—a second fermentation in the bottle is induced by the addition of fresh yeast and sugar to already fermented wine—multiplies the possibilities for disaster. Another thing that makes Champagne more prone to problems is that the juice it's made from is drained off the skins quickly and therefore doesn't include the natural preservatives present in grape skins. (Those skin phenolics keep wine fresh, but they're also bubble killers.)

The Champagne maker's balancing act is aided by the fact that the carbon dioxide generated as the yeast converts the

added sugar to alcohol creates pressure, which, in turn, keeps oxygen—potentially as harmful as bacteria—from getting into the bottle. The lees (debris) that settle in the bottle during the second fermentation impart flavor and seem to serve as a preservative (the process is poorly understood).

Now here comes the piece of the puzzle that can most improve your odds in this high-risk, high-reward game of French roulette. The final step is getting those spent lees out of the bottle (disgorgement), topping it off, and getting the Champagne to the consumer. Disgorgement introduces a bit of oxygen into the wine, which begins the aging process. A few months won't hurt, assuming they aren't spent in hot warehouses, bouncing around in trucks, or under bright lights. But the more direct the route from cellar to buyer, the better.

Of course, some people prefer their Champagne old-tasting (not surprisingly, the French have a term for it: *goût anglais*, which refers to the British love for the nutty and toasty flavors that develop in the bottle over time). But for those who prefer fruit to nuts, Bollinger and Moët & Chandon are among the great Champagne houses that offer older vintages “recently disgorged.” A few less-famous producers also disgorge just before shipping, and a handful even publicize the disgorgement date. The ten wines below all showed great complexity and freshness, and rather than falling apart in the glass as some old Champagnes do, these evolved, encouraging us to take another sip. And another. —James Rodewald

TOP FIZZ

Pierre Gimonnet & Fils Gastronomer Brut Blanc de Blancs 2000	\$47	A soft wine, with mouthwatering acidity. Aromas of ripe apples. Crisp, slightly earthy flavors.
Pierre Gimonnet & Fils Fleuron Brut Blanc de Blancs 1999	\$53	Honeysuckle and fresh-baked buttered bread on the nose. Concentrated and lively, with a refreshing minerality.
Larmandier-Bernier Vieille Vigne de Cramant 2000	\$58	Very earthy nose: mushrooms and truffles. Crisp citrus and apple flavors. Elegant.
Gosset Grande Réserve Brut	\$60	Ripe fruit, toast, and hay notes. Very fine bubbles. Slightly sweet. A big and serious wine.
A. Margaine Special Club Brut Blanc de Blancs 1998	\$63	Gorgeous, delicately floral aromas. Pear as well. Great balance of fruit, acidity, and minerality.
Gosset Grand Brut Rosé	\$70	Nice chalky, smoky, grapey, bread-dough, and strawberry nose. Very bright berry flavors. Clean, long finish.
Jean Milan Terres de Noël Brut Blanc de Blancs 2000	\$73	Smells a bit like applesauce. There's a hint of oak there, too. Soft, ripe flavors, excellent acidity. Goes on and on.
Bollinger La Grande Année Brut 1997	\$120	Cinnamon, clove, and allspice aromas give way to green apples. Rich, big, with a long, tart finish.
Bollinger R.D. Extra Brut 1995	\$200	Very complex nose: earthy, spicy, and winy. Very small bubbles, very crisp, very fresh. It's very everything.
Moët & Chandon Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1990	\$280	Toast aromas first, then beautiful fruit. Great balance between the lovely fruit and the fine structure.