

SNOW ON WINE

January 2024

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Devil's Wine

As you usher out 2023 if you feel it was “one hell of a year,” perhaps consider toasting its demise, with **Devil’s Wine!** And what you are asking is this thing, Devil’s Wine? And if I drink it, can I later be absolved of sin? Well, remember old **Dom Perignon**, a monk in the Champagne region of France, who is falsely credited with inventing the sparkling wine so named? (Sorry to burst your bubble -- pun intended). The old Dom’s greatest contribution, ironically, was improving wine making technique so as to prevent unintended secondary fermentation. This typically happened when primary fermentation quit with sugar remaining, due to frigid fall temperatures common there. Spring’s warmth reactivated fermentation creating pressure from CO₂ higher than the poor quality French glass of the time (cs 1670) could withstand. Many bottles exploded often resulting in serious injury. Since at the time yeast and molecular chemistry were unknown, the conversion of grape juice to wine was attributed to “holy spirits”, so this bad result was attributed to “unholy spirits”. Hence, **Devil’s Wine!**



Today you could score a bottle of tasty Dom Perignon for a bit short of 2 “C” notes. But if you just want a bubbly wine – *and what could be more festive* – there are myriad possibilities. Almost all for a fraction of the cost of actual “Champagne”. And of course thanks to the curmudgeonly rules of the EU, none of the alternatives can be called Champagne, methode Champenoise, or even methode Traditionelle. This was made abundantly clear to Julie and I when bicycling along the Cher River where we found a 5 million case “Champagne” winery deep in tunnels in the chalk. “No, no Monsieur, you must not call it that!” However when we got to our hotel in Paris the hotel concierge said “Oh, you brought your own Champagne!” But so that I am not targeted by EU “enforcers,” let’s just call it, “**the method**”.

Both Champagne, and it’s imitator’s across France, Europe, and the world, including, to my surprise, in Tasmania, all use “the method”. They also share a confusing way of describing the sweetness of their “**Devil Wine**”. **The method** begins with primary fermentation in a tank as with any white or rose’ wine. Then the fully fermented wine is bottled, more yeast and some rock sugar are added and a crown cap seals the bottle. A secondary fermentation creates CO₂ gas and pressure (about 75 psi!). Eventually the yeast beasties eat all the sugar then die and become lees! Ageing on the lees imparts the toasty bakery aroma and flavor which the French are gaga about but Americans not so much. At about eighteen months most feel it reaches full flavor. Then the bottles are inverted at an angle and rotated a quarter turn once or twice daily for a few months (called riddling) until the lees form a plug in the neck. Dipping the neck in liquid nitrogen freezes the plug. The cap is popped of, pressure squirts the plug of lees out, and the bottle is filled with the “dosage” and corked.



Sweetness is determined by the dosage, a mixture of wine and sugar.

The confusing description goes from driest to sweetest:

- ExtraBrut** (less than 6 Gm/L sugar),
- Brut** (less than 12 Gm/L),
- ExtraDry** (12 – 17 Gm/L),
- Sec** (17-32),
- DemiSec** (32 – 50), and
- Doux** (50).



So for Doux, bring your tooth brush or your dentist will scream!



Along with the French we love the flavor the lees imparts, but our friend Eva Roberts does not. She, like many of you prefers the “clean crisp” flavor of Prosecco, a sparkling wine where “**the method**” is not used!



So Eva was delighted to join us in Italy where we were planning to visit Valdobbiadene, the center of DOCG Prosecco. There we went to a winery and accompanying wine school for kids of winemaking families (age 12 to 18). The winemaker showed us how in the “**Charmat method**”, the secondary fermentation takes place in a pressurized tank, and once completed the wine is bottled leaving the lees behind. So no aging on the lees, and no yeasty taste. Because this is so much quicker Charmat made wines tend to be less expensive. The Glera grape defines Prosecco. DOCG Prosecco is only made in two small areas – first along the Prosecco road from Valdobbiadene to Conegliano and also around Asolo. DOC Prosecco is made all over the surrounding region -- always of Glera.

Many of you may have noted that the Kirkland (purple label) Prosecco at Costco is the least expensive Prosecco they carry but is DOCG. The other three they usually have are only DOC, yet more expensive. It was our feeling that the Kirkland DOCG was a bit better, but I wanted data. So we bought all 4, and had a group of wine lovers try them. Everyone judged the Kirkland DOCG to be clearly better. One more case for no price to quality correlation.

And back in the Po River Valley, going South into the hills above Parma we found another excellent Charmat made wine. One with richer fruitier flavor. Lambrusco is both a grape and the name of the wine. Julie and I were skeptical because in the late 1970's until 1985 Americans fell in love with the sweetest Lambrusco wines, and Italy sent all it could make, overcropping and destroying quality. But we were delighted with wonderful dry fruity frizzante wines in white, rose' and red. So if you like red wine and bubbles go Lambrusco. These are the wines folks in Emilia-Romagna serve with their Parma ham – a pairing for the ages!

For those of you looking for other “**the method**” wines you will find abundant quantities of Spanish Cava and Portuguese Espumante in local wine specialty shops. You may need to search more to find Cap Classique from South Africa, Torley wines from Hungary, or the Aussie red Sparkling Shiraz. And some of the most Champagne-like Julie and I found anywhere were in Tasmania – worth the search! And in nearly every French AOC such wines are made and called **Cremant**. And with all sparkling wines, the colder the better. Service at such low temperature kills the aroma and flavor in most wines, but not sparklers. And it helps keep the fizz in the wine longer. And speaking of fizz, remember that 75 psi pressure. Once the cage is off keep a hand on that cork, rotate not pull, and try for a controlled and gentle release. Years ago I failed to do this and left a half inch deep hole in my best friends ceiling! Or throw caution to the wind and do as Napoléon! Open with a saber strike (called sabrage). *Very impressive if done on horseback!*



So, bring in 2024 with abundant bubbles! No need to decide if you'll serve the earthy yeasty products of “**the method**” or the clean crisp results of **Charmat**. Some of each I say -- both having the **Devil's** bubbles, and likely both will be in demand in most groups.

Wine shops are well stocked with all for the holidays and there is no need to go broke – they offer plenty of good quality at reasonable prices to go around. Be a cool dude and make it very cold to preserve the fizz and flavor. And remember, pressure in some bottles tops anything Michelin rolls with – so be careful! ***And Happy Holidays to all!***