



Red, white, and sparkling

Add a little sparkle and a few bubbles to your Independence Day celebration with an American-made sparkling wine.

Let's dispel a couple of myths about sparkling wines, those effervescent potions that tickle noses and bring luck to wedding toasts. They aren't just for New Year's Eve and they don't have to be French to be good.

Sparkling wines can make any meal seem more festive without breaking the bank. Even a good, ol' American cheeseburger becomes something special when it's paired with a Blanc de Noirs, a sparkling wine made with pinot noir grapes.

"We believe everyone should

have it [sparkling wine] chilled and ready to drink every day," says winemaker Sharon Fenchak of North Carolina's Biltmore Estates Winery, producer of six sparkling wines that range from dry to semi-sweet.

Whether you are grilling tuna, grouper, steaks, or burgers, a sparkling wine is a refreshing and lighter choice that will balance the smoky flavors as well as — if not better than — a more complex wine. Sparkling rosés pair well with heavier fish, such as tuna or salmon. A dry Blanc de Blancs Brut complements

tilapia, flounder, crab cakes, oysters, shrimp, and fresh fruit. A Blanc de Syrah Brut, a unique wine from Georgia's Wolf Mountain Vineyards, is a perfect match for grilled meats, as is a Chandon Blanc de Noirs.

When serving sparkling wines with food, both brut and extra-dry will work throughout the meal. The sweeter sec or demi-sec wines should be served with desserts. And it's a good rule of thumb that dessert wines should be sweeter than the dessert itself; otherwise, the wine may taste bitter.

Now that you know you can serve sparkling wines with just about any summer menu, let's talk about American versus French sparkling wines. Champagne is undoubtedly wonderful, but a distinctly American holiday like the Fourth of July calls for a 'made-in-the-USA' wine. And you can find domestic sparkling wines with close connections to their French cousins.

Only the sparkling bubbly from France's Champagne region can be legally called champagne, which is produced by a labor-intensive, complex process known in France as *méthode champenoise*. Many U.S. wineries produce sparkling wines using the *méthode traditionnelle* or classic method, and these American-versions deliver great flavor at a fraction of the cost of even a mediocre bottle of champagne. For the best taste, buy sparkling wines produced by the classic method even though they will cost a little more, usually in the \$20 range. The inexpensive versions often are simply injected with carbon dioxide gas to render the effervescence, which will dissipate soon after opening.

Other differences between French Champagne and American sparklers include smell and taste. For example, domestic sparkling wines have characteristics of ripe, vivid fruit, especially those from

California. Grapes ripen more quickly in the California sun and produce more intense fruit flavors, which are popular with American palates. Champagne and sparkling wines from other European regions often have a yeasty or nutty smell and taste.

American terroir has attracted several French winemakers to come stateside to produce their sparkling wines. Gilbert Gruet, whose Champagne house Gruet et Fils in Bethon, France began in 1952, decided to plant an experimental vineyard in New Mexico in the 1980s. Today, his children, winemaker Laurent and daughter Nathalie, and family friend Farid Himeur run Albuquerque's Gruet Winery, which distributes its classic and crisp sparkling wines in 49 states.

Domaine Chandon's founders were winemakers from Moët & Chandon, one of France's leading names in champagne. The Napa Valley winery produces popular and locally available sparkling wines that showcase the rich, fruit flavors of California with centuries-old, traditional champagne-making methods.

A taste of sparkling wine is like "drinking the stars," according to the French. This summer, pop the cork under the Stars and Stripes for a truly festive Independence Day celebration.

Tasting the stars

Remember these few hints for getting the best flavor from your sparkling wines:

1. Buy sparkling wines made by the *méthode traditionnelle* or classic method.
2. Serve well-chilled.
3. Use small glasses to make the bubbles last longer.
4. Re-cap the bottle immediately with a pressurized champagne stopper and return it to the refrigerator or ice bucket.
5. Add kosher salt to the ice in your wine bucket to chill the wine faster.

