



## The Washington Post

By Dave McIntyre

Wednesday, December 9, 2009

## This year, break the bubble barrier with something new

For most of us, champagne is a special-occasion drink, raised as a New Year's toast and sipped at weddings or landmark birthdays. It is too expensive to be an everyday tippie, and because we drink it only rarely we tend to stick with the familiar labels of the big champagne houses. Even if you don't drink it much, you've probably heard or seen at least some of these large-house names: Veuve Clicquot, Moët & Chandon, Mumm's, Taittinger, Pommery, Bollinger. These brands and others offer reliable quality, even if sometimes at premium prices. And these large houses produce enough champagne so that you can walk into just about any wine store and find something worth drinking.

But this year, if you're willing to splurge on a nice bottle of bubbly for the holidays, I encourage you to move beyond the familiar and try something new. (I'll have some bargain bubbly to recommend next week.)

There are two ways to do that. First, seek out small, artisanal champagne producers that might seem to be risky because their names are unknown. Though their prices can match those of the familiar brands, these small grower-producers often offer exceptional value. That's because many grow their own grapes and have total control over the winemaking from vineyard to bottle. The vast majority of champagne is produced by large houses that buy grapes from family farmers.

Unfortunately, small-grower champagne is hard to find because there isn't much of it. You can identify a small grower by looking for a code imprinted on the front label in infinitesimally small letters. (You can spot a wine nerd in the champagne aisle; he's the one peering closely at the label while moving his eyeglasses up and down.) If the code begins with "RM" or "SR," it means that producer farmed his or her own grapes. "NM" means that at least some of the grapes used by the winery were purchased.

While RM or SR generally means you have something unusual and potentially very special, NM is not an indicator of inferiority. Many small houses buy grapes as part of their business plan and still manage to produce outstanding champers. Ask your trusted retailer for suggestions.

The second way to break through the familiar bubble barrier is to move beyond champagne to some of the ultra-premium sparkling wines from elsewhere in the world. We flinch at paying champagne prices for bubbly from California or New Zealand, for example, but some of those match similarly priced champagnes for quality and complexity. (If the champagne lover sitting next to you just keeled over in apoplexy, it's because he hasn't read the next sentence yet.) They just manage that with New World exuberance rather than old-fashioned French style.

So this holiday season, think of toasting the New Year and its potential by embracing the unknown and trying something new.



### Recommendations

#### Jean Laurent Blanc de Noirs Brut

\*\*

This wine is aged on the lees for five years, compared with 1 1/2 to 2 years for most non-vintage champagnes. That gives it a little extra color and weight.

Hand Picked Selections