

Champagne...

a must for the Holiday Season!

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I can not even imagine a holiday party or celebration without Champagne. For me, it's like Mardi Gras without King Cake, red beans without andouille sausage or a Saints game without Whistle Monster. Some vital element is missing and it's just not quite right.

So, to help insure the success of your holiday festivities, I've compiled a list of bubbly facts and tips.

First off, true Champagne is produced only in the region of Champagne, France, hence the name. Although the term Champagne is used in the generic sense, technically bubbly made anywhere outside of Champagne, France must be labeled "sparkling wine".

There are three main grapes used to produce Champagne: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. The label indicates the level of sweetness: *Brut* is bone dry, *Extra Sec* or *Extra Dry* is less dry than Brut, *Sec* is medium sweet, *Demi-Sec* is sweet and *Doux* is very sweet.

Seventy-five to eighty percent of all Champagnes are *non-vintage*, meaning they are a blend of two or more harvest years. A *vintage* Champagne is made from a minimum of 80% of grapes from a specified year, which is indicated on the label, and are aged for three years prior to their release. A *tete-de-cuvee* is the winery's top Champagne produced from the best grapes and is made only in stellar "declared" years. Examples of *tete-de-cuvee* include Dom Perignon by Moet et Chandon and La Grande Dame by Veuve Clicquot.

Serving Champagne at the right temperature is important to assure optimum pleasure. It is best when served 43 to 48°F, which can be achieved by placing it in the refrigerator for about 3 hours or in a Champagne bucket (half ice, half water) for 20-30 minutes. Champagne should be served in a long-stem tulip shaped glass or flute, which enhances the flow of bubbles, concentrates the aromas and prevents your hand from warming the bubbly. Contrary to popular belief, a bottle of bubbly should never pop with a loud bang, but rather with a soft sigh. It is considered garish and bubbles are wasted.

In addition to its festive, effervescent nature, another good reason to serve Champagne at parties is its compatibility with many different types of food. Of course it is a natural when paired with smoked salmon, oysters and caviar, but Champagne also compliments a variety of appetizers, cheeses, lobster, shrimp, chicken, pork, spicy dishes such as Thai and Mexican, sushi, fresh fruit and desserts. And, when crawfish season rolls around, try a bubbly at your next boil.

Here's to a Sparkling Holiday Season!

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