

CULT OF TASTE



SUMMER SPARKLERS

It's not entirely about the bubbles. But they are important. Fine and elegant ones that tickle the tongue and last for several minutes are generally preferred to big, coarse bubbles with no stamina. But, regardless of their size, texture, or character, bubbles (also known as the bead or moose when talking about sparkling wine) should never hurt. If a sparkling wine stings, blame it on too much acidity, not belligerent bubbles.

These were just a few of the many important conclusions that emerged from the blind tasting of seven Long Island sparkling wines on June 2. On *Edible East End's* rotating panel were Stan Schumacher, winemaker at Castello di Borghese Winery, Robin Meredith, owner of Broadfields Wine Cellars and manager of the Tasting Room, and Richard Olsen-Harbach, managing director and winemaker at Raphael.

Bubbles are the most obvious difference between sparkling and still wines. Bubbles are also part of the reason that sparkling wine—whether French champagne, Italian prosecco, or North Fork brut—is so much fun to drink, with so many different foods, and on so many different occasions.

First, some of the mechanics of the tasting. In a room out of the panelists' view, the chilled bottles were uncorked and wrapped with num-

bered brown bags. The panelists tasted each wine twice, and felt that the wines did "move around a bit," delivering different impressions over five or so minutes. The panel used standard wine glasses, as opposed to champagne flutes, in order to give the expert noses easier access. Mr. Meredith, who hosted the event at the Peconic location of The Tasting Room, a shop that sells the wines of five North Fork vineyards, provided a palate cleanser of mozzarella drizzled with olive oil, a trick he learned from wine critic Stephen Tanzer.

(The panel could not taste Palmer's 2000 Sparkling Brut, since it is currently sold out, and could not get either The Old Field Vineyards 2000 Blanc de Noir or Macari's Brut in time for the tasting. The panel did not include Laurel Lake's Moscato Sparkling Wine, because the style seemed different than the rest of the field.)

This relatively small selection of Long Island sparklers results partly from the realities of making champagne. The méthode champenoise or natural method, which all of the Long Island sparklers use, is a tedious and costly process. As if it weren't challenging enough to ferment pressed grape juice into a delicious beverage, a winemaker attempting a sparkling wine must essentially create two wines, transferring the first wine from barrels or tanks into bottles to ferment a second time. This



Wolffer Cuvée 2000, \$29

Aromas of bread crust, toast, and yeast. Mouth feel is soft and clean but with subdued bubbles. Finish is yeasty. Pair with smoked scallops.

Lenz Cuvée 1999, \$29.99

Good fruit on the nose with a hint of sherry. Clean and bright in the mouth with medium effervescence. Orange citrus flavors layer with lemons and limes. Think of crab cakes.

Pugliese Blanc de Blanc 2000, \$17.99

Nice mousse. Aromas of lemon, butter and fresh baked bread. Long clean pleasant finish. Overall pretty seamless and well balanced. Bring on the buffet.

Martha Clara Brut Non-Vintage, \$20.99

Nice mousse, good mouth feel. Nose is of lilac, butter and toast. Creamy yet with firm acidity in the finish. Pair with shrimp cocktail.

Pindar Cuvée Rare 1999, \$27.99

Slight blush of pink. Flavors of cherry, strawberry and rhubarb, slightly sweet. Finish is clean and does not linger. Try with chicken enchiladas.

Lieb Blanc de Blanc 2001, \$35

Nice mousse. Mouth is slightly creamy with subtle flavors of green apple and pears. Bright, light and refreshing finish. Perfect aperitif sparkling wine. Match with an apple fruit salad or curry chicken salad.

Pugliese Sparkling Merlot 1999, \$17.99

Nose is grapey and Kool-Aid like. Mouth is creamy and slightly sweet, with flavors of currants, black berry, plum, and black raspberry. Somewhat reminiscent of a good, dry Lambrusco. Pair with beef satay or spicy Mongolian beef.

time, a cap contains the carbon dioxide created by the active yeast. All of this biological activity generates not only bubbles, but also sediment that must be removed by a painstaking and ingenious process known as "racking" or "riddling." A winemaker might handle each bottle 100 times, first rotating the bottle on its side and gradually turning it upside down to gather the yeasty sediment in the tip. (At some wineries, motorized devices that can hold thousands of bottles, known as VLM's or very large machines, are replacing carpel-tunnel afflicted hand-riddlers who might turn up to 50,000 bottles per day.) The tip is dipped into an icy bath to create a small, yeast-containing ice cube that can be popped out without disturbing the rest of the bottle's contents or allowing the bubbles to escape. The wine is corked, and the process of aging begins.

All of these steps mean more opportunities to make errors and bad champagne. It also takes roughly four times the acreage of grapevines to make a bottle of sparkling wine as a bottle of still wine, since grapes intended for champagne are harvested early, when their sugar content is still low, since the long fermentation process would make fully ripe grapes too alcoholic.

"A winery owner could buy Cliquot Grand Dame and sell it for less than it costs to make his own champagne," said Mr.

Schumacher. "It's a labor of love. To do a really good champagne, you need a commitment of at least 10 years. It's not easy. If it was, everyone would do it." Mr. Olsen-Harbich concurred, "It's wine-making at the highest level."

The best champagne regions tend to have cooler climates like Long Island, which yield grapes ripe in flavor rather than sweetness. (Long Island vineyards already hold roughly 500 acres of chardonnay, one of the preferred grape varieties for champagne, and more pinot noir plantings would further expand the region's sparkling wine potential.) The panelists suggested that Long Island might produce bubbly reminiscent of the dry, delicate sparklers from the Loire Valley or the subtle *crémant d'Alsace*, the growing area just east of champagne's namesake.

"When you think about the interplay between food and wine," said Mr. Meredith, "it helps to broaden the potential scope of Long Island wines in people's lives." In fact, the landscape of Long Island sparklers seems destined to grow. Pugliese Vineyards, which had two wines represented in the tasting, makes four different sparklers. Lenz offers a recently disgorged 1991 cuvée. One North Fork grape producer, Sparkling Pointe, is specializing exclusively in sparkling wine, and will release its first vintage in 2007 or 2008. And Long Island sparklers are beginning to attract attention elsewhere. Lieb's 2001 Blanc de Blanc Reserve Wine recently won a gold medal at the L.A. County Fair Wines of the World competition, and made *Wine Spectator's* 2004 "Best American Sparkling Wines" list."

While none of the wines was unpleasant, the panelists characterized a couple of the selections as "donut wines," which lacked some body to connect the initial impression to the finish. Others with more zing were described as "Vegas by the pool," by Mr. Olsen-Harbich.

Pairing sparklers with food is easier than you think. "It's my 'any wine,'" said Mr. Schumacher about champagne. "Anytime, anywhere, anyone, any reason, with anything." Sparkling wine mingles comfortably with fried chicken, raw oysters, Peking duck and chocolate cake. It stands up to spice and salt better than most wines. "Acid with acid. Sweet with sweet," Mr. Meredith advised. Pair more acidic sparklers with heavier foods and sauces or lemon-drenched raw shellfish. Sweeter sparklers go better with spicy or sweet foods.

"It's the most underutilized wine in the world," said Mr. Meredith. In other words, consider bringing some of these selections to summer dinner parties or sipping them at the beach or distributing them as house-warming gifts. Mr. Olsen-Harbich even said that, if he was forced to drink one wine for the rest of his life, it would be sparkling: "It's my desert island wine." □

Note: For Edible East End's Spring 2005 tasting of tank-fermented chardonnays, we did not include Peconic Bay Winery's 2003 Steel Fermented Chardonnay. We always invite every Long Island winemaker to submit their wines, but did not receive this wine in time. More than a few readers commented on this conspicuous omission, since that chardonnay was named best in New York State at last year's New York Wine and Food Classic. We encourage you to judge for yourself.