

Robb Report

10 Outstanding Champagnes to Serve This Holiday Season, According to America's Top Sommeliers

By CAROLINE HATCHETT



Pop went the Champagne market in 2020. With restaurants closed and little reason to celebrate, drinkers turned to everyday cava and prosecco for their bubbles, and Champagne sales fell flatter than a half-drunk bottle of Krug to the tune of an 18 percent drop and a \$1.2 billion loss for the industry. But there are signs that the Champagne slump will end long before the pandemic does, with sales expected to return to the 300 million bottle mark by the time partygoers finish the last chorus of “Auld Lang Syne ” this New Year’s Eve.

Ninety-five percent of those bottles are nonvintage—the product of blending juice from several harvest years and a minimum 15 months’ aging. While there are exceptional and complex nonvintage Champagnes, they are “wines you can drink a lot of,” according to sommelier Ariel Arce in *Better with Bubbles*, her book on Champagnes and sparkling wines released in the not-so-festive fall of 2020.

Vintage Champagnes—which Arce calls “the rare stuff, aka unicorn wine, expensive bottles and special occasion bubbles”—are the ultimate expressions of a Champagne house and site-specific terroir. Made from a single year’s crop, sometimes just a few times each decade, these wines are aged for three to 10 years on the lees, contributing richness, finesse and Champagne’s signature yeasty-bready-toasty notes.

These are the bottles you want to stock for pull-out-all-the-stops entertaining this season. Look for notable vintages from the past 50 years: 1971, 1973, 1979, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1995, 1996, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2015, according to Arce. Or hunt down these 10 sommeliers' favorite insider bottles—coming in all styles and price points from big houses and tiny grower plots alike.

Femi Oyediran



Co-owner of Charleston wine bar and bottle shop [Graft](#), Oyediran is a music connoisseur and one of South Carolina's few advanced sommeliers.

Laherte Frères 2014 Les Vignes D'Autrefois Blanc de Niors Extra Brut

“We’re carrying several producers’ 2014 vintages at Graft, but I’m a sucker for Pinot Meunier these days, and, regardless of vintage, winemaker Aurélien [Laherte](#)’s Les Vignes d’Autrefois is on point. The Meunier comes from plots planted between 1947 and 1964, and the 2014 has a wild balance of richness, fruit and minerality.” (\$80)

Steven Dilly



A trader turned award-winning sommelier, Dilly owns Neapolitan pizza and wine destinations [Bufalina](#) and Bufalina Due in Austin, Texas.

Emmanuel Brochet 2011 Les Hauts Meuniers Premier Cru Extra Brut

“Made from 100 percent Meunier from 60-year-old vines, the wine is explosively aromatic, most notably featuring citrus, peach and a hint of brioche. Despite its slightly oxidative and vinous style, it retains loads of energy, bolstered by fine acidity on the finish.” (\$217)

Jhonel Faelnar



The advanced sommelier first made his mark at the NoMad and now pairs wines with the modern Korean tasting menu at Michelin two-star [Atomix](#).

Gaston Chiquet 2009 d'Aÿ Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru

“This wine from Vallée de la Marne is as refreshing as it is complex, with an acid kick-start on the palate before moving into nuances of ripe citrus, rich crème fraîche and honey. This current release is a disgorgement from 2020 and kept on the lees for an astonishing 10 years.” (\$72)

Matthew Pridgen



Raised in a Texas farming community, Pridgen champions family-owned wineries for his lists at Chris Shepherd’s [Underbelly Hospitality](#) group in Houston.

Saint-Chamant 2006 Cuvée de Chardonnay Blanc de Blancs Brut

“This Champagne from a tiny grower in Épernay pushes all my buttons. It was left on the lees for nine years and perfectly mature upon release. With notes of brioche, poached apple and hazelnut, the palate is rich yet defined with lemon curd, minerality and ultra-fine bubbles that dance through the finish.” (\$92)

Kevin Goldsmith



This Chicago somm cut his teeth with the [Alinea Group](#) and is now beverage director at John Shields' and Karen Urie Shields' [Smyth and the Loyalist](#).

Philipponnat 2004 Clos des Goisses Extra Brut

“The 2004 is initially wound tight, giving only the sense of vigor and slow-to-reveal, beguiling layers of dried herbs, smoke and sweet citrus. Boasting endless vertical lift, accompanied by a weight and intensity demanding every moment of your attention, it’s a living legend with every pour.” (\$226)

Rachel Coe



After serving wine from a take-out window in 2020, this sommelier is popping bottles and pairing wines again at Michelin three-star [Atelier Crenn](#) in San Francisco.

Egly-Ouriet 2002 Millésime Brut Grand Cru

“Egly-Ouriet’s Champagne is rich, yet focused and a true expression of the unrivaled terroir and grand cru fruit of Ambonnay. Egly will transport any drinker to a new realm of understanding and appreciation for the true complexities of Champagne. It’s thought-provoking, ethereal and damn delicious.” (\$435)

Fahara Zamorano



An LA sommelier via Chile, Zamorano is director of wine, spirits and cigar partnerships for [Vices.com](#) and its members-only clubs.

Krug 2002 Clos d'Ambonnay Blanc de Noirs Brut

“It’s hard not to fall in love with this unicorn. It’s been made only five times, with just 4,743 standard bottles and 240 magnums from the 2002 vintage. Made from Pinot Noir grown on a small plot in Ambonnay, this wine spent 14 years in Krug’s cellars and can be laid down for generations.” (\$2,891)

Tahirah Habibi



Founder of [Hue Society](#) and cofounder of the [Roots Fund Initiative](#), Habibi is making wine more inclusive for Black wine professionals and drinkers.

Charles Heidsieck 2000 Millésime Brut

“This elegant, complex Champagne is perfectly balanced and has stone fruit and brioche to serenade our senses. The acid is ideal, and the finish is as long as 2020 felt. With the vintage year having to struggle through rain and extreme heat, this Champagne shows how resilient wine really is.” (\$163)

Amanda Fraga



Born and raised in Miami, Fraga is beverage director for one of the city’s leading restaurant groups, chef Michael Schwartz’s Genuine Hospitality.

Bollinger 1990 La Grande Année Brut

“One of my most memorable Champagne moments was drinking 1990 Bollinger La Grande Année. It was a ripe vintage with high acid—the perfect recipe for aging. It drank like a grand cru Burgundy, with fewer bubbles than a current release Champagne and one of the longest finishes I’ve ever had in a sparkling wine.” (\$349)

Ariel Arce



The owner of Air’s Champagne Parlor, Special Club and Niche Niche published Better with Bubbles last year.

Charles Heidsieck 1983 Champagne Charlie Millésime Brut

“I was told even though people don’t think of 1983 as a top vintage, of the five Charlie vintages ever produced, this was the maison’s favorite. It was pristine, fresh and a perfect balance of graham cracker, honey and toffee—everything you want in an old bottle.” (\$559)