

## Corkheads: A world of bubbles under \$40

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Contra Costa Times

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"WHAT ARE YOU drinking on New Year's Eve?" In wine circles, the question is as common as your co-worker or neighbor asking you how you plan to ring in the new year. For many of us, regardless of the dire economy, opening a special bottle of sparkling wine is our plan (some of us also do it on random Tuesdays with Dungeness crab).

This year, however, high-end Champagne sales have dropped and Americans are trading down. Sales of sparkling wines from regions as diverse as Washington and the Georgian nation are up 10 percent — and bubbles priced over \$25 are down 21 percent, according to Nielsen statistics. To me, this opens up a world of bubblicious opportunities, particularly in the non-vintage category.

Most Champagne is non-vintage because blending wines from multiple vintages allows winemakers the flexibility they need to ensure a consistent style each year. Still, many non-vintage bottlings are as good as their vintage counterparts, and can improve with age.

So, if New Year's Eve is the one time of year you drink Champagne and you can't afford a Taittinger or Moët & Chandon, remember that smaller, grower-producer domaines such as Pierre Morlet are making Champagnes that sing for around \$40. Many stalwart supporters, such as Prima Vini in Walnut Creek, are selling them at by-the-case discounts.

If you want to stay in France and still slice your price tag, try bubbly outside of Champagne. My spring trip to the Loire Valley confirmed that the region an hour south of Paris is like a grapey Garden of Eden. So many varieties thrive there, and method traditionnelle sparkling wines have been produced in the Loire Valley for centuries.

For about \$15, you can try the sparkling wine collaboration between Soledad-based Cupcake Vineyards winemaker Adam Richardson and Paul Epsitatie of the Loire's LaCheteau winery. Richardson has a way with chardonnay (his Central Coast version is a steal at \$13) and their joint venture, Cupcake Vineyards Blanc de Blancs NV (\$15.99), is rife with the creamy texture and quality one expects from French sparkling wines.

Personally, I'm thrilled to welcome the new year with the sparkling version of my favorite grape: riesling. Washington producer Pacific Rim makes some of my favorite still rieslings, and they have a new, beautifully floral and dry sparkling version that has the texture and acidity to stand up to anything. Even gobs of crab.

At press time, the White Flowers Sparkling Riesling and these other sparkling wines were available at the following locations.

Cupcake Vineyards Blanc de Blancs Chardonnay NV: Floral nose with hints of marzipan, brioche and flavors of Asian pears and almonds on the creamy finish. Cost Plus, \$15.99.

Bernard Ledru Brut Tradition NV: This 50-50 blend of chardonnay and pinot noir has a citrus vanilla quality and full, yeasty mouth feel. A dead ringer for Krug. Walnut Creek Prima Vini, \$39.

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Pacific Rim White Flowers Sparkling Riesling: From Washington grapes grown at nearly 1,000 feet of elevation comes this floral and aromatic, dry sparkling riesling. A real treat for riesling lovers and those craving something different. Cost Plus, \$14.

Pierre Morlet Brut NV: Less creamy than the Ledru, this Champagne displays the minerally flavors and superfine bubbles indicative of the region. Walnut Creek Prima Vini, \$39.

Bagrioni 1882 Reserve Sparkling Vintage Brut 2007: Grape varieties indigenous to Georgia produce fine bubbles and stone fruit aromas that follow on the palate. San Mateo Draeger's, \$25.

Read more about wine at [www.ibabuzz.com/bottomsup/category/corkheads](http://www.ibabuzz.com/bottomsup/category/corkheads).

### What are you drinking on new year's eve?

Join wine writer Jessica Yadegaran for a lively online discussion at 1 p.m. today about the wines we choose to drink on New Year's Eve and other special occasions. Join the live chat at [www.ContraCostaTimes.com](http://www.ContraCostaTimes.com)

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