

Champagne

Champagne is great for celebrating the holidays, as a gift , or because it's been a long year and you deserve it. It tastes great, pleases a crowd, and can be a great wine for food. To help you navigate these wines this December, here are a few helpful hints about **styles**, **producers**, and **sweetness** that will tell you about what you're drinking, and are easily identified on the label.

Champagne Styles

NV ("Non-Vintage") represent ~80% of the region's wine. Producers blend in up to 20% of wines from previous vintages to balance out year-to-year variations in quality due to challenging climate and weather (it is farther north than Timmins after all...).

Blanc de Blancs are made entirely from [Chardonnay](#). These wines are lean and deliver citrus and mineral notes. They age well and develop enticing notes of toast, brioche and nuts. Chardonnay represents less than 30% of Champagne's vines, and great examples come from places in the Côte des Blancs like Avize, Cramant, Le Mesnil and even Vertus. More likely to go with food and/or please your wine-snob friends.

Blanc de Noirs are made from [Pinot Noir](#) and Pinot Meunier. They are typically fruitier (and more likely to please a crowd!), showing red berries, cranberry, apple and cream aromas and flavours. Pinot Noir adds more age-worthiness; Pinot Meunier adds fruit concentration but is best drunk young. Some of the best Blanc de Noirs come from sites in Montagne de Reims like Äy, Bouzy and Sillery. Bollinger is a great example of a Pinot Noir-dominated champagne.

Vintage Champagne typically comes from high quality grapes in

a good vintage. and suitable for long ageing, during which it develops flavours of cream, hazelnuts, almonds and toast. Great vintages will often present concentrated fruit (think lemon peel instead of lemon juice). Some **recent excellent vintages include 2012, 2009 and 2008** and will improve with more age if you have the patience. 2005, 2004 and 2002 are very good and drinking well, but if you can get your hands on some 2000, 1999 or 1998 then don't hold back, just drink away!

Rose Champagne comes in a wide range of styles, so if you find one you like, remember the producer, sub-region, vintage and sweetness level for next time!

Types of Producers

Champagne labels will indicate a two letter prefix: NM, RM, CM, MA. What the heck does that mean?

Champagne Houses carry the **NM** (Négociant-Manipulant) mark on their labels, and include the likes of Dom Pérignon, Moët, Taittinger, Veuve, etc. These are brands you can trust, but that you are also going to pay higher prices for. They buy grapes from the ~19,000 small growers (with an average vineyard size of ~5 acres) and blend them to produce a consistent house style. They also represent the majority of exported Champagne.

“Grower Champagne” have become really popular lately and are usually identified by the **RM** (Récoltant-Manipulant) mark. These smaller growers make their own, limited production wine and do not blend across vineyards. As a result, they can vary in character year-to-year, creating a higher ‘risk-reward’ offering given their (usually) lower prices versus the big houses. For many people, they represent a truly authentic, terroir-driven champagne. Great examples include Larmandier, Gimonet and Jacquesson.

Cooperatives can be identified by the **CM** (Coopérative de Manipulation) mark, and come from the pooled grapes of several local growers that lack wine-making equipment (often from specific villages). When it is branded for one specific grower, it will be marked as **RC** (Récoltant-Coopérateur).

Private Label champagnes carry the **MA** (Marque d'Acheteur) mark on their labels and are often made for a large retailer or restaurant. **ND** (Négociant Distributeur) is the mark of a buyer/distributor (not a producer) with their own label.

Sweetness

If you're stickler for dry wines (or sweet), then read this. Champagne's high acidity means that it can handle a lot of sugar before it is perceived as sweet. Basically, drier champagnes will indicate Brut **Nature** (a.k.a. Zero Dosage), **Extra Brut** or **Brut** on the label. Sweetness starts to get noticeable when you see **Sec**, **Demi-Sec**, and **Doux**.

Alternatives to Champagne

Let's be honest, Champagne can also get expensive. For cheaper options, look for **Crémant** from other parts of France, **Cava** from Spain, **Prosecco** from Italy. All of these wines use the "Champagne method" for producing sparkling wine, and deliver great value for money. [Click here for the full list of recommendations at your local stores.](#)