

**B**ubbles add spark to a cocktail menu. Whether employed for effervescence or to ramp up — or tone down — a cocktail's sweetness, sparkling wine shines behind the bar. But it's not just the fizzy stuff that has all the fun. Still and fortified wines also have a well-deserved place on the shelf, rendering fascinating multi-dimensional drinks. We checked in with operators around the country who are seamlessly mixing grape with grain and, in the process, discovering the latest trends in wine and sparkling wine libations.

### **A Matter of Style**

Sparklers are hip, fun and festive, but when it comes to using them in cocktails, remember that they are not interchangeable. "It depends on the style of cocktail you are looking to create," explains Sebastien Silvestri, vice president of food and beverage at The Venetian and The Palazzo in Las Vegas. He reaches for a bottle of demi-sec Champagne to raise the sugar level of a drink but chooses a brut Champagne to highlight acidity or add a touch of bitterness.

Champagne certainly encompasses a wide range of styles and characteristics, each with the potential to dramatically affect what it's mixed with in the glass. Take the classic Kir Royale cocktail, which combines Champagne with Crème de Cassis, a blackcurrant liqueur. Sabawun Kakar, director of operations and wine director for San Francisco's The Bubble Lounge (which also has a location in New York) points out that a full-bodied selection like Bollinger

Special Cuvée Brut adds more body and texture to the cocktail, while a lighter style like Fleury "Carte Rouge" Brut gives it more freshness and elegance.

For sweeter and fruitier drinks, Jacqui Berardi, lead bartender at Boston's Liberty Hotel, opts for Italian Prosecco. Made from the grape of the same name, Prosecco doesn't go through secondary fermentation in the bottle but is made in a style that's easy on the palate. Though it can have a "confectured," candy-like finish, it lacks the yeasty, bread notes found in traditional method sparkling wines, which works in its favor in drinks where you don't want the bubbly to compete with other components.

On the flip side, if sweetness is not desired, take a cue from Joaquin Simo, bartender at New York's Death & Co., who uses sparkling wine as a "drying agent." He especially likes wallet-friendly Cava rosés from Raventos and Llopart, Blanc de Blancs from New Mexico's Gruet Winery, and sparkling wines from Alsace, France, the last of which he says possesses a dry finesse that allows him to create inspired

concoctions beyond the bitters- and sugar cube-based traditional Champagne cocktail. Death & Co. features several sparkling drinks like the Death in the Afternoon-inspired Green Flash, with Rhum J.M. Blanc, lemon, housemade acacia honey syrup, absinthe and Champagne, with a cherry garnish.

### **Beginning with Bubbly Beverages**

So where should you begin to snazz up the cocktail list with some effervescent libations? "Sparkling sells like hotcakes," says Rachel Sergi, head bartender of Restaurant 701 in Washington, D.C. "Any take on a Bellini is a great introduction." 701 has an easy-to-make-but-elegant Hibiscus Bellini, with a sparkling Riesling base, hibiscus syrup and the tropical flower in the flute. Sergi also happens to be working on a bar creation with sparkling pineapple wine from Hawaii's Tedeschi Vineyards, an eclectic wine that's both memorable for guests and extremely mixable. Even easier and equally impressive is a basic Champagne Cobbler, with Champagne (typically rosé), muddled



Whether fortified or sparkling, wine in cocktails helps add to a bar's atmosphere, like at D.C.'s Restaurant 701.



# Uncorking Fabulous Drinks

## Impressive Yet Approachable Ideas for Wine and Sparkling Wine Cocktails

By Kelly A. Magyarics



Adding Champagne makes for fun, fizzy drinks like the one from Laguna Champagne Bar at the Palazzo in Vegas (right) and others at the Liberty Hotel in Boston (top) and the Bubble Lounge (bottom) in San Francisco.



fresh berries and small chunks of ice.

The Mojito gets a fizzy facelift at the Bubble Lounge, where a flute of Starr African Rum, lime, mint and simple syrup is topped with Taittinger Cuvée Prestige Champagne. “We offer a cocktail that many know and love, and by adding Champagne, gives more acidity to enhance and lift the flavors of the cocktail,” explains Kakar.

Simo touts the gin- and lemon-based French 75 as the granddaddy of all Champagne cocktails and a great starting place to boost the bubbly quotient on the menu. He’s partial to citrusy Beefeater, unless the guest is not a big gin drinker, in which case he pours softer, maltier Plymouth Gin. For variety, offer patrons gin or Cognac — there is a bit of contention on the original recipe’s base spirit, and each of these choices offers a completely different liquid experience.

Finally, don’t underestimate the sublime power of a small amount of a liqueur like Domaine de Canton, St-Germain or Cherry Heering; the bubbles serve as a vehicle to deliver their gorgeous aromatics. Simo suggests acquainting yourself with flavor profiles beforehand. Replace sugar or simple syrup with a half-ounce or less of the liqueur to be sure it’s not overly sweet, and add a touch of fresh lemon or orange juice and a twist. For a bitter bubbly aperitif, Kakar turns to a flute of cava with a slice of orange and a little Aperol, the bright orange

aperitif from Italy similar to Campari.

### Grape Finds

When it comes to cocktails concocted with still wines, Sangria and other punches are obvious choices, but for à la minute service and presentation, Silvestri recommends a Kir. The still wine version of the more well-known Kir Royale, a Kir combines Bourgogne Aligoté (or another crisp, light wine) with Crème de Cassis. For a less traditional, more adventurous option, Silvestri recalls a Margarita made with a bone-dry Mosel Riesling that was zesty and mouthwatering.

As with sparkling wines, factors like body, sweetness and acidity matter. Simo steers clear of oaky whites and heavy reds noting, “They don’t play well with others,” and instead reaches for wines like fruity Rioja and Malbec, as well as whites and reds from Southern Italy, Greece and Portugal. Natives of these areas consume a lot of seafood as opposed to meat, he points out, so the food-friendliness of the local wines translates easily to quaffable cocktails.

Conducting a taste test before creating a concoction will allow a bartender to select a wine whose style is synergistic to the other ingredients in the cocktail. “A viscous white won’t give you the same light result that

a Txakoli [high acid, low alcohol wine from Basque country] will,” Sergi points out, “and earthy ingredients will highlight earthiness in the wine.”

### Fortifying the Cocktail Menu

Vermouth is a staple in drinks like the Martini and Manhattan, but the entire gamut of fortified wines have been used in cocktails since their very origins. Fortified wines easily boost complexity in drinks without the need for a lengthy list of ingredients. Simo uses sherry when he wants acidity — but not citrus — like in the Bamboo Cocktail, which mixes equal parts dry sherry and dry vermouth, with a dash of orange bitters.

Port works well during the cooler weather in flips, bourbon-based cocktails like the Robert Johnson Swizzle, and in the Coffee Cocktail, whose inclusion of Ruby Port, Cognac, sugar and a whole egg results in a sipper that tastes incredibly like coffee. When working with fortified wines, remember that because their alcohol content is lower than spirits, their shelf life is shorter as well. Refrigerate bottles after opening, and use them promptly.

Recipes, flavor profiles and degrees of difficulty vary, but when it comes to wine and sparkling cocktails, one component does not: balance. “Anybody can mask a bad drink by adding more [sparkling] wine,” says Berardi. “Proportions are important.” Included wine should enhance the flavors of the cocktail’s other ingredients. “It doesn’t need to be complicated; the right wine, fresh purée, right temperature and right execution results in a fantastic drink,” adds Silvestri.

Go ahead and better acquaint the corkscrew to the cocktail shaker, relocate your wine cellar a bit closer to the backbar and delve into a drink style that has broad appeal with both oenophiles and spirits aficionados alike. **NCB**

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