

# state of

## Champagne v Sparkling

WORDS CHRIS BARNES PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS PATTERSON

It's there at just about every important event in our lives and it's the perfect way to get the party started.

You can buy it from under \$5 to \$100+ and anywhere in between. Many countries make it, but France has always led the way. And whilst the quality of Australian sparkling has dramatically improved, are we any closer to producing sparkling wine that rivals tradition? And more importantly, how does the consumer choose between the array of labels currently available?

To help answer these questions we decided to stage our own magazine tasting of top sparklings from France and Australia to find out just what makes the perfect fizz. We invited two experts to join our panel; Ed Carr, who is one of Australia's leading sparkling winemakers and Kate McIntyre, a champagne devotee and past winner of the prestigious Vin de Champagne Award.

Ed Carr has an impressive collection of wine show trophies to his name from the vast number of wines he produces for the Hardy Wine Company. He has also been a leader in the push to source fruit from Tasmania. As he told us, "Tasmania became an obvious choice for premium sparkling very early on. If you look at the

pioneering Tasmanian sparklings, (Pirie, Lubiana, Jansz and Clover Hill) it is clear that this region had the greatest potential for sparkling of all the cold climate regions of Australia. Over the last ten years Hardy's have built a strong fruit resource from all over Tasmania and are realising the quality and style variations of each specific site. Once we started to access this fruit and saw our own styles evolving our initial confidence in this region appeared fully justified."

We asked producers to submit what they felt were their finest examples of vintage and non-vintage sparklings as well as champagnes. As a result the tasting was of a very high quality, with the scores being well above the usual range (almost one third of all wines rated above 17.5 out of 20). It showed us that we were not only tasting some of the finest champagnes, but also that our domestic sparklings were both well made and consistent. This comes as no surprise when you consider that many Australian winemakers see their sparkling as a flagship for their company.

But before we go too far I think we need to be clear about the process of making sparkling wine. First, not all sparkling is champagne! Champagne comes from one district in north east

# palary





## The geographic location of Champagne has as much to do with the quality of the wines as does the *winemaking technique*.

France. Wines from Champagne are made using a technique that has been developed over hundreds of years. Known as *méthode champenoise*, this technique has been exported very successfully to just about every winemaking country in the world, including Australia.

But that doesn't mean champagne can be made anywhere and there are two simple reasons. Firstly, the soil, climate and topography of Champagne are unique and cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world. Secondly, it's against the law as Australia has a treaty with the European Union to ensure that we do not misuse the name champagne.

The *méthode champenoise* process begins with a still or 'base' wine in tank to which a mixture of yeast and sugar is added. The wine is then put into the same bottle that you will eventually hold as the finished product. This is then closed with a simple crown seal and allowed to rest. The wine then goes through secondary fermentation and spends further time on dead yeast cells or 'lees' that are formed as a by-product of the secondary fermentation. The amount of time spent on lees is critical.

The majority of premium champagne will spend from 18 months to two and half years on lees prior to release. This allows the wine to develop yeast autolysis, a very strong musty aroma brought about by the breakdown of the dead yeast cells. The aroma for many Australians is distinctly that of Vegemite, our other favourite by-product of yeast.

After the lees aging the bottles are stored at an angle (cork down) and gently turned, or 'riddled', to force the lees into the neck of the bottles. The neck of the

bottle is frozen and the lees removed. This process is called 'disgorging' and the result is a clear sparkling wine.

Once the disgorging has taken place, a new seal is needed. This is also an opportunity to adjust the sweetness of the wine by 'liqueuring' or 'dressage', which is the addition of grape or wine based products. Different markets around the world enjoy different degrees of sweetness in their wines.

Finally, the wine is corked and a wire hood is attached to hold the cork in place against the pressure in the bottle.

In Australia, much of the process of *méthode champenoise* is done by machine. This does not mean the quality is any less than when it is done by hand in the cellars of Champagne – it just means that it may keep prices down a fraction.

The issue of age in bottle was critically important in the tasting. On a number of occasions the panel remarked on the difference that both lees age and the time after sealing with cork made to individual wines. This was one of the key differences between the champagnes and all but a few of the Australian sparklings. The French product was generally older in every sense, with every vintage wine from 1998. This may not appeal to some, but the panel certainly saw this as more 'traditional' and thus very typical of champagne.

All but two of the top nine Australian sparklings were vintage, but were younger than the French with vintages ranging from 1999 – 2002.

Now we've established how the bubbles get into the bottle, it's time to look at the grapes. Sparkling wine can be made from any grape variety, white or red, and of course any quality of fruit. However,

the best quality sparkling wines are made using *méthode champenoise* and the so called 'champagne' varieties.

The climate and geographic location of Champagne has as much to do with the quality of the wines as the winemaking technique. Champagne is situated at the northernmost limits of grape growing in France; further north it becomes too cold for the grapes to thrive.

The varieties that ripen best in this environment are Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. The cool climate means that the fruit flavours in the grapes will not be over developed and the acidity will be quite high in the final wine. So it makes sense that base wine made from high acid, 'lean' fruit will eventually produce the most refreshing wine.

In Australia, the favourite vineyards for traditional styles are cooler regions such as Tasmania and the high altitude areas of Victoria and South Australia.

The tasting showed this to be true with the top wine, by a fair margin, being

the Arras from Tasmania. Six of the top local wines chosen were also made from Tasmanian fruit.

Ed reminded us of the importance of the latitude of that southerly state, which puts it as close to Champagne as we can get. Unless, as he pointed out, we planted grapes on Heard Island in the middle of the Southern Ocean just south of the Antarctic Convergence!

It is this cool to cold climate that gives Tasmanian sparklings their structure. While the guiding hand of a good winemaker is always important, the cool climate means the wine will always have the potential for finesse and elegance.

The blending of different varietal proportions for *méthode champenoise* is one of the great skills of the winemaker's palate. The reference point for selection is usually the current release wine. The reason for blending to this standard is the development of a 'house' style – a unique, consistent, identifiable style from each individual producer. The development



**Top** Karl Stockhausen and Kate McIntyre.  
**Above** Chris Barnes.  
**Opp page** Ed Carr and Keith Tulloch.





The tasting panel at work: Kate, Trent, Keith and Ed.

of this style means that customers can identify, enjoy and possibly stick with one house style throughout the course of their drinking lives.

The creation of this house style is not something that can be done overnight and in fact it takes many years. The pursuit of house style and consistency led, firstly in Champagne and then in Australia, to the concept of a non-vintage, or NV, wine.

This means the base wine will be a blend of the current harvest and that of previous years. This allows even greater uniformity between blends; in other words it evens out the peaks and troughs of vintage variation. In Champagne this is important as in some years, due to poor weather, much of the fruit may not even become ripe enough for méthode champenoise base wine. In Australia the need to blend is not as great, as many of our vineyards are in more temperate regions and therefore there is less variation between vintages.

The creation of non-vintage méthode champenoise does not preclude the winemaker from producing a vintage product. In years that are of the highest quality a vintage product will be made. Vintage champagne means simply that the grapes used for the base wine come from one harvest only. Because they are of a higher quality, the grapes produce wines that are better structured and therefore longer living.

Typically, méthode champenoise vintage wines and especially vintage champagnes are left on lees in the bottle after secondary fermentation for perhaps four or five years. Some wines, known as

late or recently disgorged, are aged for ten or more years on lees. These are considered to be the super premium or prestige wines that only come from the very best of the best vintages. These vintages will occur perhaps twice a decade. Vintage wines are far more complex and stronger in flavour than the non-vintage product.

This was identified by the panel in the champagnes and although the vintage wines stood out, they were not necessarily considered the best by all. The fact that the top wine of the champagnes was the Charles Heidsieck Reserve NV speaks volumes for the twin benefits of blending and a little time on lees.

As to the wines from the southern hemisphere, the tasting proved that top Australian cool climate sparklings have the elegance, finesse, balance and structure that are essential in the creation of top quality fizz. Remember, there were a lot of younger (both in terms of lees age and bottle age after disgorging) Australian wines in the tasting up against the older, more highly rated French.

So, is the French worth the money? The panel thought it was. Overall, the champagnes scored higher and gained the greater number of medals. Prices started from \$120. However, great champagne doesn't have to cost a fortune. For instance, the Rodier NV with its good development and fresh acid is priced at \$43.95 and the well-structured, creamy Masse NV is priced at \$58.95.

The panel agreed that the Australian sparklings were excellent value, ranging from \$20 to just \$55. It's not so far fetched to draw the conclusion that with

time Aussie sparklings, especially from Tasmania, could well rival champagne. As our winemakers learn more about the complexities of production and as wines are given more time on lees and after sealing, the future potential is huge. Champagne will always be champagne, but there are now wines like Arras, Croser and Clover Hill that are fantastic value for money sparklings from our home turf. And, the good news is, there will be plenty more still to come! ■

## the tasting panel

**Karl Stockhausen** (Chairman)  
Winemaker and Wine Show Judge.

**Ed Carr** (Guest Panellist)  
Winemaker, the Hardy Wine Company.

**Kate McIntyre** (Guest Panellist)  
Marketing Manager, Moorooduc Estate.

**Chris Barnes**  
Journalist and Wine Educator.

**Keith Tulloch**  
Winemaker and Wine Show Judge.

**Trent Mannell**  
Wine Show Judge.

**Sally Fisk**  
Winemaker.

**Michael Hatcher**  
Winemaker and Wine Show Judge.

# reviews

## France

### Charles Heidsieck Reserve NV \$84.95



It's important to note that this wine has Mis en Cave 2004 on the label representing the year the wine was disgorged or liquored. This is an unusual feature for an NV label. Scoring Gold from five of the panel, including Ed, this wine's greatness was obvious from its seductive nose, showing hints of freshly baked bread. Ed regarded its minerally length and 'sea salt tang' to be hallmarks of a top champagne. Overall, this wine showed the benefits of careful blending, plus four years on lees.

### Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label NV \$79



This is one of the most recognisable and widely available champagne labels. I thought it had great structure and powerful, toasty, almost nutty characters. Ed honed in on the brine, sea salt complexity as an element of great champagne, giving it lively brilliance. Kate found it well balanced and saw brioche and mineral acidity on the palate. Keith commented on its length and persistence. Pinot Noir dominated, the consistency of the NV style is helped by the use of 'reserve', or older wines as part of the base wine blend.

### Veuve Clicquot Vintage 1998 \$120



A blend of predominantly Pinot Noir, this wine scored the highest marks for a vintage champagne and was our Chairman's favourite! Karl thought it perfectly balanced, just as all true vintage champagnes should be. Karl, Michael and myself thought the palate was generous and opened up with fruity, mineral flavours. Kate found the nose rich with a lime extract character and a delicate finish on the palate. A wine at its absolute peak now and worthy of your very best friends.

### Taittinger Brut Millésime Vintage 1998 \$110



Although this is from the 1998 vintage, it is different from the other vintage wines we selected in that it is 50/50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir only. All the others had a fair proportion of Pinot Meunier in the base wine blend. On the nose Keith experienced a creamy, biscuity and almost honeyed character. Kate found it to be a layered and full flavoured style with a fairly sweet dosage, while Karl noted the fresh, clean acid.

### Piper-Heidsieck NV \$72.95



From the same House as our top wine, this is a 'true' NV style with two years on lees. With a score of 19 points, this was Ed's top scorer of the tasting, worthy of trophy status. Ed commented on the strong piercing acid and length of palate, calling it a full, toasty style. Keith and Karl also liked the lifted acidity and noted the persistence of lime flavours on the finish. Kate described the wine as 'crème brûlée' like. The House of Heidsieck consider this wine to be in its prime, but a year or two in bottle might well make it even better.

### Louis Roederer NV \$80



This NV wine is made from a blend of at least four different vintages and has a proportion of 'reserve' wine aged in large oak for greater complexity before being added to the base blend. Karl was impressed by the complexity of yeast and toasty characters on the nose, as well as the long, crisp finish. Ed found mineral, brine and mushroom edges and felt it showed good acid balance and good depth of citrus flavours. Sally called the acid 'grapefruity', which gave the wine great flavour persistence and length.

## Australia



Moët & Chandon Vintage 1998 \$100

The 1998 vintage in Champagne was a classic, marked by 40°C days, a rarity in that cool, northern climate. This may have contributed to the aromas of dried flowers and stone fruit on the particularly lifted nose. Trent noted the excellent length and carry of flavour on the palate. Ed commented, “This great champagne is full, bright and rich with power: brine, honey, mineral and toast. This is only the 65th vintage champagne produced by Moët & Chandon in their long history and it deserves its international popularity.



Arras Vintage 1999 \$55

While Ed Carr is the man behind this wine, all wines were, of course, tasted blind. This was the most mature Australian sparkling and rated as the highest scorer, which is endorsed by its wine show success across Australia. Sally saw plenty of aged characters and said it was a lovely, full expression of a vintage style. Karl added that it had great balance on the finish. The time in bottle, plus the top quality Tasmanian fruit, shone through. According to Ed, “This wine is still evolving and will continue to improve.” A superb wine.



Rodier NV \$43.95

There are hundreds of Champagne brands rarely seen in Australia and Rodier is one of them. This is a developed NV wine with quite powerful flavours. Michael liked the creamy and full citrus profile, while Ed enjoyed the rich mouthfeel, attractive nutty toast and round, ripe flavours. Kate commented on the freshness of acid, contrasting nicely with the fully developed character on the mid palate. Excellent value for money when compared with its better known NV neighbours.



Bay of Fires Tigress NV \$24

This wine stood out for quality and value for money and Ed gave it 18 out of 20. An almost 50/50 blend of Tasmanian Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, it has a lifted aromatic nose, leading to a rich, creamy, textured palate. Both Karl and Keith enjoyed its generosity and Keith was impressed with its sea-salt like acidity. Ed described it as “waxy and smooth with elegant flavour development.” A 20% aged component in the base wine and pristine fruit, results in a great combination.



Masse NV \$58.95

Based in one of the two Champagne ‘capitals’, Reims, Masse is another small house with exclusive Australian distribution. Kate enjoyed lemon juice and apples on the nose that also showed a hint of developed bottle age aromas. The wine was well balanced with tart acidity and good length. Trent found a creamy, supple mouthfeel that gave the wine attractive flavours up front. I also saw plenty of fresh crisp apple character, which made the wine very appealing. This is an excellent champagne for ‘everyday’ enjoyment.



Hardy Sir James Vintage 2001 \$24

This has to be one of the most well known labels in Australia, so it’s great to see it do so well. The panel commented on the length of persistency in the wine, as well as the fruit at its core. Michael found the pear and citrus flavours on the nose attractive and noted a yeasty backbone. Karl noted savoury characters as well as a long, dry finish. Kate praised the wine, commenting on its lemon and lime nose and good structure. Overall, concluded Ed, this is an elegant wine that grew stronger in the glass.



Clover Hill Vintage 2001 \$35

The 10th vintage from this single vineyard in northern Tasmania, this is a blend of the three classic varieties, with Chardonnay the leader. Clean and lifted, it has a complex palate. Kate was impressed with its lemon blossom and honey notes on the nose, while Keith experienced ‘sherbet’ fruit aromas. I liked the combination of some lees age aromas followed by a real kick of clean acid. “Steely at the moment,” concluded Ed, “but the fresh fruit palate is beginning to show lovely lanolin and nutty complexity as well.”



Jansz Premium Vintage Cuvée Vintage 2000 \$36.95

There is influence in this Tasmanian wine from the French House of Roederer. I found the nose to have lifted, perfumed aromas and a hint of roses, while the palate had good acid and some creamy characters up front. Karl liked its lifted, yeasty nose, which carried through to the palate. It finished with good fruit and acid balance. Ed agreed with the complexity and added that there was an attractive, buttery feel to the mid palate.



Petaluma Croser Vintage 2002 \$40

The fruit for this sparkling came from the cool climate of Piccadilly Valley near Adelaide. Ed’s first comment was that while this is a young wine, it has a great future. The acid stands out, as does some of the yeast character. Karl scored this one highly, particularly enjoying the creaminess in the mouth. Keith saw marzipan and biscuit characters on the nose and also commented on the racy acid. This is not surprising when you consider how cool the 2002 vintage was. This wine will certainly improve with a little more bottle age.



Jansz Cuvée NV \$22.95

In contrast to its vintage cousin, this wine has fruit drawn from Victorian, South Australian and Tasmanian vineyards. This is typical of Australian NV wines in the pursuit of consistency. Kate thought the nose showed a bread dough, savoury aroma, which Karl thought had delicacy and freshness. Ed felt this was also a youthful style that suited the aperitif nature of NV wines. Sally found the palate clean, creamy and ‘easy drinking’. The finish is tangy and lifted, perfect for the start of a meal.



Yarra Burn Vintage 2001 \$20

This is another Ed Carr wine, but this time the base wine is from over 80% Yarra Valley fruit. Predominantly Pinot Noir, Ed considered this to be “a very straight wine, showing an attractive sherbety nose and palate flavours.” I saw this wine also developing mushroom like nuances as well as a soft, creamy palate, which Karl described as refreshing and well balanced. Keith saw a honey and marzipan or even mead like character emerging in the mid palate.



Bay of Fires Vintage 2001 \$20

This is the vintage version of the Tigress, with a base wine blend of 60% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay and 10% Pinot Meunier. Keith really liked the spicy, complex nose and herbal character on the palate that finished with elegant persistency. Karl and I both thought there was a lanolin complexity. There is also a powerful backbone to the wine from the Pinot Noir, which the French often refer to as the ‘carpentry’ of the wine. Ed also saw the lanolin complexity and elegance that should be a hallmark of any good sparkling wine.



# quest panelists

*Kate McIntyre* has spent most of her life surrounded by vines and wine. She was the inaugural winner of the Negotiants Working with Wine Fellowship and in 2001 was the winner of the CIVC Vin de Champagne Award. She is currently studying for the Masters of Wine exam.

**Q. How did you get involved in the wine industry at the tender age of nine?**

**A.** My father has had a passion for wine since his days as a student. When one of his friends, Dr. John Middleton, invited the family to help pick grapes at his vineyard, precocious brat that I was, I insisted on joining the men for the tasting of the previous year's wines. Apparently I thoughtfully swirled the glass and took a small sip, before proclaiming, "Not bad for home made." My first wine review!

Soon after this, my parents bought the piece of land at Moorooduc on the Mornington Peninsula that was to become Moorooduc Estate. We planted every tree and every vine on that property ourselves and while other kids had weekends of movies and hanging around the city getting up to no good, I was tending vines! It's a miracle that I ever came back to it!

**Q. Does champagne have a special place in your heart – or are there other wines that fire your passions?**

**A.** Yes and yes. Champagne was the first wine I fell in love with, but I love the wines of Burgundy as well. If I had to pick a favourite red and white grape variety they would have to be Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but then there are the wonderful Sangioveses of Tuscany, Nebbiolo from Piedmont, Alsace Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer, plus German Riesling. I could go on, but I think that's a good starting list!

**Q. What are your aims for the future – both personal and professional?**

**A.** The usual – love, money, fame, success! Seriously though, pass the Masters of Wine exam for starters and continue to grow the family business.

*Ed Carr*, considered by many to be Australia's pre-eminent sparkling winemaker, has been creating award-winning wines for the Hardy Wine Company for the past 11 years.

**Q. You began your working life as a microbiologist. How did you end up making sparkling wine?**

**A.** After graduating with a degree in Microbiology/Food Technology, I worked as a junior chemist in the dairy industry for a year or so and then took up a similar role at Wynn Winegrowers because it looked more exciting (and paid better) than milk

testing! The company was experiencing troubles with microbial contamination of wine and it was almost a natural progression for me to get more involved with winemaking and it wasn't long before I became an assistant winemaker. It was again microbiology that got me into sparkling wine as the rapidly expanding Seaview brand was having troubles with secondary fermentation.

**Q. Out of all the wines you have created, which is the one that you are most proud of and why?**

**A.** Arras would have to rate at the top as it represents the leading edge of what we are doing in the premium sector.

**Q. After more than a decade of making sparkling wine, is it time for a change?**

**A.** Absolutely not! In fact, sparklings seem to be evermore challenging and exciting with the broad range of styles that we make from Omni Blue to Arras. And with the continued evolution of the top end wines there is still plenty of ground to cover.

**Q. Since you must taste so many sparkling wines, what do you crave after a hard day's work in the winery? Surely not a sparkling?**

**A.** European beer is high on my list of non-sparkling wine alternatives. ■