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ELEMENTS



CHAMPAGNE UNCORKED

The customary toast gets a makeover with sparkling wines from Spain, California and Italy

"I THINK CHAMPAGNE AT A WEDDING is like a wedding cake; it's one of those classic things you should always have," says Maria Gomez, wedding coordinator at the Hilton La Jolla Torrey Pines.

Indeed, Champagne is a quintessential wedding ingredient. Like the first glimpse of the bride in her gown or the couple's first kiss, the toast is a celebratory gesture that guests have come to anticipate. Today, creative couples are looking beyond this tradition and incorporating Champagne bars, signature cocktails and sparkling wines into their wedding programs.

Selecting a Champagne with a well-known name may be a couple's first instinct, but wine experts say choosing a boutique-style Champagne or a fine sparkling wine can lead to a pour that's more affordable and more unique.

Sommelier Jesse Rodriguez at The Grand Del Mar is passionate about turning guests on to grower Champagnes. Made by the same people who grow the grapes, these come from houses like Chartogne-Taillet and Gaston Chiquet, which make a small amount of Champagne each year.

Sexy SPARKLING COCKTAILS

CRESCENT HEIGHTS

Passion Bellini Caipirinha

2 ounces Leblon Cachaça
½-ounce passion fruit purée
½-ounce simple syrup
Dash of fresh lime juice
Prosecco to top

Combine passionfruit purée, simple syrup and fresh lime juice in a shaker. Fill with ice and add Leblon. Shake and strain into a Champagne flute. Top with Prosecco.

SWEETWATER SALOON

Black Velvet

2 ounces Guinness
2 ounces Champagne

Combine Guinness and Champagne in a shaker with ice. Roll into other half of shaker twice. Serve in a chilled Champagne flute.



At a recent wedding at The Grand, one couple incorporated two distinct sparkling wines into their program. The first, Doquet Brut Rosé, is only available locally at the property, and tastes of subtle strawberries and roses. Then, as guests were seated, waiters poured Veuve Clicquot Brut Rosé for the toast.

“If we can offer them a Champagne they’ll be blown away by, it’s our civic duty to do so,” Rodriguez says.

True bubbly lovers may want to treat their guests to a collection of California sparkling wines. Heather Guthrie, director of catering at The Lodge at Torrey Pines, recalls a 40-something couple who did just that throughout their three-day celebration. They served Schramsberg Blanc de Blancs at the rehearsal dinner, Roederer Estate Brut Rosé before the ceremony, Mumm Napa Brut Prestige with the toast and Domaine Carneros Brut Rosé for the Sunday brunch.

Champagne bars, where guests can choose from several styles of Champagne and sparkling wines, are fashionable for intimate, high-end weddings. Christopher Hile, meetings and events director at the Ivy, says a Champagne bar might include a lighter Italian sparkling wine like Prosecco, a fresh and crisp nonvintage brut Champagne, a lush rosé style and a toasty vintage Champagne.

Even brides who are on a budget can find creative ways to include bubbly in their festivities. Fine international sparkling wines such as Cava from Spain, Moscato d’Asti from Italy or Crémant from Alsace often cost a fraction of the price of Champagne. Loews Coronado Bay Resort sommelier Kevin Brady sees many couples select wines by Pascual Toso from Argentina, Domaine Carneros from northern California, and Gruet, made by a French family in New Mexico. Serving the venue’s house wine—usually a domestic sparkler such as Schramsberg’s Mirabelle or Mumm Napa—is also an affordable choice.

“Rent a (colored) specialty glass just for the Champagne,” says wedding coordinator Mary Noble. “It adds to your table décor and the festivities, and to the importance of the Champagne.”

Couples can also serve classic sparkling cocktails like Kir Royale and French 75, or create one of their own by adding edible flowers such as pansies, raspberries, kiwi or liqueurs to sparkling wine. At Rancho Valencia Resort, many brides choose the Rancho Bougainvillea—a blend of Cointreau, cranberry juice and sparkling wine that matches the hot orange-pink flowers blooming around the Spanish-style property in Rancho Santa Fe.

With couples constantly looking for ways to customize their weddings, incorporating sparkling wine into the menu is one way they can get creative. And no matter how bubbly is served, a glass of this crisp and effervescent wine is always welcome.

“When guests arrive, it’s a great effect and a great look,” says The Lodge’s Guthrie. “And it gets everybody in a good mood.”

—MARIA C. HUNT