

# WINE 101:

## A WIDOW, A MONK, AND A PRESIDENT

*In memory of Candy Greene*

**BY PATRICK R. DUNN**

Candy Greene edited the first two Wine 101 columns I wrote for Senior ResQ. She brought me into these pages this summer, and she died suddenly not long after. This is the first column she won't read before it runs.

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### The Mechanics of the Sparkle

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Sparkling wine is simply wine that kept its gas. The winemaker seals it in, the gas has nowhere to go, and it dissolves into the wine until the cork comes out. For centuries, that happened mostly by accident, and winemakers considered it a nuisance. Bottles exploded in the cellar. Corks shot off like bullets. It took some stubborn people to tum the accident into something worth celebrating.

### Three Visionaries: The Widow, the Monk, and the President

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Napoleon's wars had closed off most of Europe to French trade. She kept the business going anyway, and when the fighting ended in 1814, she slipped a shipment of Champagne to Russia ahead of her competitors. The Russians loved it, and her name was made.

She also solved a problem that had bothered winemakers for generations. Champagne back then was cloudy, full of leftover yeast. Around 1816, she and her cellar master worked out how to clear it. As the story goes, she cut holes in her kitchen table and set the bottles in upside down. Each day, every bottle got a small tum until the sediment slid down into the neck, where it could be popped out. Winemakers still do it, though most use machines now. Her name is on the yellow label today. Veuve Clicquot (roughly vuv klee-KO) means the Widow Clicquot.

### 2. The Monk: Dom Perignon

Dom Perignon gets more credit than he earned. He was a Benedictine who ran the cellars of Hautvillers Abbey in Champagne in the late 1600s. He's often called the inventor of Champagne, and he's supposed to have called out, "Come quickly, I am tasting the stars." He didn't invent it, and that line seems to have come from an advertisement written long after he died. By most accounts he spent years trying to keep the bubbles out of his wine. He's credited with pushing for stronger bottles and with being a gifted blender, and the legend stuck because people liked it.

Most of us have a relative like that.

### 3. The President: Richard Nixon

Many readers will remember watching this one. In February 1972, Richard Nixon became the first American president to visit China. At a state banquet in Beijing, he raised a glass with Premier Zhou Enlai, and the





wine in that glass was Schramsberg. It was a Blanc de Blancs, which means it's made only from white grapes, in this case California Chardonnay. An American sparkling wine made it into one of the most famous toasts of the century.

Schramsberg has a longer story than most people know. A German immigrant named Jacob Schram, a barber by trade, planted vines on a hillside above Calistoga in 1862 and dug caves into the mountain to store his wine. In 1880, a young Scottish writer on his honeymoon came to visit. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson, and a few years later he would write Treasure Island. He wrote about the afternoon at Schram's in a little book called The Silverado Squatters, tasted through the wines, and called Napa wine "bottled poetry." After Schram's time, the place went quiet for decades. In 1965, a couple named Jack and Jamie Davies bought the run-down property and started making sparkling wine in those old caves. Seven years later, their wine was in the president's glass in Beijing. I like to think Candy would have enjoyed knowing her daily pour had been there.

## High Society on the Comstock and the Reno Scene

Northern Nevada has its own history with bubbles. When archaeologists dug into old Virginia City saloons, they found the miners weren't living on whiskey alone. Those saloons poured whiskey, beer, wine, and champagne, more variety than the legends suggest. Comstock lore has it that the silver barons ran on champagne and oysters shipped up from San Francisco. They had money to spend and a taste for imported luxuries, and a good bottle from France was one way to show it.

The best local story came in March 1940. More than 250 Hollywood stars and reporters rode a special train to Reno for the world premiere of the Errol Flynn western "Virginia City." It opened on March 16 in all of Reno's first-run theaters and at Piper's Opera House up on the Comstock.

A Virginia City theater manager named Hart got into the spirit. He set up a bar in his lobby, poured free whiskey and champagne for everyone holding a ticket, and kept sending across the street to the Bucket of Blood Saloon for more cases. When the studio executives arrived, they judged the crowd too drunk and too risky for their stars and hustled everyone back to Reno.

LIFE magazine reported that most of the town got drunk, and Virginia City was outraged. A state senator and an assemblyman wired the magazine demanding a retraction and an apology. One reader wrote in to say the family had been in that theater, the free champagne had been drunk out on the street, and Flynn "would have been very much safer than he was in Reno."

Some readers will have their own Reno

memories of a night out with a glass in hand. For a lot of people, that meant the Mapes. It opened a week before Christmas, on December 17, 1947, and it was the tallest building in Nevada. The Sky Room on the twelfth floor was a dining and dancing room with a panoramic view of the city, and over the years it hosted Sammy Davis Jr., Liberace, Rudy Vallee, and Tony Bennett. The building came down in 2000, but plenty of people in this town still remember a toast raised up there.

These days, the bubbles have found their way back to C Street. Champagne & Chocolate is a restaurant, bar, and chocolate shop owned by the Chocolate Nugget Candy Factory. It has a location on C Street in Virginia City, along with one on West Plumb Lane in Reno and another at Heavenly Village in South Lake Tahoe. Weekend brunch comes with bottomless mimosas. Their Bubble Club sends members a bottle of wine each month with a handmade chocolate bar chosen to go with it, which would make a fine gift for someone hard to shop for. For anyone who would rather let someone else do the pouring this season, it's an easy way to raise a glass close to home.

## The Holiday Table

So why do we reach for bubbles when there's something to celebrate? Part of the answer goes back to the Champagne region itself. For centuries, French kings were crowned in the cathedral at Reims, right in the heart of Champagne, and the local wine was poured at the coronation feasts. The wine picked up a reputation for royalty and good occasions, and the Champagne houses were happy to encourage it. By the late 1800s, a bottle of bubbles meant a wedding, a ship launch, or the start of a new year. The habit stuck, and now it belongs to all of us. This season hands us four good reasons in about six weeks.

## Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is the hardest meal of the year for wine, and the hardest day of the year for whoever is cooking. The oven has been going since dawn. Somebody is carving, somebody is mashing, and somebody's green bean casserole is looking for a spot on the counter. Then turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce all land on the same plate. Most wines get along with a few of those and fight with the rest.

Sparkling wine gets along with nearly all of it. The bubbles clean the taste from your mouth between bites, so the last forkful tastes as good as the first. It's also the right thing to hand people as they come through the door, while the turkey rests and the gravy gets finished. It keeps the cook company too. A dry California sparkling wine or a French Cremant is an easy place to start. Cremant is made the same way as Champagne, in other parts of France, and it usually costs a good deal less.

For a little color on the table, add a spoonful of cranberry juice to each glass. It turns the wine a soft pink and looks like it took more effort than it did. The same trick works with sparkling cider for the grandchildren and anyone else who isn't drinking, so everyone at the table can hold up the same color glass.

## Hanukkah

Hanukkah remembers the oil in the Temple that was only enough for one night and lasted eight. That's why the holiday is celebrated with foods fried in oil, latkes and sufganiyot, the jelly doughnuts, above all. Eight nights of candles means eight nights of reasons to gather, and bubbles have always been good company for fried food. They cut right through the richness and make the next latke taste as good as the first one.

Many readers will remember when kosher wine in America meant one thing: a sweet red made from Concord grapes, the bottle that came out at every family holiday. That wine still has its place. But the kosher shelf has grown a great deal since then. Yarden Blanc

de Blancs from Israel's Golan Heights is a lovely bottle, dry and crisp, and kosher Cava from Spain and Prosecco from Italy are easy to find. Look for the kosher mark on the label, or ask at the store. Most wine shops are glad to help.

## Christmas

Christmas has two meals worth a bottle, and they call for different things.

The first is Christmas Eve. In many Italian-American families, that means the Feast of the Seven Fishes, a long, happy table of fried calamari, baked clams, shrimp, and whatever else Grandma insisted on. Seafood and bubbles are one of the oldest pairings there is. A dry Prosecco or a Brut belongs right in the middle of it. Families with other traditions will find the same wine works just as well with a Christmas Eve ham or a platter of cookies left out by the tree.

The second is Christmas morning, after the wrapping paper has been cleared off the floor. A splash of Prosecco or Cava in a glass of orange juice makes a mimosa, and it turns a plate of scrambled eggs into an occasion. The drink is usually credited to the Ritz in Paris in the I 920s, which seems about right for something that makes a Tuesday feel like a holiday. Half orange juice and half bubbles is the usual mix. More juice is fine if the day is going to be a long one.

Later, with pie or cookies, look for the word Demi-Sec on the label. It means sweet, and it will taste far better next to dessert than a dry wine will. A dry sparkling wine next to a slice of cake tastes sour, which surprises people the first time.

## New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve is the one night nearly everyone opens a bottle, whether they drink wine the rest of the year or not. Plenty of readers grew up ringing in the new year with Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians. For nearly half a century, his band played the midnight hour on radio and then television, and when the clock struck twelve they played "Auld Lang Syne." In a lot of living rooms, that was the signal to pop the cork.

Staying up until midnight gets harder every year, and nobody has to. The ball drops in Times Square at nine o'clock our time, and toasting along with New York is a perfectly good way to ring in the new year. Buy the bottle a few days ahead so there's no last-minute run to the store. Put it in the refrigerator that afternoon, and set out the glasses before the evening gets going. When the countdown starts, the only job left is the cork.

## Between the Holidays

Between the big meals, sparkling wine is happy with much simpler food. Bubbles



and salt are old friends. A bowl of potato chips or buttered popcorn is one of the best things to set next to a glass of Champagne, and it costs next to nothing. Fried chicken works the same way, whether it comes from the kitchen or a bucket. Smoked salmon on a cracker is a classic for good reason, and so is a wedge of good cheese. Oysters have been paired with Champagne for well over a century, and if Comstock lore is right, the silver barons knew it too. The salt and the richness make the wine taste brighter, and the bubbles make the food taste lighter. Chocolate is the one to be careful with. A dry Brut and a piece of chocolate tend to fight, so reach for a Demi-Sec or a sparkling rose instead.

## Understanding the Label and Proper Service

For anyone standing in the wine aisle feeling lost, one word will do most of the work. Brut (pronounced brute) means dry, and it covers most of the sparkling wine on the shelf. The only trap is Extra Dry, which is actually a little sweeter than Brut. The name goes back to the 1800s, when most Champagne was far sweeter than it is today, so a wine labeled Extra Dry really was drier than what people were used to. The label stayed put while tastes moved on. Price is less of a guide than people think. A good Cava or Cremant for under twenty dollars will make a better holiday than an expensive bottle nobody enjoys.

Once the bottle is home, a little care goes a long way. There's enough pressure inside to send a cork across the room, so chill it well first. A few hours in the refrigerator will do it, or twenty to thirty minutes in a bucket of ice and water. Point the bottle away from people and put a dish towel over the top. Hold the cork still and slowly tum the bottle until it gives with a quiet hiss. For hands that don't grip the way they used to, Champagne pliers or a star-shaped cork grip cost a few dollars at a kitchen store and do most of the work.

Any glass will do. Tall, narrow flutes keep the bubbles going longest. An ordinary white wine glass lets you smell more of the wine, and plenty of winemakers prefer it. The wide, shallow coupe (pronounced coop), the glass many of us remember from weddings and old movies, looks lovely and lets the bubbles escape quickly. Tilt the glass and pour slowly so the foam doesn't run over the top.

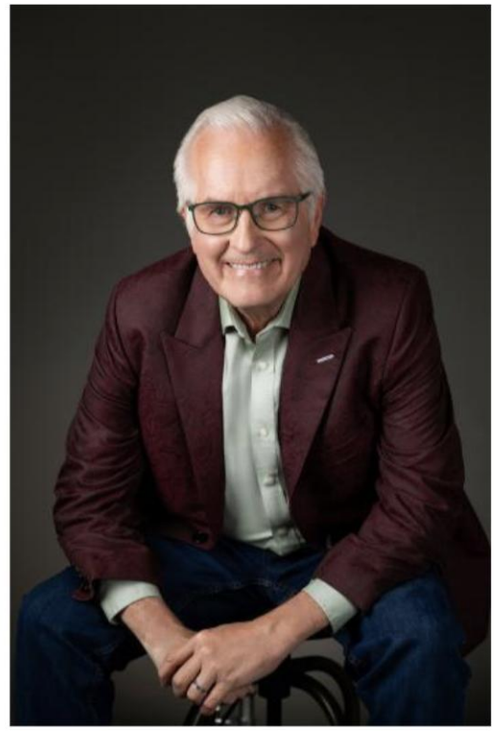
If there's wine left in the bottle, the old trick of hanging a spoon in the neck doesn't work. A proper sparkling wine stopper will hold the bubbles for a day or two. If the wine does go flat, it still makes a fine splash in a pan sauce.

Not everyone at the table will be drinking, and that's fine. Sparkling cider and alcohol-free sparkling wine belong in the same glass, and anyone on medication should check with a doctor before the holidays anyway. The toast counts either way.

## A Glass Raised

Wine 101 continues next month. Candy gave this column a home here, and I'm grateful she did. If there's a bottle of Schramsberg on your table this season, or anything else with bubbles in it, the first glass would be a fine one to raise to her.

Longtime Bonanza fans may remember that for a few seasons, the Ponderosa had a Candy of its own. So did this magazine.



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