

Flutes of Fancy

A Bevy of Bubbly Options Makes Drink Programs Sparkle

By Kelly A. Magyarics

The notion of sipping Champagne solely to mark a milestone or celebrate a special occasion is as yesterday as a flat glass of leftover Brut. Operators and guests these days recognize that a world of sparkling wine exists in addition to Champagne, and bar mavens are building exciting drink menus around that concept. Through staff and guest education, impressive selections of bubbly from around the world, innovative tasting events and synergetic food pairings, venues are introducing this wine category to a whole new audience. We check in with four sparkling wine-centric bars that are effervescence experts.

Flûte Champagne Bar New York City (Gramercy and Midtown) and Paris

www.flutebar.com

An impressive 75 percent of alcohol sales at Flûte stem from sparkling wine and sparkling wine-based cocktails. Twenty-five wines are available by taste or glass, and more than 120 by the bottle. Biodynamic wines, small boutique and grower Champagnes and budget-friendly bottles like Prosecco and Cava join conventional producers. Bubbly cocktails change seasonally, but two perennial favorites remain: the Champagne Mojito with Bacardi Light and Piper-Heidsieck Champagne, and the tart and tangy Antoinette with Absolut Ruby Red and Piper-Heidsieck.

Five flights with the moniker "Magic Flûtes" allow patrons to sip bubbly in a variety of styles (\$20 to \$27), as well as sample a selection of Bellinis (\$18) or Kir Royales (\$15), the latter available in flavors ranging from traditional cassis to more eclectic ginger, pomegranate, violet and blackberry.

Staff training is intensive: a weeklong program at



At the Champagne bar inside Pickwick & Frolic, Sommelier Dina Kostis offers an extensive menu.

the onset of employment, plus ongoing education in the form of tastings at staff meetings, daily “brush ups” and encouraged attendance at monthly consumer tasting events, even if off duty. “Servers and bartenders cannot begin their shift until management feels they have substantial knowledge to communicate with guests,” notes general manager Maija Talikka.

The food menu consists mainly of light appetizers and desserts, and servers provide pairing advice to drive home the point that sparkling wine is the ideal food partner. House specialty spring rolls with a Blanc de Blancs are an often-ordered duo; Rosé is recommended with smoked salmon; and higher-end, more complex bottles shine with foie gras.

Regularly hosted tasting events explore the world of Champagne, educate guests about Flûte’s specialty and, ultimately, drive sales. “When our guests see that we offer a variety of events very similar to wine tastings or beer tastings, it helps to introduce the idea that Champagne can be an everyday luxury — and at an affordable price,” explains Talikka. At Gramercy’s monthly Champagne School, each classroom-style session (priced between \$35 and \$95) conducted by industry experts pairs three examples of a specific style of Champagne with three food items.

The Midtown location hosts a Champagne social on the last Wednesday of each month, where the focus is on socializing and sipping rather than education. A supplier representative from one Champagne house pours and discusses three wines, and the \$32 fee also includes hors d’oeuvres. While neither of the monthly events comprises the majority of alcohol sales, they do send the message that Flûte encourages exploration and fun with Champagne every day—not just for celebrations or on holidays. This month, Flûte founder Herve Rousseau began offering franchises of the concept.

Swanky Bubbles
Philadelphia and Cherry Hill, N.J.
www.swankybubbles.com

It’s all about the ladies at these two Philadelphia-area sparkling wine hot spots. The downtown location opened in 1999 with 120 seats including the bar, tables,



The Midtown New York location of Flûte offers a Champagne social monthly to educate and entertain.



Pickwick & Frolic’s Champagne bar menu includes details on styles, growing regions and methods.

ottomans and cubes; the nearby Cherry Hill location, which launched in 2007, touts 300 seats at a bar, high tables and a second floor lounge. Management is the first to admit that while the venues attract more women than men, the former tend to naturally draw in more of the latter.

Partner and director of marketing Vince Frankowski explains that the concept behind these bars is decidedly not beer- and spirits-based. The biggest-selling sparkling wine products are the 15 to 18 bubbly cocktails for which Swanky Bubbles locations have become known. Most popular with the “female-friendly crowd” are the Bellini, Blondie (Champagne, pineapple and Smirnoff Vanilla), Green M&M (Champagne, melon and Parrot Bay Coconut) and Metropolis (Champagne, strawberry-infused vodka and strawberry liqueur), all sold for \$7 in Cherry Hill and \$9 in Philadelphia.

While various styles are available, the menu lists all sparkling wines as “Champagne” for simplicity — Frankowski explains that in his experience the general

public doesn’t differentiate. Six by-the-glass selections and about 25 bottles are offered in Cherry Hill, while Philadelphia boasts 15 and 24, respectively. Name recognition translates to sales: most often ordered by the glass are Mœt & Chandon’s Nectar Imperial and White Star, and Veuve Clicquot’s Yellow Label. Ordering a bottle entitles guests to higher-end glassware, and the popular aforementioned producers are joined by trendy Niebaum-Coppola Sofia Blanc de Blancs and the strikingly packaged Segura Viudas Brut Reserva Heredad Cava.

“Girlfriend Parties” held every few months and marketed via an e-mail list provide another opportunity for female bonding. An entrance fee of \$20 to \$30 per guest includes manicures and pedicures from local spas, three specific beverages and shopping opportunities. A recent party featured an American theme, with an Andrews Sisters-style singing group as well as vendors selling accessories, clothing and candles. “It’s a great push for business on a weekday,” notes Frankowski.

The Bubble Lounge
New York and San Francisco
www.bubblelounge.com

With locations on both coasts — New York’s chic Tribeca neighborhood and a historical district in San Francisco — these posh venues have been turning guests on to sparklers since 1996. The list focuses mainly on Champagne, but also includes options from all over the world—more than 300 different bottle selections and 25 by the glass, some of which rotate regularly. About half of alcohol sales result from sparkling wine.

Brands that have built-in name recognition are most popular, like Veuve Clicquot and Taittinger. Ten sparkling wine cocktails (\$12 - \$15) — including the classic Bubble Bellini, an effervescent version of the Mojito, and the Ruby Red, with Piper Heidsieck Champagne, Stoli Razberi and Chambord — offer guests more flavorful fizz.

Popular “Farmer Fizz flights” feature selections of grower Champagnes produced at houses whose farmers also grow the grapes, an uncommon practice in the Champagne region. The rotating \$30 flights



At NYC's Bubble Lounge, an extensive sparkling wine and food menu attracts a young, hip crowd.

consist of three 3.25-ounce flutes poured tableside and give guests a unique opportunity to taste sparkling wine from producers like Henri Goutorbe, Marc Hébrart and Pierre Gimonet.

Staff receives monthly tastings with Champagne producers and importers, and senior employees are awarded trips to Champagne and California to expand their wine knowledge. "The staff's expertise and straightforward relationship with Champagne and our concept makes the experience much more comprehensive and easier for the customers," explains publicist Kimberly Charles.

The food menu was designed with the flute in mind. Small plates such as Hamachi Tartar Blini with Red Onion and Crème Fraîche (\$13, or \$23 with caviar) and Wild Mushroom and Leek Quiche with Baby Greens and Parsley Oil (\$11), are joined by grilled sandwiches like Fontina with Wild Mushrooms and White Truffle Oil (\$15), salads, oysters, shrimp, caviar and cheese platters. Guests wishing to drink Demi-Secs with dessert can dip and nibble on chocolate fondue for one (\$12), two (\$18) or four (\$30) or several other desserts. Twelve party platters ranging from \$60 to \$65 can accommodate larger festive groups.

Early evenings tend to attract young and professional guests stopping in after work, while a funkier, younger and more

diverse crowd visits on weekend and late nights. As Charles puts it, the Bubble Lounge strives to make Champagne — often deemed an esoteric subject — accessible and fun "by making it available at all times, and making every day a celebration and a good reason to drink Champagne ... to celebrate projects, ideas and friendships."

Pickwick and Frolic Cleveland

www.pickwickandfrolic.com

Guests still chuckling from a comedian's set at adjacent Hilarities 4th Street Theatre frequently stroll into the Champagne bar, which opened on Valentine's Day in 2008. The intimate spot seats 10, with 20 additional spots at surrounding serpentine couches and floating chairs. It's open to the public Friday and Saturday nights, and reservations are accepted until 8 p.m. on Fridays.

Pickwick and Frolic's Champagne bar offers about 32 Champagnes by the bottle and the same number of sparklers from around the world. The well-thought-out menu also highlights detailed information about different styles, growing regions, the method of making Champagne and sparkling wines and serving tips.

Flights are a popular option among guests, and three are offered at any

given time, ranging from a \$6 flight of sparkling wines from around the world, to a \$21 flight of higher-end Champagnes. Manager and Sommelier Dina Kostis notes that guests who order flights typically either move on to a full glass of bubbly, or order another flight to continue their experimentation. Specialty cocktails like the Veuve Cliquot-based "Yelloween" are centered around holidays, but lack of ongoing customer interest keeps sparkling wine cocktails off the regular menu.

During the week, the bar is reserved for private events like book club meetings, as well as many corporate events. Management works with a group's budget to plan an event, and Kostis offers customized tastings and talks to make sparkling wine less intimidating and more approachable.

Menu offerings throughout the building are identical, but the Champagne bar also offers fruit trays, cheese trays and sweet trays. Regular team sessions are held with all employees — not just those who work in the Champagne bar — assuring that everyone who works under Pickwick's roof can pop a cork and speak to the juice inside. **NCB**

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