

taste buds
chef Larry Janes

Elevate your spirits

It was evident that we were dealing with a novice.

Not being one to enjoy the bubbly nature of champagne, it was necessary for me to get out of the habit of buying \$2.99 bottles of the stuff and to raise my consciousness of the effervescent grape to new heights. Could one spend more than \$3 and truly find the difference? Oul, Oul!

For those of you who, like myself, thought of champagne as something we picked up on the way home from buying lunch meat, bread and milk for the kids' lunches, boy, will you be surprised.

Champagne is the sparkling wine produced in the Champagne district of France, the area some 90 miles northeast of Paris, surrounding the village of Epernay, the city of Reims and a number of other small communities.

It is made from certain grapes — mainly the Pinot Noir and the Chardonnay. These are the same grapes used to make Burgundy. Traditional champagne is made from the black grape of the Pinot Noir whose skins are removed from the fermenting juice before the pigment can be leached out and darken the wine. The modern trend is toward Blanc de Blanc — white wine from white grapes (Sacre Dom Perignon) although they must be made entirely from the white Chardonnay. But in all cases, true champagne is produced entirely from the Champagne District. By the way, the stuff I call champagne that costs about \$3 a bottle is really sparkling wine. Although labeled champagne, it cannot be called such in Europe. Such are the laws outside the Common Market.

CHAMPAGNE was first introduced way back in the 17th century by Dom Perignon, a Benedictine monk who was the cellar master at the abbey of Hautvillers. He and the grape growers of the region were aware that wines with a slight natural sparkle resulted from the second fermentation of the grapes that occurred in the spring following the fall harvest.

The sparkle, or petillance as it is still called, was a pleasant surprise. It added a special quality to the wine. Corks were not yet invented then and, unfortunately, to put it bluntly, the flasks soon went flat. However, the wine was still sought after, and eventually brother Dom, after trying wood and cotton stoppers without great success, discovered that corks were effective when secured in the bottles by string. It is also said that the good monk was responsible for having bottles made of heavier glass to prevent them from exploding under pressure during the second fermentation.

It is this second fermentation that is the crucial step in making champagne. When making still wine, the bottling usually takes place long after the second fermentation so the bubbles are never captured. By the way, those bubbles that seem to give everyone the giggles are only the carbon dioxide gas that is a natural byproduct of fermentation. Because champagne is bottled prior to the second fermentation, the entire process is much more complex than the production of still wine.

Would you believe that still existing today there is the remnant of manual twisting and shaking of the bottles in the cellars cut deep into the soil of Reims and Epernay. That's one of the reasons you won't find imported French champagne at under \$8 per bottle. Gee, the cost of labor nowadays.

Menu calls for caviar

By Carl Rinachler
special writer

JOHN MCCARTHY, co-owner of Detroit's chic Whitney Restaurant, says, "Caviar and champagne are two words which are synonymous with success."

The Whitney is one of a half dozen or so restaurants in the metropolitan area whose caviar sales are increasing. As a matter of fact, the Whitney even offers a separate caviar menu — a fact that surely boasts of the delicacy's renewed popularity.

Meire Detroit is not the only place where caviar is a leading food trend. New York has a growing number of caviar bars. Petrossian (of Paris), the leading Russian caviar importer, has opened Petrossian-Rendevous on the sixth floor of Chicago's new Bloomingdale's. Like the New York Petrossian, the Chicago restaurant has a menu including beluga, sevruga and osetra caviar varieties as well as smoked fish dishes.

Sound enticing? Well, if you're thinking about trying a bit of Russian caviar, you may be in for a bit of a shock. A typical 30-gram serving in a restaurant will cost anywhere from \$45 to \$75. Thirty grams, by the way, will almost fill two soup spoons.

Before you venture out to sample some or invest in this precious commodity for your New Year's Eve celebration, there are a few things you should know.

FIRST OF ALL, caviar is the processed salted roe or eggs of various species of sturgeon.

There is an American caviar, which is related to the classic Russian sturgeons, producing limited amounts with a somewhat different taste. The Whitney offers an American sampler on its caviar menu — golden white-fish roe, Western salmon and American sturgeon, at about one third the cost of the Russian varieties.

Chinese caviar or kelpa is the newest variety on the market. It is distributed by California Sunshine Fine Foods under the label Tsar Nicolai. It is presently unavailable in Michigan at retail outlets. I was fortunate to sample some recently at the grand opening of Williams-Sonoma at Troy's Somerset Mall.

Caviar from Mandarin beluga and osetra sturgeons grown in China's Amur River has a nutty flavor. This caviar ranges from dark gray to green-gray, and the price is much lower than the Russian.

Having sampled the American and Russian varieties recently at the Whitney, I have to agree with the majority of caviar connoisseurs, the Russian beluga is outstanding by comparison. But, the question remains, is fresh Russian beluga caviar worth what consumers must pay? Beluga is \$48 for 30 grams, osetra is \$25. Before making any conclusions logical or otherwise, let's look at the facts.

REMOVING ROE from a fish is a painstaking process. After the eggs are removed by hand they are forced through a cotton sieve, rinsed, drained and salted. The salting process is an art in itself. It's not until the salt is added that the roe becomes caviar.

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JOHN STORMAZAND

Russian sampler at the Whitney restaurant in Detroit has three kinds of caviar — beluga, osetra and sevruga, served with fine egg yolk, fine egg white, capers and

chopped parsley. In center is cucumber with sour cream. Cost is \$55 a plate. The restaurant, which has a separate caviar menu, also offers an American sampler.

Appetizers are elegant

SAVORY CAVIAR ROULADE

Serves 8-12 as an appetizer

Ingredients:
5 large eggs, separated
1 cup sifted flour
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon finely chopped dill
1/2 cup melted butter

Filling:
2 cups soft cream cheese

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Champagne, served up with style

By Richard Watson
special writer

One of the great tribal rituals of the late 1900s in America centers around the selecting, storing, chilling, opening, serving and consuming a bottle of champagne (note the use of the lower-case "c" to denote generic reference throughout. Champagne refers to the even more ritualistic French product of a defined geographical region).

Many argue that such conventions are necessary and useful. After all, champagne is difficult to make, somewhat adventuresome to serve and an unbounded joy to drink. Its production is steeped in history, dating back as it does into the early part of this millennium.

Most families feel that, for the holiday season, at least one celebratory bottle is in order. After all, 80 percent of the stock leaves local wine store shelves in the month of December.

If you are among this group, let's do it right. The tradition-bound holidays we are in are no time to be innovative. And there is much wisdom in most of the practices followed. If champagne has been around for 700 plus years, there must be something to it.

SELECTING. There is no wine with a greater price range, from two for \$5 to well in excess of \$100 per bottle. Most choices come from France (probably the finest and cost-

liest), Germany, Spain, New York, California, Australia, the list goes on. Best advice is to determine what amount you want to spend and then take your trustworthy wine merchant's advice. He probably hasn't drunk them all personally but he

knows what sells. That can't be all bad.

STORING. Whether for a year or for a week, the same rules hold. Keep the bottle on its side (thus keeping the cork moist and tight) in

a cool, dark place, one preferably stable and secure to reduce the probability of explosion. Kept thus, all quality champagne has an amazing life span, far exceeding most white table wines.

CHILLING. Cooling the tempera-

ture of wine, as with any food, tends to decrease most of its flavors. With champagne, that is most desirable because it is at its best with just hints of fruit and yeast flavors. You want it to be very delicate, not obstructive in your mouth. A half hour in the freezer, no more, or a couple hours in the refrigerator bring its temperature down sufficiently. Preferred manner of chilling: it always seems to taste better when thrust vigorously into a massive snowdrift and served with the snow still adhering to the bottle. My wife swears this to be true.

Once-frozen champagne can be slowly thawed with little loss in quality. But do not open the bottle with it still frozen. Boom, maybe!

SERVING. Champagne is a "muscle wine" at this point. After removing the foil and the wire band it is unavoidably time to remove the cork if you are to have any. A slow, continuous twist motion is in order, working the two hands in opposite directions. The goal is to extract the cork with a minimum of "pop," thereby reducing the loss of pressure quickly and decreasing the probability of overflow (most messy and wasteful). A pilot-type tool is sometimes helpful to loosen the cork initially but use the bare hand for the final extraction; you have better control.

Do not aim that cork at a loved

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Serve champagne in flute glasses, to keep the bubbles lively the longest. Here's an array of champagnes at the Whitney.

Best of bubbly in price range of \$10-\$30

GOOD VALUE HOLIDAY CHAMPAGNES

Under \$10
Iron Horse Brut (Cal) at \$6
Cuvée de Réserve (Cal) at \$6
Trot's Extra Dry (Cal) at \$7.50
Lembey (Spain) at \$6
Cordon (Spain) at \$7.50
\$10-\$20
Domaine Chandon Brut or Blanc de Noir (Cal) at \$12
Iron Horse Blanc de Noir (Cal) at \$20
Lambert Extra Dry (France) at \$19
Mawby Cuvée 2 (Mich) at \$14
Schramsberg Cuvée de Pinot (Cal) at \$20
\$20-\$30
Champagne Devix (France) at \$24
Moet and Chandon White Star (France) at \$23.50
Veuve Clicquot Brut (France) at \$28
Iron Horse '85 Brut Rose (Cal) at \$24.50