

the **crush**
BUBBLE BURST

SPARKLING PERSONALITIES

California winemakers are eschewing Champagne grapes to make bubbles with verve.



CHENIN BLANC

"Sour cream and onion dip" with cooked lemon flavors and an "exuberant bubble," is how Pitts describes Maître de Chai's Sparkling Chenin Blanc. Broc Cellars, also in Berkeley, makes Love Sparkling Chenin Blanc, a *pétillant naturel* with a hint of pineapple and a tiny bit of green fruit.

ALBARIÑO

Carboniste's Octopus, a sparkling Albariño, exhibits underripe stone-fruit notes that Person calls "electric passionfruit" with a "beautiful pungency."

VALDIGUÉ

The sparkling Valdigués from Broc Cellars and Petaluma's Cruse Wine Co. are both *pét-nats* with watermelon flavors.

California's iconic sparkling wine houses like Schramsberg, Roederer and Chandon have long followed the gospel of Champagne, not only using *méthode traditionnelle*, but also turning to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay as their primary grapes.

A wave of boutique producers in the state are looking to burst this bubble by experimenting with alternative varieties in sparkling wine.

Some are drawing inspiration from abroad, like the Loire Valley's sparkling Chenin Blancs or Germany's Riesling-based sekt. For others, it's a matter of practicality: Less popular grapes are more affordable, which translates to a more approachable price point for consumers.

"It can be bubbles just because" says Alex Pitts, cofounder of Maître de Chai Wine in Berkeley. "That was very important to us, breaking down the stigma of sparkling wine needing to be saved for an anniversary or New Year's."

Dan Person, cofounder of Carboniste in Napa (and formerly of Schramsberg), wants to "burn down the house" and spark a revolution.

"We are 5,000 miles from Champagne, so why are we trying to taste like Champagne?" he says. "I'm going to make something with respect to the terroir of California."

Once-prolific grapes like Chenin Blanc and Valdigué, also known as Napa Gamay, might seem like obvious choices. But today, those plantings are quite sparse.

Instead, Person makes a sparkling Albariño.

"It exhibits the sunshine of California," he says.

He's hopeful for continued innovation.

"I'm a big fan of the idea that a rising tide lifts all boats. I want to see more people making interesting varieties. To me, that would be fantastic."

—Jess Lander

PHOTO: ASHTON WORTHINGTON; PROPS: JI CHAN