SPARKLING PERSONALITIES

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

California’s iconic sparkling wine houses like Schramsberg, Roederer and Chandon have long followed the gospel of Champagne, not only using méthode traditionelle, 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 sëkt. 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 Valdiguié, 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