

## LIBATIONS

# The best bets for the best in bubbly

By MICHAEL VAUGHAN

There's something about Champagne. Victorious athletes shower in it, '30s movie stars bathed in it, new ships are christened with it, and almost everyone tells you to toast the New Year with it. One thing is certain, Champagne seems to set the tone.

Of course, there are thousands of sparkling wines out there, all varying in style and quality. This certainly makes it challenging to definitively say which is best. Fortunately, as a professional taster, I have the opportunity to assess more than a hundred annually. While I am the first to admit, that there is a style for every palate, I am always amazed that some of the most expensive "grande marques," while very fine, don't really deliver in terms of flavour.

Put one in a blind tasting test and you will discover that some big label Champagnes costing upwards of \$150 a bottle will be beaten out by much less expensive competitors. It was my long time friend Christian Pol Roger who confided that "real connoisseurs go for vintage-dated Champagne." Pol Roger 1998 Extra Cuvee de Reserve Brut (\$79.95 ON / \$81 SAQ), for instance, is a classic -- dry, well structured and harmonious with ripe lemon-melon flavours and a lingering, very toasty finish.

While not vintage-dated, another reliable choice would be Taittinger Cham-

pagne Brut Reserve (\$59.95 ON / \$58.99 BC), which is very dry, nicely structured and gently toasty with ripe lemon flavours and a lovely, lingering finish. It has excellent effervescence.

A traditional best buy is Lanson Black Label Brut Champagne at \$39.95, which includes a limited-time \$5 discount in Ontario until January 5, 2008. It is crisp, dry and very effervescent with lingering apple-lemon-citrus flavours. In Quebec it will set you back \$55, while in B.C. it goes for \$49.99.

An amazing value still lingering on the shelves in Ontario is the superior Lanson 1997 Gold Label Vintage Brut Champagne (722520), a steal at the discounted \$52.85 price. It has lovely, gently toasty, ripe lemon-lime flavours with a long finish.

Of course, there are great non-Champagne bubbly as well. From California's Sonoma County, my best bet would be Gloria Ferrer Sonoma Brut (\$23.95 ON/ \$23.65 SAQ / \$29.99 BC). This blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay has delicious, harmonious, ripe apple-melon flavours with a lingering finish.

Whatever the bubbly, I always think of the words of columnist Art Buchwald, who said he loved Champagne because "it always tastes as though my foot's asleep."

