

The New Sparkling Wines of the Northeast

La Crescent, Cayuga, Brianna and Marquette might be lesser-known varieties, but many producers in the Northeast are embracing these hardy grapes to make exceptional sparklers.

BY RÉMY CHAREST



Photo by Meg Baggott

There's a different kind of buzz—or rather, fizz—around American wine. This time, it's coming out of the Northeast. Winemakers there are putting a new spin on lesser-known, cold-hardy grapes like La Crescent, Cayuga, Brianna and Marquette to create distinctive and delicious sparklers.

History and hybrids

In New York's Finger Lakes region, Winemaker Nathan Kendall and New York City Master Sommelier Pascaline Lepeltier have been making waves with Chëpika, a line of bubbies using the often frowned-upon Catawba and Delaware grapes. They were attracted by these varieties' hardiness—and their history.

“In the late 1800s, the Finger Lakes' international reputation was built on sparkling wines made from those grapes,” says Kendall.

Bold Tastemakers

In Vermont, the critically acclaimed sparklers made by Deirdre Heekin at La Garagista are exported to Canada and Europe. In the same state, Shelburne Vineyards Winemaker Ethan Joseph has created a line called Iapetus that's focused on producing natural wines. Cold-hardy bubbles make up half of the Iapetus range.



Why Unpopularity Suits California's Viognier

Similar efforts by Brian Smith at Maine's Oyster River Winegrowers have gained followers as far as Arizona and Washington State.

These winemakers employ a sustainable, low-intervention approach and largely rely on a sparkling category known as pétillant naturel, or pét-nat. In that style, wines are bottled before the end of fermentation to produce the bubbles, as opposed to traditional method, which uses a second fermentation in bottle.

The case for pét-nat

Heekin points out that effervescence of the wines matches the energetic acidity present in alpine varieties.

“The high acidity, lower alcohol and flavor profiles, sometimes related to Muscat, lend themselves well to sparkling,” she says.

Sparkling also avoids aromas known as “foxiness,” prevalent in cool climates. Kendall says that early harvest helps prevent it, while Heekin has found it less of an issue as her vines mature. But pét-nats avoid the problem altogether.

The style is also fun and meant to be enjoyed young. The wines’ mineral character and crunchy texture provide a playful counterpoint to the aromatics that will appeal to all sorts of drinkers.

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