



I like the tradition of finishing the year of Explorer Club with a sparkling wine. There is no other beverage that quite rings in the end of the year and makes any gathering more festive. To pair with this sparkling wine, I thought it would be cool to find a wine that originates from the Middle East. Not only do the Judeo-Christian holidays of Christmas and Hanukkah begin this region, but it is also one of the earliest areas in the world to export wine. Please enjoy these selections responsibly, and we wish you a wonderful holiday season.

CUNE Cava (\$16)

I am a big fan of the CUNE winery and have featured its products several times over the years. Recently, it left the company that imported them into the United States (Europvin) and began shipping through one of our strategic partners. When the new importer/distributor presented the wines to their sales force, in a meeting I was also attending, I was surprised to see a Cava. When I tasted it, I immediately thought it would be a great Explorer Club feature for December.

It turns out that CUNE has never made a Cava before, but purchased one of the most historic properties in the Penedes region in July of this year, Roger Goulart. Founded in 1882, Goulart is one of the quality leaders of the original Cava district, outside of Barcelona. This is a very storied, high quality producer that fits nicely with the rest of the CUNE portfolio.

Since it has been a year since our last bubbles feature, here is a quick refresher on the category. In general terms, sparkling wines are made in one of three methods. The first is the most simple, where cold wine is injected with carbon dioxide, which infuses and makes it sparkling. This process is the same as making soda and the results are equally compelling. Your sub-\$10 bubbles are typically made this way, brands like Wycliff and Tott's. The second is called the *Charmat* method, in which clear juice is fermented in closed tanks, at low temperature. This process is used to make all Prosecco and most of your less expensive sparkling wines. It is a method that yields good results but the wines lack the dimension of those made in the *Method Traditional*.

For *Method Traditional*, the primary fermentation of the wine occurs either in tank or barrel. The wine is then moved to a bottle, where additional yeast and sugar are added, then it was sealed with a bottle cap. Another fermentation then takes place that yields a small amount more alcohol and a whole lot of carbon dioxide, which, having no where to go, infuses into the wine. The actual development of the bubbles is important, but less so than what happens as the yeast do their job and then die, sinking to the bottom of the bottle. In winemaking lingo they are then called *lees*, which is a fancy way to say 'dead yeast cells.' After a period of time, and purists will say at least 20 months, the yeast begin to decompose in a process called *autolysis*. While this may not sound appealing, it is this process which imbues the final product with the toasty, nutty, qualities that differentiate the wines from the other forms of sparkling. The longer the wine rests on the lees, the more complex the quality. Since their establishment in 1882, Goulart has been committed to extended lees contact on all of their wines. Even this, their base model, sees 24 months on the lees before the wine is disgorged, which is a year longer than the legal minimum.

When you are ready to serve this wine, chill it to refrigerator temperature before popping the cork. I suggest pouring your glasses half full then waiting a few minutes for them to warm slightly, then topping off. By doing this you will experience more of the complexity of the bouquet, which is a complex blend of toasted sesame seeds, candied lemon peel, roasted celery root, white cardamom pods and fresh green apples. On the palate, this wine has a good sense of weight, with soft fruit framed by some minerality and acidity into the finish. Drink this wine over the next year with smoked salmon Benedict, brie baked in puff pastry with orange marmalade or asparagus puffs.

2017 Massaya Colombier (\$16)

I have wanted to feature a wine from this dynamic winery in Lebanon ever since meeting one of the founders, Sami Ghosn, a couple of years ago. Lebanon? You bet. If my trips to Chile, Argentina, South Africa and Portugal have taught me anything, it is that great wine is made in a lot of new places. Of course many of them are not really new, but modern viticulture and winery practices mean the wines from these ancient places are far more commercially viable than ever before.

As for Lebanon, it is a place where great wine should be made. The Phoenicians, a tribe from the region, are widely credited with planting the first vines in the south of France almost 3,000 years ago. The region was also a major trade area on the spice routes, which is how the parent grape vines of many of the varieties we know and love found their way west. As for modern history, the Hochar family has produced some of the world's most interesting wines at Chateau Musar since the 1920s, of which we are big fans in the Orlando store. Now comes Massaya, which like Musar is from the historic Beqaa Valley. The foundation of the wines is the family estate of Sami Ghosn, who began planting vines in 1992. He also has a French connection with partners Frederic and Daniel Brunier of Vieux Telegraph in Chateaufort-du-Pape and Dominique Hebrard, whose family used to own Chateau Cheval Blanc in St. Emilion. They bring a lot of expertise and knowledge to the project, which is immediately apparent when you pour the wines.

The climate where the grapes grow for these wines is Mediterranean, which means warm summer days and temperate winters. Vines grow at relatively high elevation, on the slopes of two mountains that frame the northern border of the Beqaa Valley. In these harsh conditions the Rhone varieties, Grenache, Syrah and Cinsault thrive. The vines for this wine grow between 2,700 and 3,600 feet above sea level and average more than 40 years old.

Colombier, which is French for 'dovecote,' is a blend of 35% Cinsault, 35% Grenache and 30% Tempranillo fermented and aged in tanks. Cotes du Rhone with a faint Spanish accent? Yeah, sort of. With this wine, you get a fresh nose of raspberry jam, dried strawberries, rose petals, green cardamom and white sage. The palate is not surprising; dense, plenty of fruit framed by dusty tannins that are firm but not austere. Serve over the next year with lamb kabobs or tangine, or carnitas.

Asparagus Puffs

I like to keep a box of puff pastry in the freezer because it is a versatile way to dress up soups en croute, make cheese straws or tuck savory or fruit fillings into for pop-overs. This recipe is extremely versatile and a great way to use up leftover ricotta cheese or substitute spinach that has been cooked and squeezed dry (one cup, cooked, squeezed and chopped).

1 cup ricotta cheese
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
¾ pound asparagus, trimmed, blanching, dried, and chopped fine
¼ cup minced fresh chives
2 tablespoons lemon juice
Salt and pepper
1 box frozen puff pastry (1-pound), thawed in refrigerator overnight
Flour for dusting work surface
1 large egg, lightly beaten

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Combine ricotta, ¾ cup Parmesan, asparagus, chives, lemon juice, and salt and pepper to taste in bowl.
2. Unfold both pieces puff pastry on lightly floured surface and roll out to flatten bumps or creases. Using 2 1/2-inch round cookie cutter, cut out 24 rounds. Brush rounds with egg. Place 1 tablespoon cheese mixture slightly off center on each round. Fold round over cheese and crimp edges with fork. Place on parchment-lined baking sheet. Brush tops with egg and sprinkle with remaining Parmesan.
3. Bake until puffed and golden brown, about 20 minutes. Cool slightly and serve warm.

Grilled Lamb Kofte

I grew up in western Pennsylvania, which is a surprisingly diverse cultural area with pockets of people who immigrated from the Middle East, particularly Syria and Lebanon. One of my earliest memories is of my family driving to New Castle to eat lamb-on-the-rod, purchased from a Syrian man who grilled them in his back yard on Friday night. Apparently in the early 1970s, the rules for selling food were more lenient than today. Eventually he opened a restaurant that his kids still run to this day.

This recipe is a little easier than cutting up lamb chunks off a leg or shoulder, but the flavor is incredible. Obviously it works great with the Massaya, but also with just about any European, medium bodied red. You can also substitute 85% lean ground beef for lamb and the results are very good. Serve these wrapped in pita bread or over rice.

YOGURT-GARLIC SAUCE
1 cup plain whole-milk yogurt
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons tahini
1 garlic clove, minced
½ teaspoon salt

KOFTE
½ cup pine nuts
4 garlic cloves, peeled
1 ½ teaspoons hot smoked paprika
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon pepper
¼ teaspoon ground coriander
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
⅛ teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 ½ pounds ground lamb
½ cup grated onion, drained
⅓ cup minced fresh parsley
⅓ cup minced fresh mint
1 ½ teaspoons unflavored gelatin

1. FOR THE YOGURT-GARLIC SAUCE: Whisk all ingredients together in bowl. Set aside.
2. FOR THE KOFTE: Process pine nuts, garlic, paprika, salt, cumin, pepper, coriander, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon in food processor until coarse paste forms, 30 to 45 seconds. Transfer mixture to large bowl. Add lamb, onion, parsley, mint, and gelatin; knead with your hands until thoroughly combined and mixture feels slightly sticky, about 2 minutes. Divide mixture into 8 equal portions. Shape each portion into 5-inch-long cylinder about 1 inch in diameter. Using 8 (12-inch) metal skewers, thread 1 cylinder onto each skewer, pressing gently to adhere. Transfer skewers to lightly greased baking sheet, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 24 hours.
- 3A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Using skewer, poke 12 holes in bottom of disposable pan. Open bottom vent completely and place pan in center of grill. Light large chimney starter filled two thirds with charcoal briquettes (4 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour into pan. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.
- 3B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave all burners on high.
4. Clean and oil cooking grate. Place skewers on grill (directly over coals if using charcoal) at 45-degree angle to grate. Cook (covered if using gas) until browned and meat easily releases from grill, 4 to 7 minutes. Flip skewers and continue to cook until browned on second side and meat registers 160 degrees, about 6 minutes longer. Transfer skewers to platter and serve, passing yogurt-garlic sauce separately.