

The Press Democrat

How France influences California sparkling wines

PEG MELNIK | December 23, 2019

It's not surprising that a French sensibility has been imported to Northern California, as there are more than a handful of sparkling wine houses with ties to a parent company in France. The question is, what are these quirky marriages — these Franco-American matches that join both sides of the pond — creating in California when it comes to house style? Are they more Californian in nature? More French? Twins, or an entirely new creation? To learn more about the house styles of these Old World-New World marriages, we first spoke to the winemakers of sparkling wine houses with direct ties to France...

All the winemakers we spoke to use the traditional French method when crafting their sparklers. But they're working with California grapes which can be riper than their French counterparts, although that's not always the case. So how does this puzzle out in house style? In other words, when you uncork a California sparkler, can you detect a French accent in your glass?

DOMAINE CARNEROS

The 2012 Le Rêve Blanc de Blancs (\$115) — elegant, delicate and well-balanced — is the best example of this winery's house style, according to Eileen Crane, founding winemaker and CEO of Domaine Carneros.



The Napa sparkling wine house, which opened its doors in 1989, is owned in part by Champagne giant Taittinger. Built in the style of an 18th-century French chateau, it has marble floors and is crowned with chandeliers. But from the beginning, the vision was to create a fine American sparkler rather than recreate Taittinger French champagne, Crane explained. "Claude Taittinger, then head of Champagne Taittinger, used the analogy that if Picasso had tried to imitate Renoir's style, you would never have heard of Picasso," she said. "He said imitations are never as good as originals."

Le Rêve, which means "the dream" in French, is aged seven years on the yeast. The house style, Crane said, is closer to Audrey Hepburn in a little black dress than the sleek Grace Kelly in the Taittinger poster.

"Both Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn are elegant, but like Domaine Carneros, Audrey Hepburn is just a bit more kinky," she said.

