

Champagne's magnum opus

Put on your tuxedos, it's time to think big this New Year's

It's time to supersize your Champagne. Why settle for a 750 mL bottle when these brutes will ensure no shortage of "holiday cheer" during your festivities. Champagne is actually sparkling wine and can be either vintage (a single grape harvest, designated by the growth year, and aged for a minimum of three years) or non-vintage (blended from different varieties spanning many years). A second fermentation creates the bubbles, and for a more intense effect, serve in a tall flute or tulip glass.

We held our black-tie affair at Jenkinson's Aquarium, Point Pleasant Beach, where we found some appropriately attired African penguins to model with our guests from France's Champagne region. Unless noted, prices are based on 1.5-liter magnums and each is rated on a 10-point scale. Happy New Year!

SELECTIONS BY EVANGELOS MIHELIS & HARRIS SIEGEL PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES J. CONNOLLY

Taittinger Brut Réserve

The combination of chardonnay and pinot noir grapes yields a magnificently fruity aroma, and the company's reserve of 5 million bottles will guarantee a consistently memorable experience on every occasion.

Price: \$118
Rating: 8.9

Louis Roederer Brut Premier

If Cristal - L.R.'s celebrity big brother - is out of your league, then Louis might be a better date for New Year's Eve. Youthful and cool with an herbal taste profile. Best of all, you'll still have money left over for cab fare home.

Price: \$80
Rating: 8.7

Veuve Clicquot Brut

It's been called the "gold standard" of non-vintage Champagnes, and nothing says celebration quite like arriving with a bottle of "yellow label." The signature style - primarily chardonnay and pinot noir grapes - blends 50 wines, but they mingle effortlessly like guests at a great party.

Price: \$80
Rating: 9.4

Krug Grande Cuvée

Johann-Joseph Krug founded this famous house in 1843 and we'd suggest making it your 2008 resolution to savor his accomplishment. Vintage wines - from growths spanning a decade - coexist in this golden master work. Intensely dry with a sour apple nose and a silky finish.

Price: \$350
Rating: 9.8

Perrier Jouët 1999 "Fleur de Champagne"

A stunning Art Nouveau bottle is a fitting vessel for the prestige cuvée of this company's line. Splurge for a jeroboam - the name for a 3-liter bottle shown - and you'll make an unforgettable statement. Tantalizingly drinkable.

Price: \$250
Rating: 9.4

Dom Pérignon 1999

Named for the Benedictine monk often credited with "inventing" Champagne. His role may be a bit overstated, but one cannot exaggerate the complexity of this elegant wine.

Price: \$300
Rating: 9.6

Charles Heidsieck Brut Millésimé 1995

Sinatra's "It was a very good year" best describes this voluptuous vintage.

Price: \$200
Rating: 9.5

