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'Whirlwind' of events at Vancouver International Wine Festival

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Barons de Rothschild Champagne paired with a well-organized lunch at Tableau Bistro this week during the Vancouver International Wine Festival. Photo Tim Pawsey

The week at wine festival unfolds in a whirlwind of events and tastings, all of which confirm one salient fact that, ultimately, wine is all about place and people.

There's no question that the Vancouver International Wine Festival owes much of its success to a policy employed over many years that requires an owner, winemaker or principal to be in attendance.

It's that human connection that makes the week so lively, interesting and, yes, personal.

After all, when the export manager for Champagne house Taittinger quips, "We drink three bottles a day, so we make sure it's good," wouldn't you want to taste his Taittinger Prélude Grands Crus?

I did, and was wowed by its rich but elegant texture with definite mineral notes, with hints of stonefruit and citrus and a lingering finish (91 points, limited supply at BCLS Festival Store, \$79.99).

With France in the spotlight, it's no surprise that several specialized tastings served to underscore the remarkable variety of styles on offer at every price point.

Continuing with the theme of Champagne and sparkling wine, I crossed paths with more than a few standouts that spanned the spectrum.

Wherever you go in the wine world, almost every country or region makes sparkling wine. Whether it's Spanish Cava, French Crémant, German Sekt, Italian Prosecco, South African Cap Classique, Canadian méthode traditionnelle, great sparklers from Argentina, Australia, California, New Zealand or, of course, French Champagne, there's rarely any need for an excuse to pop the cork (or snap the crown cap).

However, while sparkling wine rightly revels in its traditional celebratory status, all too often overlooked is the real bonus: that bubbles of all stripes make for the most flexible and food-friendly of wines.

In fact, the best wine pairing insurance you can own is a bottle (or two) of good sparkling ready for "emergencies" in the fridge.

You couldn't ask for better proof of Champagne's prowess as a food wine than a well organized lunch at Tableau Bistro, which showcased the Champagnes of Barons de Rothschild, presented by very engaging and witty CEO Frederic Mairesse.

The project, which combines the considerable talents and resources of the three renowned winemaking branches of the celebrated family, is relatively young in Champagne's storied terms. But even in its early stages, driven by true desire for excellence (and no shortage of well-placed resources and sourcing from only the best crus), it's apparent this newest of marques will be much in demand, and in some cases a collector's item.

One of Tableau's flagship dishes, creamy mushrooms on toast, played perfectly with the toasty richness of the (mainly grands crus sourced) Brut NV, 91 points; while the creamy, stonefruit and citrus-toned Blanc de Blancs NV (100 per cent Chardonnay, 93 points) proved an extraordinary match for chef Marc-André Choquette's scallops, leek and herb risotto.

Produced in still limited quantities, these remarkable Champagnes are hard to find, although you might track down some Brut at West Vancouver's 16th Street liquor store, or if you're reading online, at the festival BCLS store.

Champagne has spawned many imitators, although Domaine Zinck owner Philippe Zinck is quick to point out that his Crémant d'Alsace NV Brut makes no such claims. And it is a definitive example of just how good crémant can be. It's a beautifully balanced, nicely textured, slightly nutty, apple-pear and citrus-toned bubble that would be perfect with a little cheese and onion tart (BCLS \$23.99, 90 points).

A more deliberate nod to classic Champagne style is Moreson Cap Classique Solitaire (Franschhoek, South Africa), which yields definite brioche biscuit notes on top, followed by a creamy, toasty-yeasty palate and crisp end. Look for it at private stores, \$30-ish, 90 points.

Or, for something completely different, head to Coonawarra, where at Majella they make that most distinctive of Australian drops, Sparkling Shiraz.

Sometimes these wines can be more than a mouthful, but Majella 2007 Sparkling Shiraz delivers just the right balance of still-elegant fruit wrapped in juicy acidity, with plummy and anise notes further enhanced by adding a touch of vintage port. Food match? No question, says Majella owner Brian Lynn, "Bacon 'n' eggs!" (\$39-ish, 90 points).

Tip: If you're headed to the International Festival Tastings, it's best to buy what you like at the onsite BCLS store, as many or most of these wines will not be available later.

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