

*Amy Reiley's*

## Eat Something Sexy



### **BEST INEXPENSIVE CHAMPAGNE FOR VALENTINE'S DAY OR ANY ROMANTIC OCCASION**

Champagne is a wine category linked with romance. Just ask anyone. (I did! See the results of our [food & romance survey](#) to see just how many people consider Champagne the drink of love). As you may already know, inexpensive Champagne is not easy to find. But I'm going to help you make your next romantic occasion more memorable with the aphrodisiac of Champagne.

Champagne is wine that comes from Champagne, France

Champagne is a place...in France. Only wine that comes from the Champagne region is Champagne. Anything else is sparkling wine, also referred to as bubbles or bubbly. All are great terms to define a wine with effervescence but unless that wine is produced in Champagne, that term is inappropriate.

Now that isn't to say there aren't great sparkling wines produced around the world. There are. And they are often far more affordable than Champagnes. Ah, but here is where we get to why Champagne is special.

The Champagne region has chalky soils and a cool climate. Both of these elements of nature make for grapes high in acidity. This is key to making Champagne, a wine style that is emulated in regions around the world.

But there's more to Champagne than just geography. The wines of the region are strictly regulated. Only three grapes are acceptable for use in Champagne. These are Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay. The three may be blended but no other grapes are ever used in Champagne.

Like most still wines, Champagnes are first fermented then blended. But unlike many still wines, the goal of most Champagne houses is to keep the blend tasting the same year after year or a “house style.” Most non-vintage Champagnes are made of a blend from several vintages in order to help maintain this level of consistency.

## Why making Champagne is expensive

After blending, the wine is bottled and this is where the “secondary fermentation” occurs, (in other words, when the bubbles develop). A bit of yeast and sugar is added to the bottle to stimulate the natural production of the bubbles.

In Champagne, this must be done by the traditional method and the Champagne must age in the bottle for 15 months before the release date for non-vintage wines and 33 months for vintage Champagnes. (This is another of Champagne’s regulations.)

Of course, before the wine can be released it has to be disgorged, which means removing the blob of yeast that caused the wine to generate bubbles. This can be done by machine or by hand, but it must be done bottle by bottle. The bottles then have to be topped up with what’s called a dosage. The dosage is a little bit of Champagne with enough sugar to give the Champagne whatever level of sweetness the maker desires.

There are sparkling wines made in this same, painstaking method. In fact, you can get great, finely crafted sparkling wines from around the world. But everything in Champagne is heavily regulated to ensure that all Champagne houses are producing wines of the quality this expensive and time consuming method creates.

## My best budget Champagne recommendations for romantic occasions

### **Champagne Ayala Brut Majeur**

If you want a wine that truly represents the complexity and quality of Champagne on a sparkling wine budget, you need to get to know Ayala. The Brut Majeur offers finesse and elegance yet it has bright acidity and ripe fruit flavors that still make it feel festive. This is a lovely wine for any occasion but I think it will hit a home run on date night.

### **Champagne Ayala Brut Rosé Majeur**

A charmingly pink wine, this is my pick for Valentine’s Day, not just for color but for quality. As remarkably elegant as the Brut, this blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier has the freshness of ripe berries. But an underlying chalky note gives it an earthiness, a sense of place. It is the sort of wine to sweep you up in its romance, if only until the bottle is drained.

### **Champagne Bollinger Special Cuvée**

This is one of those Champagnes that just makes everyone feel special. It is the wine James Bond drank. And any guy who wants to feel like an international man of mystery or any woman who wants to make a man feel like a sexy secret agent will love pouring this. It is not a cheap Champagne by any means. But it is a great value, easily as elegant and finely crafted as Champagnes that cost twice the price.

Beyond the ties to intrigue and mystery, the wine is incredibly elegant. It offers yeasty, brioche notes and the most remarkably tiny, vibrant stream of bubbles. This is sexy wine.

