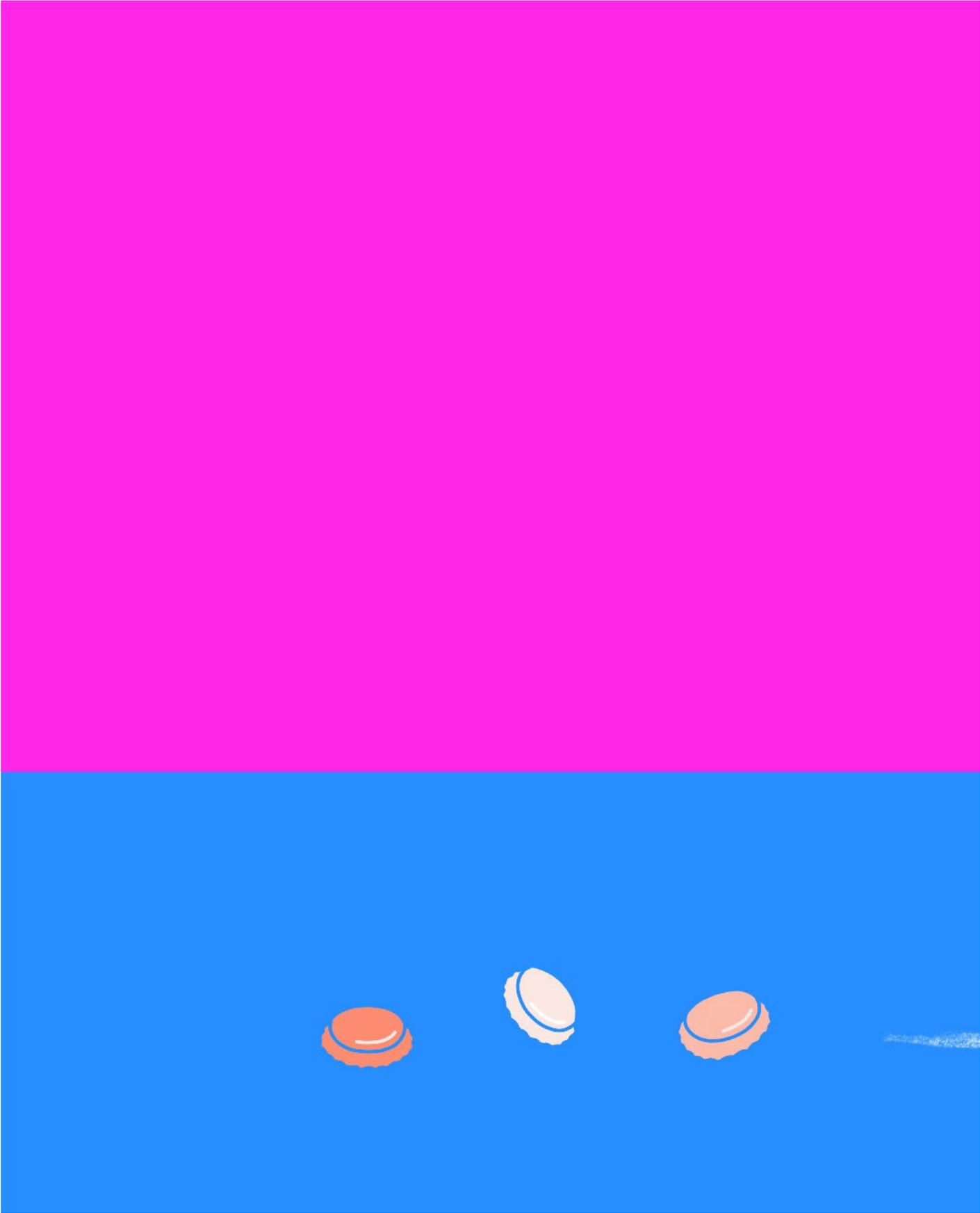


# The essential producers, wines and methods behind the world's most notable pétillant naturel.

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Listen to sparkling-wine makers long enough, and you might be tempted to conclude that they like to make life unnecessarily complicated for themselves.

That isn't to understate how complex it can be not only to make wine well, but to make it sparkle. It requires scientific precision, not least because of the possibility of exploding bottles. But at times, their plight sounds downright existential, as if their results were the product of alchemy, rather than basic chemistry and physics.

It's fizzy wine, and it shouldn't be a slog. In short: When yeast and sugar ferment, they give off carbon dioxide. If you trap this gas inside a bottle, your wine becomes fizzy. *Fin.*

Maybe that's why the entire idea of [pétillant naturel, or pét-nat](#), has such a growing appeal: It's all about making the process simpler. In Champagne-style winemaking, a still wine is made first, and then sugar and yeast are added, it all goes into bottle, and fizzy things are born. Pét-nat tries to make two steps into a single extended one: The wine is sealed in the bottle while alcoholic fermentation is still under way, and the resulting bubbles are just the trapped byproduct of that first fermentation. There are lots of complicated asterisks along the way, but the general idea is that you don't even need to add anything to make the sparkle.

This isn't a new idea, in that pét-nat is just a modern term for what's sometimes called *méthode ancestrale*, a way of winemaking that arguably dates to the 16th century, and that can still be found in places like Limoux, and the Diois in southeastern France.

As a fixation on the past has become a salve for modern misery, in wine as other things, it's logical that pét-nat has found an enthusiastic and growing fan base—myself among them. And while it's tempting to dismiss pét-nat as a fad, there's also little evidence of that being the case. These wines are useful on all sides: They give the thirsty a way to drink fizzy drinks without paying up for Champagne or enduring the sad industrialism of most prosecco. And they allow wineries to experiment, and often to find a use for grapes that might not have been so delicious as a still wine.

The state of the art in pét-nat has evolved a bit in recent years, enough that [we've considered its progress](#) several times before. This isn't to say all pét-nats are made successfully or well, and even in our most recent tasting, we scratched our heads over examples produced by people whose palates are generally beyond reproach. But on balance, there's a lot of interesting pét-nat out there—and ever more. And we should cheer that, because even when these wines are quirky, they're still usually a lot of fun to drink.

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#### Fast Facts

- If there was a global epicenter for pét-nat, it would undoubtedly be the central Loire Valley, not far from the city of Tours. It's where Christian Chaussard and his fellow winemakers [began teaching the technique of pét-nat](#) in the 1990s, and today it's where you'll find many masters of the form, as well as Bulles au Centre, the sole French tasting event currently dedicated to pét-nat.
- Not far away, the [appellation of Montlouis](#) has come as close as anyone to formalizing pét-nat as an established wine type. Pushed by producers like the Joussets and Damien and Coralie Delecheneau, local wine groups established an official appellation, Montlouis Pétillant Originel.
- Pét-nat's ground zero helps to explain why [chenin blanc](#) (along with [gamay noir](#) and grolleau) is arguably the most common base material for the category. Its long history in making sparkling wine in the area provides a great track record.
- In the United States, pét-nat has become popular in West Coast regions like California and Oregon. But it has also helped create or revive interest in more emergent areas, especially those with marginal climates, in part because the wines require lower grape ripeness than still wine. For instance, the Long Island wines of Channing Daughters and the Finger Lakes project, Chèpika, have developed loyal followings in New York City.
- There has been much debate inside the Pét-Nat World on the topic of disgorgement—the expulsion of the lees found in a bottle. Champagne and other more conventional wines are disgorged, and conventional wisdom says that drinkers won't buy a cloudy, fizzy wine. But in part because pét-nat is so closely aligned with natural-wine principles, some winemakers find it anathema to let go of the lees, which they consider part of the wine's creation. That said, some top pét-nat makers disgorge their wines.
- Similarly, there has been debate about the practice of adding a bit of unfermented grape juice to the bottle before the second, sparkling fermentation. This is done when the base wine is fully dry, and sugar is needed to make the sparkling. Some purists see this as too interventionist, but it preserves the idea of using what's inherently in the grape—versus added yeast and sugar. And a bit more inclusiveness seems to serve Pét-Nat World better than drawing lines in the sand.
- There's also a notion that pét-nat should be sealed with the crown caps used on beer bottles. The crown cap is a great closure—both in telegraphing that these wines are less stuffy, and in making them easy to open. But plenty of good pét-nat is similarly sealed with cork, especially if it's disgorged. (We can debate the Zorks used by Les Capriades another day.)

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#### The Essential Producers

**Les Capriades:** It's hard to imagine anyone taking pét-nat more seriously than Pascal Potaire and Moses Gadouche; in fact, it's all they make in their tiny Loire winery outside Montrichard. The breezy names (“Piège à Filles,” aka “Girl Trap”) and labels belie some [tremendous winemaking skills](#).

**Domaine Mosse:** René Mosse and his sons are some of the most popular vigneronns in the Loire's Anjou area, and their rosé Moussamoussettes, usually a bit off-dry, has become one of the icons of the pét-nat world.

**Cruse Wine Co.:** Michael Cruse gets a lot of buzz for his Champagne-style Ultramarine wines, but his terrific pét-nats (and his help for other winemaker colleagues in producing them) may ultimately be a more compelling contribution to California sparkling wine. His sparkling light red St. Laurent is a *sui generis* masterpiece.

**La Grange Tiphaine:** Situated just outside Montlouis, Damien and Coralie Delecheneau have finessed their skills with this form of sparkling, continuing on Christian Chaussard's application of rigorous science to what can be an inexact art. That has earned them deep cred in the natural wine world for bottles like Nouveau Nez (chenin blanc from Montlouis) and their Rosa Rosé Rosam.

**Day Wines:** Brianne Day is plenty talented as a pinot noir maker, but she has also created a bustling side business producing some of Oregon's most unabashedly gratifying pét-nats. Her Mamacita! is good evidence that all wines made from the malvasia grape are better with sparkle.

**Costadilá:** This small producer in the Treviso area of the Veneto has been one of the pioneers in bringing the pét-nat spirit to prosecco. Ernesto Cattel's *col fondo* bottles are considered by many a touchstone for the style.

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## The Essential Wines

**Lise & Bertrand Jousset Rose à Lies Vin de France Sparkling:** The Joussets have a particular knack for pét-nat, enough that they make at least two reference examples (their *Éxilé* is the other). Rose à Lies is a mix of organically farmed gamay and grolleau, the Loire's two unfancy workhorse red grapes. It's juicy but not basic—with a steeliness and aspects of rose petal, dark cherry, raspberry and a quiet spiciness.

**Julien Braud La Bulle de l'Ouest Pétillant Brut:** Although Braud is the winemaking mind behind the popular Forty Ounce series, he has more serious things at hand—even if the cartoon cowboy on this label (don't ask) implies otherwise. This is sparkling Muscadet, basically, with that leesy quality, a toasty walnut-skin aspect and Champagne-like depth.

**2015 Haarmeyer St. Rey Sutter Ranch Vineyard Clarksburg Pétillant Naturel:** Craig Haarmeyer is on a mission to bring back not only the good name of Sacramento but nearby Clarksburg, once California's source for lots of great chenin blanc. This is his fizzy version, and a template for refined sparkling chenin. It's refreshing and full of pear fruit and a subtle resin and poppy-seed side. A benchmark for Cali pét-nat.

**2017 Blind Corner Margaret River Rosé Pétillant Naturel:** Ben and Naomi Gould were among the first to bring the [New Australia](#) out to the Margaret River area outside Perth. This is a mix of chenin blanc with not-quite-fermented shiraz juice, which provides the sugar for the sparkling fermentation in bottles. There's a coolness to the peachy flavors, and a fermented tea-leaf herbal side, plus some slightly aggro bubbles (open over a sink).

**2015 La Porte Saint Jean Six Roses Vin de France Sparkling:** Did we mention that the Loire is the epicenter for this stuff? From near Saumur, where Sylvain Dittière captures a great snapshot of the region in this wine. with a mix of chenin, cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc that's silken and smoky and showing a watermelon-rind bite that's right for food.

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## The Essential Fringe

**In the dark heart:** Pét-nat is no longer found only in the hipper-than-thou corners of France, but pretty much everywhere. [Alsace](#), where sparkling *crémant* is a thing, also produces wines like Domaine Geschickt's *Obi Wine*. And even in Bordeaux (!! ) and the Southwest, pét-nat is bubbling away, from producers like Closeries des Moussis (Médoc) and Tour des Gendres (Bergerac). This isn't actually that big a surprise, considering that the area of Gaillac was making *ancestrale* sparkling wine as far back as the 17th century.

**State of mind:** American pét-nat has taken hold not just in larger wine regions, but also in states that don't immediately telegraph "wine country." Examples like Old Westminister in Maryland and Deirdre Heekin's *La Garagista* in Vermont have found a degree of acclaim, not only using *vinifera* but in the case of *Garagista*, American hybrids as well.

**More prosecco than anti-secco:** Even in northeastern Italy, whence comes oceans of meh prosecco, the pét-nat spirit lives. The *col fondo* method of prosecco completes the sparkling fermentation in bottle, often as a continuation of the original fermentation. A related trend can be found to the west in Emilia-Romagna, where red lambrusco is getting similar reconsideration.

**Sekt appeal:** Germany and Austria are increasingly turning out naturally minded versions of *sekt*, or sparkling wine. Bottles from producers like Brand (Pfalz) and Strohmeier (Steiermark) are in high demand.

**Natural revival:** The Loire appellation of Vouvray has long stood for pretty much the direct opposite of pét-nat: cheap, industrially made bottles of sparkling supermarket chenin. But a handful of keen producers, including Mathieu Cosme and Michel Autran, are rethinking how sparkling Vouvray should be made—and following the example of their savvy friends across the river in Montlouis.

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