

Wine is a Food Group: Sparkling wines with stories that pop

Gwendolyn Elliott Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
Dec 21, 2025

1 of 2

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Skål Sparkling Rosé, Gård
Courtesy

The holidays are a time of stories, from the annual traditions that inform the year-end celebrations, to memories made and shared with friends and loved ones, year after year.

Many of us turn to sparkling wine this season for special gatherings and festive toasts. Yet any good sparkling wine worth its hefty bottle weight comes with a story of its own. Here is a look behind the label of a few local sparklers and the story that makes them pop.

All wines below are currently available for purchase and tasting at the tasting room. They also share another detail: All are made in the traditional method, where the secondary fermentation that creates the bubbles takes place in the bottle, a labor and time intensive process that results in rich and complex flavors.

2023, The Four Stars Blanc de Blancs, Kinhaven

The “four stars” of this wine refer to Kinhaven founders’ Lisa and Terry Davenport’s four children, who, according to the website, are “each unique in their temperaments and talents, but loved equally for their shining light.”

Terry, a corporate marketing executive, designed the Kinhaven wine label that tells the story. Creatures and symbols all have meaning — a badger (formidable, patient, one-time winery resident), a rabbit (prosperity, abundance), and other fairytale-like characters are set in a pastoral scene with the quartet of celestial siblings twinkling above it all.

The north star of this particular constellation, however, is the eldest Davenport, Kasey, who makes Kinhaven wine with her husband, Cameron, and is so foundational in the family folklore that Cameron took her last name when they married.

It is often the role of eldest daughters to wield outsized influence in the family, yet Kasey channels hers with care and precision. The Four Stars is a single vineyard (Celilo) single varietal (chardonnay) wine the winemakers have produced since 2021.

Kasey notes that Celilo vineyard in the Columbia Gorge is one of the oldest plantings of chardonnay in Washington state, and is renowned as a “beautiful site” for the varietal.

“For our sparkling program, it’s picked on the earlier side. We like the acidity of the site, and the minerality it provides as well. We did extra brut on this last vintage so it’s very dry. Very crisp.”

It’s a wine the whole family enjoys together, that speaks to the family connection, too, Kasey says.



The Four Stars Blanc de Blancs, Kinhaven
Courtesy

“There’s a lot of love, a lot of patience, in the bottle.”

2021 Falx Blanc de Noirs, Dusted Valley

Winemaker Chad Johnson himself looked to the stars for Dusted Valley’s sparkling wine.

A turn of the century woodcut carving inspired the label you see on most Dusted Valley still wines: Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture, holding a sheaf of wheat and wielding a scythe, or “falx,” during harvest.

The Falx label offers a nocturnal view. Inspired by aboriginal dreamscape art—and designed by Johnson’s sister, a graphic designer—“It’s literally a reinterpretation of that [scene], looking out the back of the winery at the Blue Mountains and Breezy Slope vineyard at night,” Johnson says.

The particular pattern of stars depicted is the actual harvest sky from 2019, the first year Falx was produced. Here, Ceres tenderly reaps rows of chardonnay, pinot meunier, and pinot noir, the traditional Champagne grapes. Each row is denoted by a different color.

Interestingly, the wine contains only 100% pinot noir, sourced from Breezy Slope in Walla Walla.

“I was thinking ahead,” Johnson says, noting that chardonnay and pinot meunier have been planted and will be used in future vintages of the Falx.

The single varietal approach seems to be working just fine for now. A combination of low intervention techniques like avoiding filtration, using native fermentation in low oxygen settings, and picking grapes at slightly-higher-than-usual sugar levels for sparkling wines, “for flavor development,” Johnson says, allows for the wine to be complex and layered.

“People love it,” Johnson says. Reportedly, his sister is a fan, too.

2023 Sparkling Roussanne, Isenhower

About a half mile west of Dusted Valley, Brett Isenhower has been making a 100% sparkling roussanne since 2012, after a friend encouraged him to make a sparkling wine. But why roussanne, a variety rarely made into the style?

At the time, Isenhower says, most of his winemaking experience was with viognier and roussanne. And the first thing you need to make sparkling wine is still wine. “I thought, well, in France, there are some Crémants made from roussanne. So, I decided to do it.”

Over the years, Isenhower dialed in the process, learning how roussanne’s unique features, like bigger berries, flavor profile (underripe mango), and suitability for different fermentation vessels (settling on stainless steel) affect the finished wine.

“Bubbles magnify everything,” Isenhower says.

The 2023 vintage was different from the others. For the first time, the grapes came from Blue Mountain vineyard in Walla Walla. (Previously, they were sourced from Olsen vineyard in the Yakima valley.) “I’m getting sick of driving all the time,” says Isenhower, who was driving at the time. “I’m trying to buy more Walla Walla fruit.”

It's also the first year he has not adjusted the final wine with additional sugar — the dosage — making the wine “brut zero,” Isenhower says.

“Adding sugar changes the bubbles, too. With brut zero your bubbles are a little more naked and tend to fade a little more.”



Dusted Valley Falx
Courtesy

This slight tweak has amped up the wattage of the latest vintage, Isenhower says.

“It’s electric, it’s got great acid. It’s probably the best food wine I’ve ever made.”

2020 Blanc de Blancs, Grosgrain

Further down Old Milton Highway, winemaker Matt Austin of Grosgrain has recently released the second vintage of his Blanc de Blancs sparkling wine.

Among other things, Grosgrain is popular for its Pétillant Naturel, or Pét-Nat, style of sparkling wine. But the 2020 Blanc de Blancs is the culmination of nearly five years of effort and patience, and a project with special significance to Austin and his wife and Grosgrain co-owner, Kelly.

“At our wedding we served a champagne for the toast and had a case left over afterwards,” Austin says. “We planned to have a bottle every year to celebrate our anniversary, but ended up drinking them all in a matter of weeks, which is indicative of how much we enjoy sparkling wine.”

To make their own house style, the Austins found inspiration in the wine they love — “longer aged vintage champagne,” Austin says. The grapes, 100% chardonnay, come from a block of French Creek vineyard that is “a cooler site down near the Yakima river developed specifically for sparkling wine. Whereas most vines have two cordons, the vines there have four, so it produces a little larger crop that slows down the ripening because we’re looking to have less ripeness with the sparkling wine.”

The wine was then bottle aged for nearly four years in contact with its lees (spent yeast), a process that produced a “creamy kind of texture in the bubbles, a lot of depth in the flavors, and a toasty, brioche kind of thing,” Austin says.

Now the Austins have a sparkling wine at the ready for all of life’s special occasions, and Austin adds, “even the most ordinary of days.”

2022 Skål Sparkling Rosé, Gård

Matías Kúsulas is the only winemaker on this list who doesn’t profess an outward love of sparkling wine.

“I’ll be honest with you, I am not a sparkling wine person,” Kúsulas says.

Be that as it may, Kúsulas has chops to convince you otherwise.

Since 2021, when he assumed duties as head winemaker at Gård, Kúsulas has gathered buzz from numerous publications as one of the state’s top winemakers. The previous vintage of this wine alone took home a gold medal at the Great Northwest Invitational, earned a “platinum” rating from Great Northwest Wine, and 93 points from Wine Enthusiast.

The grapes for this wine are managed by Kúsulas, too — he serves as head viticulturalist for Gård’s estate property, Lawrence Vineyards, in the Royal Slope, an appellation in south central Washington. “I grow this fruit, I’m involved in every single aspect from grape to bottle,” Kúsulas says.

This rosé of chardonnay and pinot noir comes from Solaksen vineyard, a higher elevation site at over 1400 feet that “sees less growing degree days than other vineyards, and extreme diurnal shifts that help to retain acid,” Kúsulas says. For the cool, slow-ripening 2022 vintage, the fruit was cropped heavy to slow ripening even more, resulting in a wine that is complex, and “very lifted ... all about acid and texture.”

Kúsulas himself prefers still white or red wine when given the option, but you could say he takes a rose-colored view making this fizzy pink drink. He willingly admits that “everyone loves sparkling wine.”

Gwendolyn Elliott is a writer and editor in Walla Walla and was the first recipient of the Allen Shoup Memorial Fellowship for wine writers. Her website is gwendolynelliott.com.