

KORBEL®

CALIFORNIA CHAMPAGNE

Production and the Method Champenoise

Champagne. It christens ships. Toasts love. Celebrates happiness. Harmonizes with food. No other beverage is more versatile, fun or intriguing.

Champagne owes all of its superlative attributes to its unique characteristic -- bubbles! Bubbles are key to the quality of the champagne. Although there are several methods used to make sparkling wines -- wines with bubbles -- there is only one method that world class producers use to make fine champagne: méthode champenoise.

The méthode champenoise (may-tud shom-pun-woz) is the only process that Korbels has used in its 125 years of champagne-making. French for "champagne method" classic méthode champenoise is the traditional champagne-making process developed by winemakers in the Champagne region of France during the 1700's and 1800's.

Méthode champenoise champagnes are those sparkling wines produced with the second fermentation taking place in the bottle (when the bubbles form), followed by a long, intensive process to rid the wine of yeast sediment before final corking. Excellent champagne, however, begins long before a single drop of wine is produced.

Quality In The Vineyards

Korbels vineyards lie along the sloping hills of Sonoma County in California's Russian River Valley. Its sandy soil, foggy mornings and long, warm growing season make it

an ideal area for growing grapes. Here the vineyards yield grapes high in acidity, which is a valuable and desirable attribute for champagne grapes.

Harvest

As late summer stretches into fall, Korbels begins harvesting its champagne grapes -- primarily Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Chenin Blanc and Colombar. Grapes are hand-picked -- just as the Korbels did 125 years ago -- when their "brix," or sugar content, has reached 18-20 degrees.

After the grapes are crushed, only the free run juice of the first press is used for Korbels champagnes. The process takes 45 seconds from skins to grape juice or "must." This quality-control step ensures freshness and keeps the must from picking up unwanted color from red grapes. The must is stored in cooled tanks as soon as possible to avoid oxidation. The first or primary fermentation takes place in these temperature-controlled tanks.

After this first fermentation is complete, the wine is clarified and then aged in either oak or stainless steel. During the clarifying time, the wine undergoes "racking," a natural clarification that removes sediment by transferring the wine from one cask to another until it is judged by Korbels champagne master to be a fine still wine. At Korbels, a percentage of the wine from each harvest is held back and blended with the following year's wine to lend consistency of quality

and taste to every bottle of Korbels champagne.

Blending And Liqueur De Tirage

Before all of the magic of the second fermentation can begin, a critical and challenging process must take place: the blending of the still wines to create a cuvée. The cuvée resulting from the blending process, or l'assemblage, is bottled with a precisely measured amount of liqueur de tirage, a solution of sugar and yeast. Every bottle of Korbels champagne is created with special proprietary yeast strains used exclusively by Korbels. It is important to add the precise amount of liqueur de tirage to achieve the desired effervescence in each bottle of Korbels. Too much liqueur de tirage and the bottle explodes; too little and the champagne is flat.



This turn of the century scene shows the original discharging room at Korbels. Left to right: Discharging, dosage, corking and applying the wire head.

"The method champenoise is the only process that Korbels has used in its 125 years of champagne making."

Production continued...

Méthode Champenoise

The secret to the perfect, pinpoint bubbles seen in every glass of Korbel champagne is the méthode champenoise. The exacting steps of this seemingly magical process begin as the still wines undergo a second fermentation. Because the second fermentation takes place in the same Korbel bottle that will be opened and enjoyed, the carbon dioxide becomes well integrated with the wine. This process produces smaller bubbles that rise more slowly and last longer than those in champagnes produced by other methods. Remember, the smaller the bubbles, the finer the champagne!

Two other methods are used to create sparkling wines: the transfer method and the Charmat process. Both methods, however, are considered less exacting than méthode champenoise because of the way the wine is handled during and/or after the second fermentation. Unlike méthode champenoise, the transfer method transfers the wine to large tanks for filtering after second fermentation in the bottle. Sparkling wines produced by the Charmat process are fermented in large tanks six to eight weeks. Soon after that, the yeast is filtered out and the champagne is put into bottles.



Riddling

After the second fermentation, Korbel champagnes are aged on the yeast for up to four years, depending on the cuvée style. The bottles are arranged in special automated racks for the process of riddling, or remuage, which brings the dead yeast down to the necks of the bottles so that it can be removed.

In the past, riddling was done by hand at wineries -- a costly, time-consuming method that left the champagne's quality vulnerable to the imprecision of the human hand.

During riddling, the bottles were slowly tipped down to a vertical position over a period of four to five weeks and slightly turned once each day to work the sediment down to the cap.

In 1966, Adolf Heck invented and patented the first automatic riddling machine. Korbel has continued to improve upon Adolf's idea, and today the winery has a highly specialized riddling, bottling and packaging production flow that produces a champagne of consistent high quality. At Korbel, the bottled cuvées are placed upside down in shipping cases that are arranged on automatic riddling racks.

These racks gently vibrate the bottles in their cases for one hour, four times a day. During this period of vibration, the cases are gently rocked every two minutes, which eventually works the yeast down into the neck of the bottle. Thus, the process of riddling is carried out with great precision and consistent quality is ensured.

Disgorging, Dosaging and Finishing

After riddling, the bottles are delicately dipped, neck down, into a brine solution at zero degrees. This freezes the dead yeast into a plug. The bottles are placed upright and their temporary caps are removed. The pressure in the bottle is just enough to push out the yeast plug without losing any significant amount of champagne.

A mixture of sugar and wine is added -- liqueur d'expédition -- to replace liquid lost during disgorging and bring the sweetness of the Korbel champagne up to a desired level. This process is called dosage. After dosage, each bottle is corked. At Korbel, this entire process takes only 25 seconds, allowing the product an absolute minimum exposure to air.

Korbel champagnes are held at the winery for one month after corking to allow the cork to soften and the liqueur d'expédition to blend thoroughly.

Korbel Méthode Champenoise Champagnes

All Korbel champagnes are produced using the méthode champenoise process and are proudly labeled with the designation "Fermented in THIS bottle." Sparkling wines and champagnes produced by the less quality-oriented transfer method and Charmat process are labeled "Fermented in The bottle" and "Bulk Method" respectively.