

# Bubbly With Friends

*But Even With the Deepest Friendship, the Wine Must Be Good*

By LETTIE TEAGUE

Jan. 16, 2014 10:15 p.m. ET



Rita Jammet, in her Harlem apartment, looks over wine lists and menus from La Caravelle, a French restaurant that she and her husband, Andre, ran for more than 20 years. Today, the Jammets own La Caravelle Champagne, and their bubbly is served by many of the city's best-known chefs. *Craig Warga for The Wall Street Journal*

Although New York is a destination of men and women determined to make their mark in the world, the true measure of success in this city is an ability to succeed over and over again. To triumph just once isn't enough.

Take, for example, Rita and Andre Jammet. For more than 20 years, the married couple ran one of the most successful restaurants in Manhattan (after lives spent in Paris, Geneva and Beirut). Then, 10 years ago, that restaurant, La Caravelle, closed for good. ("Everything changed after 9/11," Ms. Jammet said.)

Afterward, the Jammets launched an entirely new business: La Caravelle Champagne. I sat down with Ms. Jammet this week at Benoit restaurant to find out more.

That restaurant had special resonance, said Ms. Jammet, because Benoit's chef and owner, Alain Ducasse, was her very first customer when she began selling her Champagne. It was a great starting point. As Ms. Jammet said: "Alain Ducasse really put us on the map."

Other important customers soon followed: Country and Beacon restaurants (now both closed) as well as prominent retailers such as Morrell Wines and Sherry-Lehmann Wines & Spirits.

Morrell was actually selling La Caravelle Champagne before the restaurant closed. Private-label wines were once commonplace in restaurants, though as Ms. Jammet noted: "Now the house wines are made by the sommeliers themselves."

There may be no bigger fan of New York sommeliers than Ms. Jammet, who seems to be on a first-name basis with just about all of them—from "Pascaline" at Rouge Tomato to "Aldo" at Le Bernardin to "Patrick" at Pearl and Ash. "The new generation of sommeliers have adopted me like a member of their family," Ms. Jammet enthused. (Actually, "enthusiasm" is too mild a word to describe the sort of passionate feeling that the exuberant Ms. Jammet exudes.)

It's particularly fortunate that Ms. Jammet has developed so many close relationships, since she can sell only to people she knows. "I don't cold-call anyone. I wouldn't know how," she declared.

But even with the deepest friendship, the wine must be good. When Ms. Jammet approached Aldo Sohm of Le Bernardin, he told her that even though they were good friends, he would buy the wine only if it met his exacting standards. Fortunately, it did. Mr. Sohm features La Caravelle Cuvee Nina on his wine list from time to time. (La Caravelle Champagne also appears on wine lists of restaurants such as Daniel, Marea, Eleven Madison Park and Marea.)

The Cuvee Nina is one of three nonvintage Champagnes in the La Caravelle portfolio; there is also a blanc de blancs and a rosé. All three are produced by De Castellane Champagne house in Epernay, France. They are reasonably priced (under \$40 retail) and are crafted to be accessible and to pair well with food. It was important to the Jammets, as former restaurateurs, to have a Champagne that was food-friendly, said Ms. Jammet. "We call it Champagne de Copains," she said. ("Champagne to be shared with friends.")

It was Ms. Jammet's idea to add a rosé Champagne to the repertoire. But she had to work to convince her husband it would sell.

"I told him there would be a big market for rosé, but Andre was skeptical. He said: 'Men will never drink a pink beverage.'"

Ms. Jammet prevailed, and sales of La Caravelle rosé now account for 25% of their total. (Mr. Jammet is more of a "background" figure with La Caravelle Champagne. "It's really Rita's business," he told me in a phone call the next day. Mr. Jammet is the dining-room manager of the Metropolitan Club.)

The La Caravelle rosé that I drank at Benoit was certainly friendly—soft and approachable and agreeably fruity—but it cost \$21 a glass. Not exactly cheap.

I wondered if Ms. Jammet thought that Champagne cost too much. I told her that I found it almost impossible to find a good bottle under \$100 on a wine list in New York. Ms. Jammet acknowledged it could be a challenge and that she wished Champagne was more affordable, but she didn't necessarily have an opinion about pricing, as she "did not want to tell her clients what to do."



A selection of La Caravelle champagne and menus.  
*Craig Warga for The Wall Street Journal*

Ms. Jammet spends a great deal of time with her clients—in fact, she dines out at their restaurants almost every night of the week. "You have to support the people who are supporting you," she said, rattling off her future dining destinations—all in Manhattan.

Although La Caravelle Champagne is sold in several states outside New York, Ms. Jammet doesn't do much business in the boroughs outside Manhattan. But she just hired a salesperson for Brooklyn, so that may soon change. And Ms. Jammet, with her Champagne de Copains, will doubtless acquire many new friends.

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