

FESTIVE DRINK

By Adam Perkal



Ten Great Wines for the Christmas Holidays

Choosing wines for the holidays isn't difficult, but does require some thought. The best wines for the Christmas celebrations are all-purpose wines.... crowd pleasers. They should be fresh and medium-bodied, in order to combine with a wide range of foods, and be neither too sweet nor too dry. Keep it simple... it's not a time to experiment with unusual flavours.

When my house is full of hungry guests, I'm concentrating too much on the rest of the meal to worry about wine service. For this reason, I suggest choosing younger wines, since they are easier to handle and don't throw off sediment. Keep the decanters for more intimate events. At larger parties, I also like to serve wine in magnums (1.5 litres)... they save time and, most importantly, announce to all that it's a special occasion. Two normal bottles somehow don't say the same thing. And rather than serving a wide range of wines, I usually offer just one or two favourites - generally a white and a red.

If there is one thing that is worth worrying about, it is service temperature. Make sure you have some ice buckets for the whites, and don't be afraid to use them for the red wines as well, if you find the room temperature has heated up too much. Five minutes in ice, and most reds are back to an ideal 15° to 18°. Before the party, keep the wines in a cool corner of the house and don't forget to put the whites in the fridge the night before.

Sparkling.

Champagne. Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Quality Brut. (30 to 35 euros).

With the crisis in full-swing, I was considering suggesting a less extravagant sparkler, such as Italian Prosecco or a good Cava from Catalonia. But after all, this is the season to splurge, and if not at Christmas, then when? My suggestion for this year is to try one of the many "petites maisons" of champagne, instead of relying on the same multinational brands that we see everywhere. Ployez-Jacquemart, a family-run estate since 1930, makes top-quality wines from only premier cru and Grand cru vineyard sites. They are located in Ludes, a tiny village in the hills between Reims & Epernay and their wines are traditional blends of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir & Petit Meunier, aged for more than four years on their lees before disgorging and bottling. This wine is fresh, clean and exceptionally well-balanced, with a fine and persistent sparkle. It combines well with just about everything (one reason that champagne is so popular), but especially savoury starters. 12% vol.

Dry Whites.

Spanish Valdeorras. Val de Sil Godello "sobre lias" 2008. (9 to 11 euros).

The finest Spanish white wines today come from the cool, northwestern region of Galicia, and perhaps the most interesting are those made from a local grape variety called Godello. This is a rich wine with potential for ageing, made from grapes grown on the slate slopes above the village of Villamartin de Valdeorras, Ourense. It has both floral and citrus aromas and a buttery texture, ideal when served with turkey, duck or the Christmas goose. 13.5% vol.

South African Chardonnay. Neil Ellis Stellenbosch Chardonnay 2007 (15 to 18 euros).

A rich and creamy chardonnay from one of South Africa's best producers. Nice tropical fruit aroma and with just a hint of wood, a portion of this wine has been barrel-fermented to add texture and complexity. A great choice for Chardonnay lovers & a bargain when compared to similar wines from Burgundy. 14% vol.

French Pouilly-Fumé. Masson-Blondelet "Les Pierres de Pierre" 2006 (20 to 22 euros).

Sauvignon blanc is becoming one of the most popular white wine grape varieties, mostly because of its mineral & rich aromas, forward fruit and bracing acidity. They tend to be excellent "food wines," combining especially well with oysters, smoked savouries and most famously, goat cheese. Pouilly-Fumé is only produced from the rocky soils of the Loire Valley, south of Paris, and should not be confused with Pouilly Fuissé, a white Burgundy which is made from Chardonnay grapes. 12.5% vol.

Dry Reds.

Spanish Rioja. Sonsierra Vendimia Seleccionada Crianza 2006 (8 to 10 euros).

The wines from Rioja have changed dramatically over the past decade. Once light-bodied and heavily oaked, Rioja today is often deep purple in colour, resembling wines from the new world. Mixed consumer reactions to this trend have brought some of the winemakers back a little closer to their traditional style, and this wine, made by a producer in the town of San Vicente de la Sonsierra, is an excellent example. Ripe cherry fruit, toasty oak with some minerals as well, this wine is fresh and easy to drink. Ideal with fattier meats, such as sausages, hams and lamb chops. 13.5% vol.

Italian Piedmont Red. Pico Maccario Barbera d' Asti Lavignone 2007 (9 to 11 euros).

At the heart of the Piedmont, Asti offers fresh, medium-bodied wines loaded with perfumed red cherry and strawberry fruit. This example has an edgier herbal and dark cherry note and would be excellent served with gammon or turkey. 13.5% vol.

Spanish Ribera del Duero. Anta Natura A10 Crianza 2005 (10 to 12 euros).

A modern-style Ribera, blended from 80% Tempranillo, 10% Merlot & 10% Cabernet Sauvignon grown near the village of Villalba del Duero in old Castile. Concentrated, yet classily made, it is a wine redolent of spices, berries and black plums. Ideal with roast suckling pig. Movie fans may also like to know that this winery was recently purchased by film star Antonio Banderas and will soon be renamed Anta Banderas. 14% vol.

Majorcan Red.

Galmes i Ribot Som dels Cavallers 2007 (10 to 12 euros).

A rich blend of local and international grape varieties, such as Syrah, Cabernet, Merlot, Callet & Fogoneu all grown in vineyards around the village of Santa Margalida. A classic Mediterranean-style red with powerful, spicy fruit complemented by herbal and balsamic aromas. 12 months oak barrel ageing. Ideal with stews, grilled meats or steak & kidney pie. 14.5% vol.

Chilean Cabernet. Pérez Cruz Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 (10 to 12 euros).

The best Chilean Cabernets make an excellent alternative to Bordeaux, being slightly lush and with hints of mint or eucalyptus. This superb example is packed with perfumed ripe plum aromas and is a fine match for cold meats and roasts. Pérez Cruz is one of the hottest new wineries in Chile, racking-up high scores and acclaim in the specialized press. They are a family-run business and are located in the upper Maipo valley, close to the capital, Santiago. 14.5% vol.

Dessert & After Dinner.

Sweet Spanish Sherry. Lustau San Emilio Pedro Ximénez Sherry. (18 to 20 euros).

Dessert wines add a festive feel to any meal, so why not include a classic "Solera" reserve to the holiday line-up? This opulent dessert wine combines a Christmas-flavour of spicy raisins & dried apricots with chocolate and old oak. It is concentrated and very rich. 17% vol.

All of these wines are available at Isla Catavinos, a specialised wine store on Calle Guillem Massot in Palma, tel 971 760 585.