

WINE

Spread cheer with our holiday wine picks

By DALE ROBERTSON

WINE WRITER

There are many reasons to buy wine this time of the year, and this was a tasting that tried to speak to all of them, from gift-giving to celebrating to capping off a great meal with special people.

And, at the risk of sounding immodest, I think we batted 1,000.

You're going to love the prices on our recommended sparklers, which were either proseccos or cavas save for the Asti Spumante Moscato from the Barefoot folks, which can be had for

less than a 10-spot. Even our favorite port, the ever-reliable Fonseca Bin 27, more than held its own with several vintage offerings (including Fonseca's) at a fraction of the tariff. Of course, the latter are going to age for decades, and judging them now is almost pointless.

As for bottles you'll want to put in a pretty bag with a bow on it, it's hard to say "Happy Holidays!" any louder than with a bottle of Beringer's Private Reserve cab, a cult favorite of mine long before the term existed and, again, an excellent value at \$95 compared to the

kind of wines with which it competes. The Ravenswood old vine zinfandels hold up vintage after vintage as well and, although I chose to feature the Sonoma, it's splitting hairs to pick one over the other.

A terrific new find for most of us was the Pirouette, an impressive red blend from Washington's Columbia Valley that has some superstar wine-making talent behind it. Also, be on the lookout for a couple of new releases from another Columbia Valley comer, Greg Harrington's Gramercy Cellars. The panel awarded no higher

score (9.3) than what we gave Harrington's 2007 cab, but good luck finding a bottle.

However, his "The Third Man" Rhône-style blend and the Walla Walla Syrah are well worth trying, too. A roster of our other recommendations can be found at chron.delish.com today or 29-95.com, where the list will be archived. For the latter, click on "bars/clubs," then scroll through the entries for "Our holiday recommendations."

Prices are what Spec's charges when you pay cash, but many are available elsewhere.



RECOMMENDED

Fonseca Bin 27 Port

- **Overall score:** 19.2 (9.2 for quality, 10 for value)
- **Our tasters:** All but one recommended it with a high score of 9.5 and four scores of 90 or higher. "Super ripe ... chocolate notes."
- **My score:** 8.8. There has never, ever been a better port for the price in the market. With extracted plummy fruit, chocolate notes and a vintage-quality elegance, it always exceeds my high expectations.
- **Buy it:** \$22.99



2007 Ravenswood Old Vines Sonoma County Zinfandel

- **Overall score:** 19 (9 for quality, 10 for value)
- **Our tasters:** Received a unanimous recommendation. "A round wine, full of cedar and ripe berries."
- **My score:** 8.8. Ravenswood has been making zins from Sonoma grapes for three decades now, and this wine speaks to its success. Full-bodied and laden with ripe fruit, it's a perfect wine for the season.
- **Buy it:** \$14.17



2007 Raymond Family Classic Cabernet Sauvignon

- **Overall score:** 19 (9 for quality, 10 for value)
- **Our tasters:** Received a unanimous recommendation. "Ripe black fruit with pencil lead and a strong finish."
- **My score:** 8.8. A blend of cabernet grapes from Napa County (70 percent), Sonoma County (24 percent) and Lake County (6 percent), it's a cheaper cousin of Raymond's all Napa cab but obviously not a lesser one. You'll love how well the wine pairs with food despite its jammy character.
- **Buy it:** \$16.08



Barefoot Spumante

- **Overall score:** 18.9 (8.9 for quality, 10 for value)
- **Our tasters:** Received a unanimous recommendation. "Tangy, tasting of cantaloupe."
- **My score:** 8.6. Mine was the lowest score, but I'll cede to the majority here and admit it's a remarkably pleasing effort — fruity with good acidity — for the price.
- **Buy it:** \$7.99



Freixenet Cordon Negro Brut

- **Overall score:** 18.8 (8.8 for quality, 10 for value)
- **Our tasters:** "Fresh and lively."
- **My score:** 8.9. I guessed this crisp, dry, smooth sparkler wine should cost \$25-plus. That says it all. No wonder the Cordon Negro can claim to be the most imported sparkling wine in the world.
- **Buy it:** \$8.89



2006 Pirouette

- **Overall score:** 16.5 (9 quality, 7.5 value)
- **Our tasters:** All but one recommended it. "A big wine with a delicious finish."
- **My score:** 8.9. This unfiltered, unfined Bordeaux-style blend (except it has a small syrah component) from small lots in Washington's Columbia Valley is a collaboration between three famous names — Philippe Melka, Agustin Huneeus and Allen Shoup — on behalf of Long Shadows Vintners. Chock full of luscious dark fruit.
- **Buy it:** \$49.99

