

Judging by all the festivities I see happening around me, I reckon we are smack bang in the middle of the holiday season. Perhaps you are looking for a special wine to offer as a gift? Or, a simple easy-drinking wine to drink at a holiday party? To help navigate the myriad of wines on offer I've put together a tidy selection of wines that I tried over the past year, and found particularly tasty.

As those of you who read my column regularly might imagine, I taste a lot of different wines each week. While some can be disappointing, so many more than I have the capacity to write about on a weekly basis, are downright delicious. So, in preparing this post I read back through all my tasting notebooks from the year to pull out the gems that never made it into one of my weekly posts.

To make it easy to navigate I've divided my wine selections into

- a. *party wines* and
- b. *special wines to offer as a gift*

Holiday Party Wines

A few quick tips for choosing holiday party wines.

1. Remember it is all about the party, not about the wine (unless it is a gathering of like-minded wine geeks).
2. A festive holiday party is generally not the occasion to bring out the obscure attention demanding wine - keep it simple.
3. Don't obsess about having 'the' perfect wine - wines are much more versatile than many would lead us believe.
4. And as usual keep within budget.

White Wines

- **2010 Pfaffl "pepper" Grüner Veltliner, Lower Austria, Austria, \$14** - Crisp, lively, unoaked. Lots of bright citrus and stone fruit with the quintessential nuances of cracked white pepper.
- **2007 Mathern Niederjaiser Rosenberg Dry Riesling, Nahe, Germany \$16** - Expressive on the nose. Crisp, juicy and refreshing with a lot of flavor intensity. Exotic citrus, apricot, guava and hints of honey. Medium bodied, well balanced with lovely earthy minerality.
- **2010 Kim Crawford, Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, New Zealand, \$15** - I was so pleasantly delighted when I tasted this wine. So many Marlborough Sauvignon Blancs have become so monotone and one dimensional. This is a delightful wine. Not terribly complex, but tasty, refreshing, flavorful and well defined. Zippy, citrus, tropical and stone fruit with grassy and spicy notes.
- **2010 Martín Codax Albariño, Rías Baixas, Spain, \$14** - A nice alternative to Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Grigio and so dependable. Lively nose. Juicy, crisp with ample favors of ripe stone fruit, grapefruit and a lovely floral note. Nice minerality on the palate.
- **2010 Wild Horse Viognier, Central Coast, California \$17** - Nice expressive nose - guava, lychee, apricot with hints of spice, vanilla and white flowers. Smooth, rich texture with ample bright flavors. Quite broad, juicy and easy drinking Spicy kick on the finish.

Red Wines

- **2009 Chateau d'Oupia, Minervois, France, \$11** - Deeply colored with attractive aromas of ripe black fruit. Fairly full-bodied and expressive flavors on the palate - blackberry, raspberry, black plum with notes of clove, spice and pepper. Nice grip to the tannins.
- **2009 Rioja Vega, Rioja Spain, \$11** - One of only four wineries allowed to use the Rioja designation in their brand name because the winery was established back in 1882, before the region was demarcated. Soft, easy drinking wine. Jam-packed with juicy ripe fruit. Smooth texture, soft ripe tannins and plenty of flavor. A great party choice.
- **2009 Bila-Haut Côtes du Roussillon Villages, France \$16** - From the Charpoutier house, this wine is a blend of Syrah, Grenache and Carignan. Deeply colored. Nice expressive nose of black cherry, wild forest fruits, spice and clove. Fairly fleshy texture, robust with supple tannins. Lots of tasty flavor and nice spicy finish.
- **2007 Raymond Merlot, Napa Valley, Reserve Selection, California - \$17** - A sure crowd pleaser with plenty of personality. Plummy, tobacco, creamy vanilla aromas. Smooth with velour like tannins that caress the palate. Ample bright fruit. Nice complexity and fairly long finish.
- **2008 Hogue Cellars Merlot, Columbia Valley, Washington - \$11** - Washington has earned quite a good reputation for Merlot and this one does not let the side down. Fresh and fruit driven with aromas and flavors of ripe plums, cherry jam, blackberry, baking spices, hints of toffee and vanilla. Smooth, supple tannins.

Holiday Gift Wines

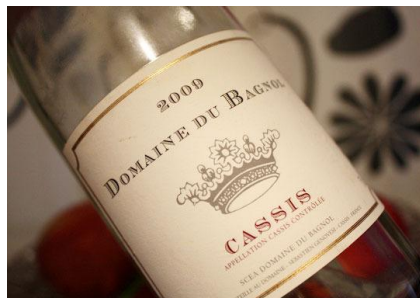
Admittedly, some of the wines on my party selection list would also make for nice gifts. When choosing a wine to offer as a special gift I usually try to make a connection between the wine and the person on the receiving end. It is all too easy to buy solely on price. Too often when buying a gift we focus on the price, as the only measure of how much it will be appreciated. When I am choosing a wine to gift I try to think about the receiver's personality, interests, culture, heritage and so forth. For example, if I know that the person has Greek heritage I might try to find an interesting Greek wine.

In my opinion, searching out the obscure, less well known wine is a good strategy when choosing a wine to gift. It often enables you to get a better wine for less money. And, it shows that you've thought about it, rather than picking the well-known brand that is highly merchandized in the store.

I am not against well-known, famous wines for gifting. In fact if money is no object, many of the best have great cellaring potential and can be enjoyed 5-10+ years from now. Additionally, you may be buying for someone who prefers classic wines such as Bordeaux, Burgundy or even a Napa Cabernet. So with that here are a few worth considering.

White Wines

- **2007 Louis Jadot Meursault, Burgundy, France, \$47** - A dependable lovely wine from a well-established reputable négociant. Focused nose, fresh hazelnut, melon and orchard fruit, considerable minerality, toffee and subtle spice. Broad flavored, creamy mouth feel. The lively acidity and minerality provide plenty of steely backbone. Good depth of flavor and long length. Minerality shines on the finish.
- **2007 Schloss Reinhartshausen, Erbach Schlossberg (Monopole) Riesling Rheingau - Erstes G wachs , \$50** - From the legendary 15-acre Schlossberg vineyard, which is a monopole (owned in its entirety by Schloss Reinhartshausen). Expressive, fragrant nose. Very focused with huge minerality. Concentrated fruit and great intensity and depth of flavor on the palate. Layer after layer unfold. Complex, dense and taut texture. Racy acidity adds a steely backbone. Impressive, elegant with great length.
- **2009 Domaine du Bagnol, Cassis, France \$30** - For someone who loves to try something different. Cassis is one of the prettiest villages along the French Mediterranean Coast. This is a blend of Marsanne, Clairette and Ugni Blanc. What I particularly love about this wine is its savoriness, minerality and incredible sense of place. You can almost taste the sea air. Fairly full-bodied and complex with layers of flavor - garrigue, spice, citrus peel, apricot pith. Fleshy texture and very long finish.
- **2004 Trimbach Cuv e Fr dric Emile Riesling, Alsace, \$65** - I had been saving my only remaining bottle of this wine, which we recently opened to share with special friend visiting from out of town. The sheer deliciousness of the wine far outweighed the feeling that my last bottle was gone. After all wine is for sharing! Poise, focus, definition and complexity were the first words to come to mind when tasting this wine. Multi-dimensional and showing some wonderful flinty, fusel developed notes.
- **2008 Lynch Bages, Blanc de Lynch Bages, Bordeaux, \$70** - From one of Pauillac's best red wine producers comes this truly lovely white. White Bordeaux accounts for such a tiny proportion of all Bordeaux wine produced. It is a style that I am particularly fond of. This is a blend of S millon and Sauvignon Blanc and it is barrel fermented. Laden with laden with flavor, dimension and complexity. Lovely balance of vibrant fruit, well-integrated oak and strong minerality throughout.
- **2009 Cobb Chardonnay, Joy Road Vineyard, Sonoma Coast , \$70** - Cobb is probably more well known for their splendid Pinot Noir wines - so this is something a little more unusual to offer someone who has a particular penchant for elegant California Chardonnay. Focused and well structured. Layer upon layer of ripe flavors open up, both in the glass and on the palate with every sip. Great breadth and depth of flavor - orchard fruit, citrus, lemon curd, caramel, Asian spice and a delicious earthiness.



Red Wines

- **2009 Georges Verney, Sainte Agathe Côtes du Rhone, \$35** - Probably one of the best examples of Côtes du Rhone you can find. 100% Syrah from Northern Rhone vineyards (Condrieu area). I was reading about Georges Vernay in Gerald Asher's new book "A Carafe of Red" and made a mental note to seek out this wine. Imagine my surprise when two days later, at a friends for dinner, she produced same-said bottle, which she had bought when she was in the Rhône area this summer. Every drop was as delicious as I expected it to be.
- **2005 Arnaldo Caprai, Sagrantino di Montefalco, Umbria, Italy, \$56** - A powerful, tannic, full bodied wine with great ageing potential. Made from the Sagrantino grape, it is deeply colored and has an incredibly dense nose of ripe black fruit, dried wild cherry, wild herbs, spice, tar, smoke and clove. Fleshy, rich and demanding of attention on the palate. Striking mineralality adds another dimension to the wine. This is a wine that I would always decant a few hours before serving to allow the many layers of flavor open up.
- **2007 Numanthia, Toro, Spain, \$60** - In the fall I had the pleasure of meeting Numanthia winemaker when he was in New York City, and taste through the Numanthia wines. It was many years since I had tasted them, and I admit I was fairly bowled over. The over-arching thought that struck me was how the wines combine great power with elegance and finesse. As well as the eponymous Numanthia, the winery makes two other wines, the delicious Termes (\$30) and if money is no object, the iconic and powerful Termanthia (\$200). The 07 Numanthia is made from very old vines - Tempranillo (called Tinto del Toro in Toro) It is deeply colored, dense, layered, contemplative, with enormous concentration of fruit and flavor Robust and full-bodied, yet refined and complex. Wonderful savory minerality prevails. Lot of complexity. A special gift. Could drink now but best if cellared 5+ years.
- **2007 Silver Oak, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, \$100** - Expensive and one of the well-known cult Napa Cabs. That said, I was extremely impressed by the this wine. Still very young and best cellared for a few years, it is very concentrated and full-bodied. While powerful, it is not really a blockbuster, showing welcome restraint as well. Complex with many layers of deep, dark fruit- cassis, blackberry, plum, Asian spice, anise and vanilla. Definitely a keeper.
- **2004 Muga Rioja, Selection Especial, Rioja, Spain \$36** - Mainly Tempranillo with Garnacha and small amounts of Graciano and Mazuela in the blend. A reserva wine that is aged in oak cask for 28 months before release. Deeply layered nose of ripe berry fruit, earth, leather, clove, licorice, hints of vanilla and smoke. A big, full-bodied wine with suede like, supple tannins that frame the wine really well. Expressive flavors that slowly unfurl with time in the glass. Lovely, savory finish.
- **2008 Buty Columbia Rediviva Phinny Hill Vineyard Estate Grown, Horse Heaven Hills, Washington, \$48** - Small production, not much more than 35 barrels of this wine are made. This is a Cabernet dominant wine with Syrah as the blending partner. Full-bodied, firm structured, powerful wine with tons of flavor and fruit. The Syrah nicely fleshes out the more angular Cabernet. Ripe, supple tannins frame, adding grip and form to the wine. Rich, seductive texture. Layers of vibrant ripe fruit - black plum, blackberry, cassis, sweet spice, pepper, vanilla and a lovely savoriness that contrasts the sweet fruit.

This is a small cross-section of the wines that I was fortunate enough to taste and enjoy . Hope it is helpful. Until next week, enjoy!

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