

## Stuff some stockings with bottles of wine

By MIKE DUNNE  
*Special to The Bee*

Along with strands of colorful lights and sets of Nativity figures, sales of wine peak during the year-end holidays. But you may be asking what to buy, whether as a centerpiece for a Yuletide soiree or as a gift for your favorite wine geek.

### When the holiday open house is relaxed and casual

If you pour solid, interesting and modestly priced representatives of the three most popular varietals, you aren't likely to disappoint your neighbors. Plus, throw in one outrider sure to surprise the resident wine authority in the gathering.

**Chardonnay:** What could be more fitting than the Little Black Dress 2012 California Chardonnay (\$10)? Despite the too-cute-for-words brand and the low price, this is a surprisingly faithful chardonnay, with sweet tropical fruit, a thread of lavender in the scent, and downright lip-smacking, mouth-watering flavor. Yes, it's a little soft, but that's welcome in a cocktail wine.

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The wine so impressed judges at the San Francisco International Wine Competition this summer they gave it a double-gold medal, meaning every member of the panel agreed on its merits.

**Cabernet sauvignon:** The Trivento 2013 Argentina Mendoza Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$12) is dry and lean, but with enough sweet, youthful and lively fruit that

it nevertheless can be sipped leisurely on its own, though it also has the acid and backbone to stand up to the sorts of spicy meatballs and cheesy popovers that almost always circulate among guests at an open house.

**Merlot:** All we ask of merlot is that it be pleasantly plump, sunny with juicy fruit from the cherry and plum families, and flexible enough to be savored on its own or with food. The Hahn Winery 2012 Central Coast Merlot (\$14) has all that and a couple of things more – more brisk acidity and a more lingering finish than generally found in the varietal. At the San Francisco International Wine Competition this summer it was found to be the best of all the merlots entered.

**Outrider:** One of the more vexing mysteries in the wine world is why valdiguié as interpreted by J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines of San Jose isn't more popular. The name could account for that. Valdiguié is a French grape variety once erroneously thought to be gamay. Little of it is planted in California, but it grows exceptionally well in the cool Arroyo Seco district of Monterey County. J. Lohr has been sticking by the wine for years, carefully tending the vines, precisely harvesting the grapes, and then treating them gently, producing a light, fruity and lively wine suggestive of Beaujolais. The J. Lohr 2013 Monterey Wildflower Valdiguié (\$10) is a brilliant ruby-purple, its spunky and seductive fruit delicately sweet (.65 residual sugar) and its finish prickly with a dash of pepper. Serve lightly chilled.

### When the dinner party is more serious and formal

The table is set with heirloom china, the candles are lit and the aroma of roast duck, prime rib or leg of lamb is competing with the smells of cedar and cinnamon. All that remains to be done is the greeting of guests and the opening of wine.

**Chardonnay:** What, chardonnay with red meat? Listen, chardonnay is so popular that you run the risk of coming off as a particularly dense host if you don't have a bottle on the table. Besides, several chardonnays are being made these days with such forceful fruit, rich complexity and substantial build that they can go with fairly big cuts of dark flesh. Exhibit A: The Rodney Strong Vineyards 2012 Chalk Hill Estate Chardonnay (\$25) is packed with the sort of authority, complexity and persistence that suggests that the price should be twice what it is. The wine is classic California chardonnay, its crafting including barrel fermentation, stirring of lees and aging in French oak, so it's rich, creamy and opulent, yet it also is graceful and spirited thanks to its moderate alcohol (13.5 percent), zesty acidity and a finish that just won't give up even long after the glass is empty.

**Cabernet sauvignon:** For the rare combination of character, elegance and spirit in a wine, look no further than the Smith-Madrone Vineyards & Winery 2010 Napa Valley Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45), a seamless take on the varietal distinguished by lively red-fruit flavors, an intriguing thread of herbalness, firm but unin-



timidating tannins and refreshingly crisp acidity. The cool 2010 vintage was challenging, but brothers Stu and Charles Smith have been tending vines high on Spring Mountain for more than four decades and have learned how to roll with whatever weather is dealt them.

**Zinfandel:** The DeLoach Vineyard 2012 Russian River Valley Saitone Vineyard Zinfandel (\$45) shows with both muscle and grace that zinfandel has a place at even the most elegant and intimate of festivities. This is a zinfandel that delivers with assurance every marker for the varietal – color brilliant and deep, aromas forward and fragrant, flavors ripe yet buoyant, spice that is peppery, oak that is restrained, and tannins that while evident will not get in the way when paired with a succulent cut of red meat. It was one of 54 zinfandels we tasted in the high-price class at the Sonoma Harvest Fair earlier this fall, and one of few that was an honest double-gold medal, meaning that the three judges of our panel agreed spontaneously that it deserved gold, no further discussion needed.

## For the postal carrier, accountant or stylist

The key here, of course, is to know whether someone you rely on and want to thank for their steadiness actually drinks wine. That can be determined discreetly; there's no need to know more, like their favorite region or style, not when the wines are this user-friendly.

**White:** For a wine distinct to the Sacramento area as well as a wine uncommonly upbeat, give a bottle of the snappy and spicy Terra

d'Oro 2013 Clarksburg Chenin Blanc/Viognier (\$16). The chenin blanc was grown in the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta, which is gathering acclaim for its reliable way with the varietal, while the viognier was grown in Amador County, where Terra d'Oro is based. The result is delightfully fruity, suggesting peaches and pears. It's balanced and nimble, with revitalizing acidity. All those attributes added up to best-of-show white-wine honors at the Calaveras County Fair commercial wine competition at Angels Camps this spring.

**Red:** The Francis Ford Coppola Winery 2012 California Rosso Red Blend (\$12) represents a theme that courses through "The Godfather," that a gathering of family and friends calls for readily accessible and hearty food and wine. Don't be intimidated by the wine's dense color and earthy and herbal veins – it's one really refreshing and welcoming wine, a double-gold medalist at the San Francisco International Wine Competition. For the record, the wine is 29 percent zinfandel, 25 percent syrah, 25 percent petite sirah and 21 percent cabernet sauvignon.

## For someone starting to develop an interest in wine

**White:** If they wonder why they are hearing so much chatter about pinot grigio, give them a bottle of the Beringer Vineyards 2013 California Founders' Estate Pinot Grigio (\$10/\$12). They could drink it now or they could hold it until next spring or summer. Regardless, as soon as they sip that first glass they will understand why pinot grigio is generating so many fans for

its liveness and refreshment. At the Long Beach Grand Cru this summer, the Beringer won a gold medal for its forthright tropical and apple fruit fragrance and flavor, its tantalizing spice and its zesty acidity.

**Red:** Year in and year out, the sister wineries Shenandoah Vineyards and Sobon Estate in Amador County turn out the region's cleanest, most faithful and best priced zinfandels. Take your pick of two that performed exceptionally well on the competition circuit this year, either the generous and frisky Shenandoah Vineyards 2011 Amador County Paul's Vineyard ReZerve Zinfandel (\$24), best zinfandel and best-of-show red wine at the Calaveras County Fair this spring, or the lean, long and peppery Sobon Estate 2011 Amador County Rocky Top Zinfandel (\$17), which to my palate was the liveliest of several gold-medal zinfandels in the final sweepstakes rounds of the San Francisco International Wine Competition this summer.

## For the wine geek who thinks he or she already has had it all

**White:** The Harbor Winery 1986 Amador County Mission del Sol (\$40) is likely the last of its kind, a style of dessert wine conceived by Charles Myers at his upstart West Sacramento winery in 1972. It is amber-hued, high in alcohol (nearly 23 percent), lilyingly sweet (8 percent residual sugar) and memorable not only for its history but for the range and focus of its fragrance and flavor. You get butterscotch, caramel and nuts in the wine as well as the sunny tang of citrus fruits. It's a holiday dessert all on its

own, or paired with traditional pies or persimmon pudding. Available only at Corti Brothers.

**Red:** Each fall, the Lake Tahoe Autumn Food & Wine Festival pairs about two dozen of the area's restaurants with wineries, breweries and distilleries to see which team can come up with the most impressive coupling of dish with beverage, as determined blind by a panel of judges. To this palate, one of the more complete pairings was the Senders Winery 2007 Napa Valley Julia's Cuvee Bordeaux Style Blend (\$30) with a dish of lamb and savory bread pudding finished with a sauce of black currants and verjus. Both dish and

wine were powerful yet graceful, with the fresh and distinctive fruit of each eminently companionable. The wine is a rich and supple blend of cabernet sauvignon from the Rutherford district, cabernet franc from Oakville and merlot from Mount Veeder. Senders is a small winery in El Macero. The wine is named for the daughter of the owners, Craig and Karen Senders.

*Wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne's selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. He can be reached at [mike-dunne@winegigs.com](mailto:mike-dunne@winegigs.com).*



Little Black Dress chardonnay



Picasa

The user-friendly Terra d'Oro Clarksburg Chenin Blanc/Viognier



For a casual dinner, look for solid, interesting and modestly priced versions of chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, plus something a little surprising.