



Christmas Wines

Tips from a seasoned Tippler

“Any fool can serve a good wine by spending a fortune on it”, my father used to say, “but the trick is finding something delicious to drink that isn’t ruinously expensive”. He was particularly good at it and I have tried to emulate him.

With Christmas around the corner, expenditure at an annual high and entertaining on a larger scale than normal, I thought it might be helpful to share some things I have found or been introduced to me by Hels, my PA, without breaking the bank.

I am going to list my suggestions in the order in which you might drink them, starting with aperitifs, first course companions and what to have with meat, fish and, of course, Turkey, and finally, what to drink with cheese and pudding.

I know next to nothing about spirits, so if Milk Gin is your tippie or you adore a pre-prandial Mojito, forget my wine choices and go for a bigger hit!

At times of celebration one immediately thinks of Champagne, but when it’s going to be drunk in industrial quantities, one tends to think again. Do you really want to spend between £35 and £55 a bottle for an average Champagne?. Instead, we drink the Crémant de Bordeaux that Jane MacQuitty habitually praises in The Times. It comes from M&S at £10 a bottle (£9 if you buy



Crémant de Bordeaux

six of them!) and has small bubbles, which I like, as I’m prone to sneezing if they get too big and has a creamy texture. In fact, try any of the Crémants from Bordeaux, the Loire, Jura or Bourgogne. They are made the same way as Champagne but don’t come from the region so have to be called something else by French Law, and cost a fraction of the real thing.

If you don’t like fizzy drinks, you might like to try something white and light. I like the grape varieties Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Torrontes, Albarino and Assyrtiko in this category where acidity and minerality are the buzzwords. They are perfect aperitifs.



Marques de los Zancos

In the under £10 price range, try the old favourite Ned, a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc from Majestic and Marques de los Zancos from Tesco, still a bargain at £6.00.

If you want a white wine to accompany food, you will need a grape variety with greater richness and body. This is where Chardonnay comes in and in the affordable price range Macon Lugny from Majestic, Waitrose and others hits the spot.

Now we come to the key moment, what to serve with the turkey? There is little point buying cheap red burgundy (Pinot Noir) as it doesn’t taste of anything and even when you spend £100 a bottle for red wines from this region, it is easy to be disappointed. Last year I recommended Claret (red

Bordeaux) but by way of a change, why don't you experiment with Rioja. I always think it's a good winter wine and has a bit more punch than a Claret.



Lidl sell a very acceptable Reserva, a term which means it has been aged for at least 3 years before release, 6 months of which – usually more, will have been in oak barrels. The term, therefore, denotes superior quality! This wine is called Cepa Lebel 2018 and is a steal at under £7 per bottle. As it's Christmas,

you might want to spoil your guests and serve an even better Rioja. If that's the case, why don't you try Muga Reserva 2020 from Majestic at £17.99 a bottle if you buy 6 bottles. It's a whopping 14.5% but is a very smooth, refined wine and well worth the money.



Next comes the Stilton. It has such a strong flavour that it overwhelms most wines, but not the fortified ones. So, I would recommend Port with this course. A vintage port from a great year such as Fonseca 1994 will set you back £100+. From a less good year, say 2003 you are still looking at spending between £35 and £50. However, if you go for Fonseca's Bin 27, it behaves just like a late bottled Vintage Port. It has a deep colour and intense fruity flavour but because it is a blend of various vintages, is ready for drinking now. This wine is £18.99 at Majestic or £14.49 if it's part of a mixed 6.

Finally, what about pudding wine? I think that most sweet things at Christmas are so sugary – Christmas Pudding, brandy butter, mince pies that to have a sweet wine with

them would be cloying. Open some more Cremant!

However, if you are serving Foie Gras or a pudding that is quite tart, a Sauternes is your answer. Of course, Chateau d' Yquem is by far the greatest of them all, arguably the finest wine from Bordeaux, but at £3-400 a bottle for a recent vintage, you need to have a big cheque book! A bottle of the 1811 was bought for £75,000, making it the most expensive bottle



of white wine ever sold. However, there is an incredibly rigorous selection policy of Yquem and the 150 pickers go through the vines picking the grapes several times, as they ripen at different speeds due to the presence or absence of Noble Rot, a fungus that weakens the skin of the grape to allow evaporation. This makes for a very sweet wine due to the percentage of sugar to liquid. In 1964 the pickers went through the vines 13 times, only for the makers to decide the grapes were sub-standard and declared a non-vintage making no Yquem at all. This doesn't mean they make no wine in such a year. In most years only the best grapes are used and the lesser ones go into a 'de-classified' wine, such as "Sauternes" from Vineyards Direct, which was selling for £16 a half bottle when released. Try and find one of these.

To end on a note of thrift, Christmas is the time to search for that bottle of wine a friend brought you and you know would hate and had put aside for the Tombola at the village fete. This is a gift that is heaven-sent for mulled wine, where the wine is just a vehicle for cinnamon, orange peel, cloves and nutmeg and where the heating process ruins the wine. A glass of mulled wine on a cold winter's day is a thing of good cheer. Enjoy it and have a very Happy Christmas.