



CHEERS!

Drink Well This Holiday Season

by Brian Freedman



I like to think of the holiday season as both the capstone of the current year and a harbinger of the one to come. As such—and perhaps this is the main reason I espouse this philosophy—you’ve virtually required to drink well. After all, who wants to bring the past 300-plus days to a close with the resounding thud of mediocre wine? And who wants to ring in a new season with a less-than-promising glassful?

And while it seems as if summer has just ended, the season of forced jollity and medically (or at least psychologically) necessary sipping is nearly upon us. Time, then, to answer the single most burning question of all: What shall we drink?

Champagne

Not only does Champagne bring its own sense of good cheer whenever the cork is popped, but it pairs brilliantly with the full range of holiday foods that many of us eat. Christmas ham? Bring on the rosé, perhaps a bottle of Perrier-Jouët "Fleur de Champagne" Brut Rosé 2002, with its show-stopping notes of wheat toast and strawberry jam. Hanukkah latkes? Find a good bottle of blanc de blancs; the Jean Milan "Cuvee Symphonie" Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 1998 is a gingerbread-rich, delicate treat if you can find it. Traditional feast of the seven fishes? Some good Brut NV will be perfect—no one will ever be disappointed in Krug or Taittinger. There really are precious few things in the world as life-affirming and palate-caressing as good Champagne, and this is the perfect time of year to remind yourself of that.

White Wine

I always have at least two different styles of white wine available for dinner whenever there are more than four people at the table—it just seems like good etiquette, and it's a great excuse to open bottles and taste with friends over a good meal. For something more aromatic, look for the Gut Oggau Gewürztraminer "Emmeram" 2009. It's one of the single most complex, rewarding bottlings of this grape variety I've ever had the pleasure of tasting, and reminds me of minerals, apricots, white peaches, and fresh brown spices. Also, any time you can find the Robert Mondavi Fumé Blanc "I-Block, To Kalon Vineyard" bottling, snap it up—this is to Sauvignon Blanc as Beethoven is to classical music. I've also been a big fan of the excellent, exciting Chardonnays from Knight's Bridge, especially their remarkable West Block 2009 and Alder Springs Vineyard 2009—both decadent, effusively delicious, and possessed of the potential to mature for many years to come.

Red Wines

From the earthy elegance of a classic red Burgundy to the more assertive power of New World Cabernets, there are enough options for holiday reds to keep you busy (and well-hydrated) all season. As for the former, I tasted the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Romanée-St-Vivant 2004 earlier in the year and loved it. Earth, fruit, and spice are rarely as marvelously (and seamlessly) carried as they are here. Another great choice is the Ravenswood "Icon" 2008, an aromatically complex, supremely evocative wine that tastes of everything from dark fruit to black licorice to scorched earth—with braised short ribs, it'll be a home run. And if you're in a gift-giving mood, esteemed California producer Newton has partnered with highly regarded ceramicist Michael Misner and is offering "The Element," 100 bottle-chiller and coaster sets made with the clay from their Carneros vineyard, each one signed and numbered by the artist.

Sweets

Sweet wines are appropriate throughout the year. But the combination of snow on the ground, the cracking fireplace, and the rich meals of the holiday season somehow make these after-dinner treats seem even more than sensible—they become necessary. If you can get your hands on it, treat yourself to a bottle of Carpineto Vinsanto del Chianti "Farnito" 1992—its nut, orange peel, and flower-honey notes are beguiling. Or head to Santorini and delve into a bottle of the Santo Wines Vinsanto 2004, which pulses with fig paste, toffee, and apricot preserves. Also try the Inniskillin Vidal Ice Wine 2007, an ambrosial combination of white peach, preserved lemon, and warm honey. Anything by Kracher, the legendary Austrian master, is a treat—I love the Auslese Cuvee 2008. And, of course, there's Port, which has always been close to my heart. From the aged tawny Ports of Taylor-Fladgate and the 20-Year-Old "Quinta do Bom Retiro" from Ramos Pinto, to the remarkable Colheitas of Andrensen and the vintage beauties of Dow's and Fonseca, you cannot go wrong with these and so many more.

The only hardship, really, is deciding what to drink first. Best to sit down with a pad and paper, a glass of gloriously refined and limited-production Ron Abuelo Centuria (this remarkable rum smells like Christmas-spiced fig-almond-hazelnut bread and tastes of sweet orange caramels with cardamom), and plan out the season's drinking.

Tough work, I know, but you'll pull through it somehow.

Brian Freedman is a food, wine, and travel writer and wine consultant. He writes for John Mariani's Virtual Gourmet, Philadelphia Style Magazine, and the blog www.UncorkLife.com for Wine Chateau, among others. For more information on his work, or to contact him regarding consulting or speaking, please visit www.BrianFreedmanPhiladelphia.com. You may also read his new blog, The Food, Drink & Travel Report at www.FDReport.com.



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