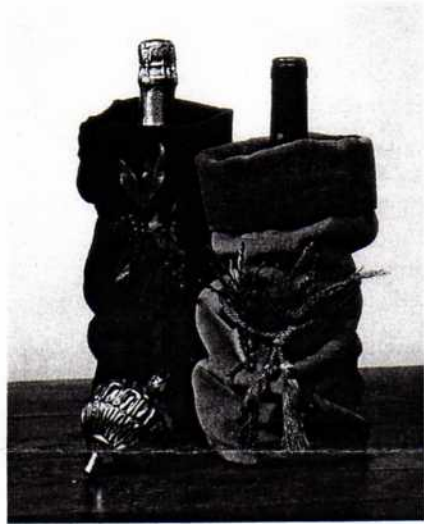


The Wine Guide

BY KAREN MACNEIL-FIFE



Wines for the best of times

■ Since antiquity, wine has been the beverage of celebration, for it symbolizes joy, transformation, and togetherness.

Notwithstanding all this archetypal significance, however, wine has a purely pragmatic side this time of year: it is just about the best answer to the question of what to bring, serve, and give during the holidays. Here are a few sticky seasonal scenarios—and some delicious thoughts on how to solve them.

You're invited to a holiday dinner party and ...

IT'S SMALL AND INTIMATE. This calls for something that will be scrumptious and impressive if the host decides to open it on the spot—a lush Viognier from California. Viognier is a relatively new grape in America, but it already has a cult following. As white wines go, Viognier is expensive, but it's magnificent. Top choices (all 1997): Alban Vineyards Estate, \$28; Calera, \$30; and Pride Mountain Vineyards, \$28.

IT'S A FAMILY GET-TOGETHER. Tap the special magic a family holiday dinner can possess, with a wine that suggests warmth and generosity: a big, velvety-soft Zinfandel. I mean, of course, the real McCoy—red Zinfandel (white Zin is

another animal altogether). Among the most fantastic Zinfandels (all 1996): A. Rafanelli, \$18.50; Folie à Deux Old Vine, \$18; and St. Francis Winery Old Vine, \$20.

IT'S AT THE HOME OF SOMEONE YOU HARDLY KNOW. Best to opt for something classic, such as a top Cabernet Sauvignon from the Napa Valley. Three of the best (all 1995): Shafer Vineyards, \$30; Spottswoode, \$55; and Livingston Moffett Vineyard, \$40.

You're throwing a party and ...

IT'S CASUAL. This is the time to abandon any "rules." Why not go out on a creative limb and put together a group of wines around a theme? One great possibility is "Up-and-Coming Varieties." Did you know, for example, that all kinds of new exciting varieties are being planted in California? Here are some up-and-coming whites (all 1997): Seghesio Family Vineyards Arneis, \$15; McDowell Valley Vineyards Marsanne, \$16; and Monte Volpe Vineyards Tocai Friulano, \$13. Among reds, try Jade Mountain Mourvèdre 1996, \$20; Pepi "Colline di Sassi" Sangiovese 1995, \$20; and Truchard Syrah 1996, \$27.

IT'S ELEGANT. Nothing beats bubbles for making everyone feel special. My favorite moderately priced sparklers: Gloria Ferrer Brut nonvintage, \$15, and Domaine Carneros Brut Cuvée 1993, \$18 (both from California). And if money is no object, consider French Champagne: Billecart-Salmon Brut Reserve nonvintage, about \$25, or Veuve Clicquot-Ponsardin Brut nonvintage, about \$50.

YOU'RE ON A BUDGET. For wines that consistently taste more expensive than they are, head for Australia. Wynns Coonawarra Estate Shiraz (the same as Syrah) 1996, about \$13, has fabulous boysenberry flavors; Rosemount Estate Grenache-Shiraz 1996, about \$8, is packed with juicy berry flavors.

You need a gift for ...

A COLLEAGUE. How about a top Merlot, impressive yet comfortable? Beringer

Vineyard's "Howell Mountain" Merlot 1994, \$45, is supple and rich.

AN OLD FRIEND. I like to give old friends something rare, something I don't think they'd ever buy for themselves. One favorite choice: a mesmerizingly opulent dessert wine such as Chateau St. Jean's "Belle Terre" Special Select Late Harvest Johannisberg Riesling 1994, about \$25 for a 375-ml. bottle.

THAT PERSON WHO HAS EVERYTHING. Yes, but does she have the most famous Cabernet from Italy—Sassicaia? The 1995 costs about \$90. Has he ever sipped Clos de la Coulée de Serrant, one of France's greatest and rarest white wines, from an ancient vineyard planted by Cistercian monks? The 1995 costs about \$40. How about one of the much-talked-about wines out of Spain—the Bodegas Alejandro Fernandez Pesquera Reserva Especial 1994, about \$65?

YOUR PARENTS. They're pretty wonderful after all, aren't they? Maybe one wine isn't enough. Maybe they need a mixed case of fun wines delivered at the beginning of each season—a case for spring, a case for summer, and so on. A good wine shop could easily help you devise such a gift. Or maybe your parents would love a weekend in wine country. There are wineries all over the Western states (not just in California), and most wine-producing areas also boast great restaurants and charming bed-and-breakfasts. Virtually every wine region from Washington state to Santa Barbara has a wineries association that can provide you with information.

AND, BY ALL MEANS, DON'T NEGLECT YOURSELF. When I was a starving young writer in New York, I wore secondhand dresses and walked instead of taking taxis. But every holiday season, I bought myself a case of Champagne as a special treat for the entire year to come. At least once every 12 months, it seems to me, we should all give ourselves something a little extravagant. And wine is perfect—unlike cars, jewelry, and vacations, it's truly an affordable luxury. ♦