

AN INTERNATIONAL TOUR OF WINE OPTIONS FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

by Rich Mauro

The holiday season presents consumers with such a dizzying array of wine choices that it can be intimidating even for knowledgeable wine drinkers. This potential problem, however, is an opportunity for sellers to show a little creativity in the advice they give to customers.

Whether they are planning for a holiday dinner or just looking for something for everyday drinking, I have assembled a list of great wines from recent tastings to get you started. Consider them suggestions meant to stimulate your imagination. Of course, any of these also would make great gifts.

International

AUSTRALIA: How about a wine with dual appeal? Here is one that combines the popularity of Australian Shiraz with the star power of an international collaboration between Tony Terlato, the respected American wine importer, and Michel Chapoutier, a leader Rhone Valley and one of the world's great winemakers. They have teamed up to make wine in Australia. Although this one has a name that may be difficult for Americans to decipher, the 2004 Domaine Terlato & Chapoutier Shiraz "lieu dit Malakoff" delivers quality that should be easy to enjoy.

FRANCE: Although the traditionally great wines of the Rhône Valley (Hermitage, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Côte-Rôtie) tend to be prohibitively expensive, a look to some of the lesser-known appellations can pay dividends, especially when a top producer makes the wine. Two excellent examples are the 2003 Chapoutier Crozes-Hermitage "Les Meysonniers" made from biodynamic grapes and the 2003 J.L. Chave "Offerus" made by one of the great Hermitage producers from grapes grown in the lesser known district of St. Joseph.

ITALY: From north to south, Italy is one great vineyard. So, it shouldn't be a surprise that, while wines from Piemonte and Toscana get most of the attention, there are many exceptional wines throughout the peninsula. One such is Mastroberardino, one of the great names of Italian wine. The family has been making wine in Campania in the shadow of Mt. Vesuvius since 1750. The winery

has been a leader in preserving native varieties, such as Fiano and Aglianico. And the "Piediroso" that is responsible for the 2004 Lacrima Christi del Vesuvio Rosso, famously known as the "tears of Christ."

PORTUGAL: Ever since the days of the British Empire, Port has dominated the Portuguese wine industry. Lately, Port producers have turned their expertise to table wine. In a sign of the promise of these wines, even Bordeaux producers are getting into the act. The Cazes family of Château Lynch-Bages and the Roquette family of Quinta do Crasto have entered into a joint venture to produce a Douro red. The 2003 Roquette e Cazes "Xisto" (pronounced shees-too) is a most impressive inaugural release.

Keep in mind, though, that characterful wines, produced with indigenous grapes at reasonable prices, are available elsewhere in Portugal. It is gratifying, for example, to see that Jose Maria da Fonseca is still producing Periquita from the southwestern coast of Portugal. Periquita was one of my old reliables when I first started drinking wine. Both the 2004 Periquita and 2001 Periquita Classico Special Reserve are good values.

California

CHARDONNAY: Robert Talbott began growing Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey County over 20 years ago, long before the area was a sought-after growing region. His 2003 Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, 2003 Cuvée Cynthia and 2002 Diamond T are pure expressions of the area's cool climate and mineral soils. Not surprisingly, they have become highly sought after by collectors.

Chateau St. Jean is one of the premier wine producers in Sonoma County. The winery makes a wide range of wines of consistent quality and reasonable price. Chateau St. Jean built its reputation on whites, especially two celebrated vineyard-designated Chardonnays. They have been making a Robert Young Vineyard (current vintage 2004) and Belle Terre Vineyard (current vintage 2003) ever since 1975. There is also a 2005 Sonoma County that is a consistent value.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Ever since the Dry Creek Vineyard was founded in 1972, the winery has been a leading

California Sauvignon Blanc producer. They were the first to plant the grape in the Dry Creek Valley and are still a benchmark for the classic herbaceous, citrusy style. And now there are three different choices: the 2005 Sonoma County Fume Blanc, 2004 Estate Fume Blanc DCV3 from the winery's oldest vineyard, and 2004 Taylor's Vineyard from a unique clone of Sauvignon Blanc called Sauvignon "Musque."

OTHER WHITES: Tangent is a new portfolio of wines from the same family and winemaker responsible for the wines of Baileyna in Santa Barbara. The focus is on "alternative whites," meaning not Chardonnay. The initial releases, including the 2005 Pinot Gris Paragon Vineyard and 2005 Albarino are impressive.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Wine writers often talk about regional styles of wines, like the typical Bordeaux is intense, yet elegant. If there is a California style for Cabernet Sauvignon (more flamboyant and fruit-filled), it is exemplified by the Napa Valley. And, to my palate, Beringer Vineyards is the quintessential Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon producer. Although Beringer produces exceptional single vineyard Cabernets, it is the winery's blends — the full-bodied Napa Valley (current vintage 2002) and especially the big, rich and concentrated Private Reserve (current vintage 2002) that I consider the definitive expression of Napa Style.

SYRAH: Rosenblum Cellars may be best known for their multitude of single vineyard Zinfandels but they also have become one of California's premier producers of Rhone-style wines. Here again numerous single vineyard bottlings are available. Among the Syrahs, start with the 2004 Rominger and the 2004 Hillside Vineyards.

OTHER RED: The Phillips family has been farming in California's Lodi area since 1860. After generations sold their grapes to others, Michael and David Phillips now produce wine under seven different labels. In addition to an "Incognito" Viognier and "Earthquake" Syrah, I was impressed with the 2004 "Windmill" Old Vine Zinfandel and 2004 "Incognito" Red Wine, a blend of seven grapes.