

THE WINE GUY

Wine-loving family will enjoy books, bubbly for holiday



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High sparkling wine is associated with special occasions, it seldom is present without a festive accompaniment and less so with an evening of celebration. It is a shame, since the food and brisk acidity of sparkling wine makes for a wide variety of pairings.

When we gather at my parents' house on Sunday for Christmas dinner, I'm planning on drinking bubbly with the family. As with most such occasions, these are multicourse affairs. I am considering a bottle of Pinot Noir from Australia, Italy, and the U.S. to share. (I will list are non-vegetarian otherwise noted.) I will start with Brio (\$9), a lively wine from the Veneto re-

gion of Italy. This Prosecco is a great aperitif but also should do fine with our antipasto, which includes cured meats, vegetables, cheese and shrimp cocktail. It's a tad sweet but has fresh citrus and flowery aromas and clean, fresh flavors.

On the drier side, I'll also have ready a bottle of Pinot (\$12), a popular Aussie sparkler from the Yellowglen Winery with a light red fruit that should especially complement the meats.

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Next comes the main course: pasta with calamari in a red sauce with bread crumbs. This is a challenging dish to pair, but I think I can match it with the fresh red-fruit flavors of the Marquis de la Tour Loire Valley Sparkling Rose (\$9), a unique blend based on cabernet franc. Then I'll pop the cork on a Schramsberg 2002 Blanc de Noirs (\$33) and enjoy its toasty, smoky red fruits.

Since the pace of our eating slows down considerably at this point, I expect that I will need to be ready with a couple of additional bottles to fill the time as we savor the food and conversation. The intense berry flavors of the creamy 2003 Schramsberg Brut Rose (\$40) and the elegant, earthy Taittinger Prestige Rose Brut (\$60) will finish off the entree nicely.

Dessert at our table will include a variety of traditional (at least for us) Italian cookies — some spiked with honey, others based on dried fruit and, our favorite, pizelles. The perfect choice here is the 2003 Schramsberg Cremant (\$35). This delicate, off-dry, dessert-style bubbly is dominated by a grape called flora (a cross between semillon and gewürztraminer), with a significant dose of chardonnay.

I also will have ready Botte-

ga Petalo's "Vino dell'Amore" Moscato Spumante (\$14). From Italy's Veneto, it is delicately sweet, with floral aromatics and fresh peach and apple flavors. And at 7 percent alcohol by volume, fairly low compared with many wines, it will be welcome this late at night.

Any of the above wines would be great for a New Year's Eve meal as well, or, for that matter, Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Another tradition in my family is to gather in my parents' basement after dinner to open gifts from one another. Among other things, this year I have selected two wine books to give to my two wine-loving nieces.

The first is The Oxford Companion to Wine, Third Edition, edited by Jancis Robinson (Oxford University Press, \$65). In the 12 years since its first publication, this book has become the definitive reference for anything and everything wine.

Amazingly, this invaluable edition is even more comprehensive than the two previous versions. It's more than 800 pages long and has 300 more entries than the second edition. And, of course, previously existing entries have been updated.

The other book is "Red,

White, and Drunk All Over: A Wine-Soaked Journey from Grape to Glass," by Natalie MacLean (Bloomsbury, \$24). In a rather stark contrast to the Companion, which is monumental and encyclopedic, this book caters to readers who prefer to learn through storytelling. And MacLean is a good storyteller. She effectively combines a narrative of her personal journey through the world of wine with useful and often entertaining insights about how that world works, as well as how we can better enjoy our wine-drinking experiences.

Admittedly — possibly as a result of my political-science background — I found myself occasionally skimming past the scene-setting and flowery descriptions to get to the information, explanation and analysis (and wishing there were an index).

I found, though, when I exercised the patience to read every word, I was rewarded with an evocative sense of the transformative nature of wine — something that is hard to get from cold facts and figures.

The only question now is which niece gets which book.

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