

## Offerings that get you in the spirit of the season

November 28, 2007

We enjoy a holiday party as much as anyone - but why is it that even when plenty of interesting people, appetizing hors d'oeuvres, and good cheer are on offer, there's often nothing much in the way of good wine? Our best guess is that when there's a houseful to entertain, hosts are likely to fall back on what is both cheap and familiar. For guests, this often means a Hobson's choice at the bar. Let's see, will it be the murky puddle of mass market merlot or the vague, insipid-by-design pinot grigio?

One could argue that all the wines we discuss in this column qualify as party-ready - but that isn't strictly true. Since we go to some length to discover low-priced sips with something like real character, there is a chance that not everything we chat about here from month to month necessarily commends itself to a crowd.

For one thing, wines that perform well under these circumstances are those able to run the gantlet of festive fare - all those salty, sour, and smoky bites that tend to show up at informal, walk-around affairs. It's not as easy as you think. For another, you can't really impose too much adventure on unsuspecting guests. What strikes you as interesting and intriguing, someone with less wine experience may well consider downright odd.

The best course to chart, then, involves finding a few well-made, true-to-place wines with a good balance of bright fruit and lively acidity - bottles your least wine-savvy guests can sip pleasantly over a few hours without making demands on their experience or their endurance. Keeping the alcohol reasonable (around 12 percent) also makes sense.

In the spirit of the season, we offer three whites and two reds as fitting examples of the genre. Each is versatile, nicely put together, and eminently user friendly - and each is something we'd be pleased to spend some quality time with while we wait for coffee and pumpkin pie.

Domaine du Tariquet "Chenin-Chardonnay" VDP des Cotes de Gascogne 2006. An amiable little sip, one of five from this property we tasted and liked. A comparison with their all-chardonnay blend (a Plonkapalooza nominee) suggests it's the chenin providing the modest mineral interest here. Nothing too assertive, but should be a crowd pleaser. About \$10. At Bauer Wine and Spirits, Back Bay, 617-262-0363; Wollaston Wine and Spirits, Quincy, 617-479-4433; Ball Square Fine Wine & Liquors, Somerville, 617-623-9500.

Chapoutier "Belleruche" Cotes du Rhone Blanc 2006. Appealing stony, lemony, floral aromas; fruit component sturdy, persistent, and mouth-filling; nice clean finish. About \$10. At Winestone, Chestnut Hill, 617-264-0393; Martignetti Liquors, Brighton, 617-782-3700.

Punto Final Perdriel Malbec 2006. Fine combination of local character and varietal authenticity; generous sour cherry fruit garnished with herbal notes; firm and shapely. About \$12. At Marty's Fine Wine, Newton, 617-332-1230; Groton Market Wine & Spirits, Groton, 978-448-6387; Andover Liquors, Andover, 978-470-0500.

Graham Beck Robertson Chardonnay 2005. Vibrant, complex aromas showing bright, sweet chardonnay fruit and mineral notes; no wallflower on the palate either - it's biggish and ripe with a profile that veers toward the tropical, but never quite arrives (good news, in my book). About \$12. At Cambridge Wine & Spirits, 617-864-7171; Whole Foods, River Street, Cambridge, 617-876-6990; Harkey's Wine and Spirits, Millis, 508-376-8833.

Cusumano Sicilia Nero d'Avola 2006. Plenty of appealing texture, but mainly that bright raspberry-ish fruit just keeps coming. About \$12. At *Federal Wine & Spirits, Boston, 617-367-8605*; *Vintages, West Concord, 978 369-2545*; *Marty's Newton.*

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