

Cheers! Holiday pours priced to please even Scrooges

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Special to The Washington Post

December 05, 2007

Depending on the crowd, a contrarian attitude doesn't necessarily make for effective cocktail-party conversation. But if you're trying to find wines to complement a range of foods at a holiday get-together, at a price point that won't rob you of the seasonal spirit, that's just the mind-set you need.

The best wines to serve to crowds are lighter-bodied, fruit-forward and food-friendly. And one way to find affordable versions of them is to forget for a moment about the wines that particular reputable regions are known for and investigate their other varietals instead.

Take Gascony, which has traditionally been known for its Armagnac, often made from Ugni Blanc, the most widely planted white grape in France, and Colombard. Three decades ago, Yves Grassa decided to prove its exceptional potential for winemaking, and it clearly has succeeded. The only thing we found lacking in the vibrantly flavored and crisply refreshing 2006 Domaine du Tariquet Ugni-Blanc Colombard Vin de Pays des Cotes de Gascogne (\$8), for instance, is a name that rolls off your tongue.

Two of Grassa's other offerings also provide outstanding quality for the price. The 2006 Domaine du Tariquet Chardonnay (\$12) is not a big, obvious chardonnay; it is more quietly elegant, with tart pear and mild vanilla flavors. The 2006 Domaine du Tariquet Sauvignon (\$10) proved our favorite of the three, beautifully balanced between grapefruitlike acidity and lingering minerality. Both are even better with food, the former with roast chicken and the latter with lighter seafood.

Another region where the contrarian's approach yields success is Australia, better known for shiraz than merlot. While searching for a merlot to recommend, we tasted our way through a dozen humdrum offerings from around the world before pouring ourselves a glass of the 2006 De Bortoli "dB Selection" Merlot (\$9), whose impressive first sip made it clear that our quest was over. The light- to medium-bodied wine from one of the best-value and fastest-improving wine producers in Australia features the juicy fruitiness of mixed berries and plums with a mellow dark chocolate finish.

The 2006 De Bortoli "dB Selection" Chardonnay (\$9) tastes like a juicy peach accented with a hint of caramel, and it shows off chicken or crab cakes.

If that doesn't fit your definition of "affordable," check out the 2006 Banrock Station Chardonnay (\$6) from southeastern Australia, which is a bigger, more tropical-flavored wine with assertive grapefruit and pineapple fruitiness and honeysuckle notes.

With heavier dishes, such as rare roast beef or lamb, the 2005 Penfolds Koonunga Hill Cabernet Merlot (\$10) is a smooth and well-balanced red wine with bright, rich blackberry and plum fruitiness and a velvety texture that's just as delicious with or without food.

At the mention of Riesling, many wine lovers still think of Germany or Alsace before Washington state. But Washington is the source of the delicious 2006 Genesis by Hogue Cellars Riesling (\$12), produced from grapes from the winery's top vineyards. This light-bodied wine tastes like crisp apples tossed with ripe peaches and pears.

When it comes to bubbles, a natural choice during the holidays, France has a lock on the namesake region and the reputation that goes with it. But if you've got champagne taste and a beer budget for your party, look for sparkling wines from elsewhere, such as cava from Spain (NV Cristalino Brut, \$9), prosecco from Italy (NV Zardetto Prosecco Brut, \$12), sekt from Germany, or even a brut sparkler from New Mexico (NV Gruet Brut, \$14).

Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page are award-winning authors of "What to Drink With What You Eat."