

HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY
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TOASTS WITH THE MOST

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APPETITE We seek wine recommends the year 'round, but never more than the during the holiday season. Here's some affordable sipping assistance for ringing in the new year or decking the halls with friends. (Key local shops like K&L Wine Merchants, Jug Shop, Arlequin, Bi-Rite, or SF Wine Trading Co., may stock these bottles or can likely get them for you).

GOING BUBBLY

Nothing says New Year's Eve like champagne, and at a recent Bubble Lounge industry tasting my palate was piqued by a few. I cannot afford **Armand de Brignac** champagne, but if you can splurge, by all means, be my guest. Offered in elaborate, hand-carved bottles marked by pewter labels, attention to detail is paramount. Thankfully, the champagne is as elevated as the package. The **Blanc de Blanc** is buttery with oak, balanced by a chardonnay crispness; the **Rose** is a gently flushed beauty; **Brut Gold** is a showcase blend of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Pinot Menuier. I may never be able to stock my wine cabinet with a bottle — it's often priced at more than \$300 a bottle — but I anticipate the joy of tasting it again.

However, at a ridiculously reasonable \$7.99 per bottle, Spain's **Jaume Serra Cristalino Brut** earned my kudos with earthy, citrus notes and bone-dry finish. The **Cristalino Rose** was also lovely, redolent of mushroom and tart cherry, made with Pinot Noir and the less common Trepate grape.

Cloverhill Sparkling from Tasmania, priced around \$30, is bready and crisp, balanced with honey. **Zardetto Rose Raboso Veronese** and **Zeta Prosecco** are both real values: the Rose is laden with strawberry and vanilla cream, while the acidic Prosecco is food friendly. (Both around \$15).

CIDER SIPPING

With a long American history, cider is low in alcohol and a happy food companion... a welcome change of pace from wine

and champagne. I received a few samples this fall, my pick being an upstate New York duo. **Newton Pippin Original Sin Cider**, is made from single heirloom Pippin varietals, known as "the prince of apples". Uber dry and crisp, it pairs well with a wide range of foods (I rather like it with pretzels and mustard). **Cherry Tree Original Sin Cider** is a winning combo of tart cherries combined with crisp heirloom apples. (Both come at around \$12 per bottle.)



VALUE WINES

A few recent favorites that won't break your bank:

Lasseter Enjoué, Sonoma — This \$24 rose from the just-opened Lasseter Family Winery (you may know John Lasseter as Pixar-Disney's CFO and director of films like Toy Story) is a dry Rhone-style rose, whispering with Mediterranean breezes and flower gardens. It's a Syrah, Mourvedre, and Grenache blend, (*enjoué*, means "joyful, playful"). Although winter might not seem ideal, I'd sip this softly acidic beauty for a winter escape or hold onto it until the days lengthen... my favorite of the four wines at the elegantly understated winery. John, his wife Nancy, and winemaker Julia Iantosca have a love of Bordeaux and Rhone wines, apparent in their blended wines representing varietals from both regions. Purchase online at www.lasseterfamilywinery.com or at the winery (tastings by appointment).



Gerard Bertrand Chateau L'Hospitalet, France — 2007 Gerard Bertrand Chateau L'Hospitalet Reserve is one of the better French bargain reds. At a mere \$8.99 per bottle, this wine from the La Clape region of the Languedoc is fruit-forward, begging to partner with a hearty cassoulet or coq au vin. A blend of 30 percent Grenache, 40 percent Syrah, and percent Mourvedre, its soft spice



is balanced by minerality and subtle oak.

Landmark 2009 Grand Detour Pinot Noir, Sonoma — At \$40, this is Landmark winery's lower-priced Pinot which I actually prefer to its \$65 Kanzler Pinot. It's robust for a Pinot with earthy cherry and minimal oak, but offers enough acidity to be food friendly, unfolding as it sits. This casual, comfortable winery (with bocce ball and small lake) offers tastings and bottles to purchase or online at www.landmarkwine.com.

Mapema Sauvignon Blanc and Malbec, Argentina — Mapema's 2011 Sauvignon Blanc (\$14) and 2009 Malbec (\$19) are both affordable winners. The Sauv Blanc claims 90 percent stainless steel fermentation (10 percent aged in new French oak), allowing the grape's zesty, acidic properties to dominate. Lemongrass hints and a well-rounded finish go nicely with seafood. The Malbec offers hints of cherry and cocoa, with solid tannins from 50 percent new and 50 percent one-year French oak, pairing well with pork, lamb, or hearty grains.



Huge Bear Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma — The name Huge Bear might not be poetic (though I dig the old world, Wild West California label), but the 2009 Sauvignon Blanc (\$25) offers floral melon and citrus notes, soothing with Asian take-out. The 2009 Chardonnay (\$40) is pricey but showcases crisp apple, pear and mineral notes, followed by a butter cream finish. These are small production at merely 150 cases each, fine local retailers at www.hugebearwines.com

Kracher's Cuvee Beerenauslese (pronounced bear-en-ow-SCHLAY-zuh) — I adore Austrian wines and this \$27 blend of Chardonnay and Welschriesling grapes is much more than a sweet finish to a meal. It's a layered, acidic desert wine, dripping with vanilla honey balanced by mineral pineapple and lemon zest. **SPFO**



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