

Festive fizz

15 Dec 2007 by FT but this is a rather longer version

Good fizz is wonderful at any time but this is the time of year when we feel we can indulge ourselves, so I have concentrated on some of its most esoteric and luxurious manifestations. Look for the very appealing 1999 champagnes or the brisker 1998s – 1996s if you can still find them. Any vintage of **Roederer Cristal** 1997 or pre 1991, **Dom Pérignon** 1999, 1996 or the very mature 1990 or **Krug** 1988 would be a superlative treat. Wines are listed upwards by single bottle price or equivalent, although in some cases a mixed dozen bottles have to be bought. Since all these wines are between 12 and 13%, I have not marked their precise alcohol content.

Luis Pato, Maria Gomez Bruto NV Portugal

£8.95 Stone, Vine & Sun

Grapey nose, but dry, clean and appley from one of the most punctilious producers in the Barraida region of northern Portugal.

Codorniu Raventos Brut NV Cava

£8.99 Oddbins, Majestic, Sainsbury

One of the most obviously Chardonnay- influenced Cavas at a fair price for the quality. Dry, lightish but clean. I found it very difficult to extract the cork from this flask- shaped bottle though.

Bird in Hand, Sparkling Pinot Noir 2007 Adelaide Hills

£9.99 Tanners

Very pale pinkish amber. Soft yet dry and definitely reminiscent of the red burgundy grape. Very friendly South Australian from one of the state's cooler corners.

Green Point Vintage Brut 2004 Australia

£12.99 Fareham Wine Cellar, £12.99 Waitrose

The slightly sweeter, simpler non vintage version is only £9.99 a bottle if two are bought from Majestic, but this 2004 is exceptionally well made energetic fizz, with crown cap so no risk of cork taint. The zero dosage (ZD) version is a bit too brutal for me.

Tigress Sparkling Rose NV Tasmania

£13.99 Sainsbury

Extremely pale and delicate pink. Admirably dry. Not desperately persistent but super clean and very well made by one of Australia's most admired sparkling winemakers. This may well be the best value pink fizz on the UK market.

Tesco Finest Premier Cru NV Champagne

£14.99 Tesco

The bottle I tasted most recently seemed to have an impressive amount of development and density, though presumably this is made in such vast quantities by the Union Champagne co- op that I cannot vouch for every bottle.

Waitrose Brut NV Champagne

£31.99 a magnum

Waitrose put an enormous effort into their own label champagnes and this one is fine in a regular bottle but is a particularly good buy in this two- bottle size as it benefits from extra lees contact and concentration. The current cuvée is based on the above- average 2004 harvest. Made by P&C Heidsieck.

Pierre Moncuit Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru NV Champagne

£16.25 (until 31 Dec, then £17.75) H&H Bancroft

An uncompromising aperitif wine from Le Mesnil. Delicate.

André Clouet Grande Réserve Grand Cru NV Champagne

£16.95 Tanners, £19.95 Nickolls & Parks

A lovely wine for the money from a grower in the village of Bouzy. Great Pinot and yeasty perfume. Lovely texture and freshness. Persistent and this could happily be drunk with food. Excellent value.

Tesco Finest Vintage 2002 Champagne

£17.96 Tesco

Even better value than Tesco's Premier Cru described above, with all the concentration of the 2002 vintage. In fact, as an all- Chardonnay wine it's a Blanc de Blancs and to my palate more refreshing than the wine sold, at £17.99, as Tesco Finest Blanc de Blancs.

Clos La Chapelle, Instinct Premier Cru NV Champagne

£17.99 The Sampler

Fantastic value from a small co- operative in the village of Villedommange run by the younger generation of a small group of families. Meunier is the dominant grape in this interesting, fruity, mouthfilling liquid that is a wine rather than A N Other champagne. Lovely texture and smart label.

Waitrose Blanc de Blancs NV Champagne

£19.49 Waitrose

Another P&C Heidsieck wine, made from Chardonnay from 30 different villages. The cuvée is based on the 2000 vintage so the wine has more bready lees contact flavour than most wines at this price.

Herbert Beaufort, Carte d'Or NV Champagne Grand Cru

£19.99 until 31 Dec (regular price £24.99) M&S major stores

A big boned, Pinot Noir- based champagne for drinking with food from an enterprising grower in Bouzy but not such good value as its counterpart from Tanners listed above. The regular **NV Premier Cru** is a flirtatious £21.38 from M&S online only. The Sampler sell the most extraordinary deep strawberry coloured **Rosé** in a flask for £24.99. Not for the faint- hearted.

Larmandier Bernier, Terre de Vertus Premier Cru NV Champagne

£21.95 Lea & Sandeman, £23.75 Vine Trail

Stunningly good value grower's champagne that is bone dry. Vine Trail has others in this extremely superior range.

Delamotte Blanc de Blancs NV Champagne

£22.49 until 31 Dec (regular price £24.99) Corney & Barrow

All Chardonnay from the sister company to Salon in Mesnil on the Côte des Blancs. Not a bad price for at least four years' maturation in bottle. Based on 2002 and pretty broad. It could technically be labeled Grand Cru.

Waitrose Brut Special Reserve 1996 Champagne

£23.99 selected Waitrose

During a stock check at the end of 2005 P&C Heidsieck suddenly found another stash of this wine from the celebrated 1996 vintage made by the late Daniel Thibault, the gifted Charles Heidsieck winemaker. Thus has this vintage both preceded and succeeded Waitrose's 1999 own label vintage champagne. Seems underpriced to me.

Claude Cazals Grand Cru 2000 Champagne

£24.95 A&B Vintners

Like Delamotte and Moncuit, from the Chardonnay village of Le Mesnil. Pale. Gentle nose – nicely balanced – though pretty young on the palate. Good wine but, unlike any wine described so far, this would positively benefit for more bottle age.

Perrier Jouët NV Champagne

£24.99 Oddbins (also, buy 5, get 6th free), £27.99 Majestic (2+ reduced to £20.99 until Feb) £29.50 Harrods, £37.99 (with two glasses) Selfridges This is tasting very good at the moment, in fact the quality gap between it and its vintage dated counterpart, the **1998**, seems less than with many other examples. Tight knit – lovely texture – and rather juicy fruit. Quite substantial. Long.

Gonet Blanc de Blancs NV Champagne

£26 La Petite Maison, London W1

Fine, zesty, aperitif champagne with real attack. No hurry to drink this.

Taittinger Prelude Grand Cru Champagne

£26.95 The Vintage House of Soho, £39.99 (£26.66 if two bottles are bought) Majestic

Mellow and evolved on the nose. Lots of autolysis character. A bit of lemon sherbet on the side. Not the driest but very satisfying.

Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve Mis en Cave NV Champagne

£26.99 Waitrose and Tesco

This is Daniel Thibault's creation that gives the year in which it was mis en cave (put in the cellar to age). The bottling to look out for is the exceptional **Mis en Cave 2003** based on 2002 wines which Waitrose have been stocking. Tesco's Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve **Mis en Cave 2005** is a little less focussed at present.

Duval Leroy 2002 Champagne

£31.99 (£14.99 if two bottles are bought, until 31 Dec) Majestic

This is no great deal at the regular price but at the two-bottle price it is a steal for a wine from this excellent vintage that is both lacy and intriguing but tastes as though it has been tightened by a drawstring.

Pol Roger 1998 Champagne

£35 H&H Bancroft, £36 The Wine Society, £39 Tanners

Very fine, age-worthy wine as usual from this family owned house but the **1999** which will be released in January is even more winning.

Cattier, Clos du Moulin Premier Cru Champagne

£43.46 Calder Wine Appreciation, W Yorks, £55 Wine Raks of Aberdeen

Very intriguing single vineyard wine with surprisingly appetising hints of linseed oil on the nose. Lovely texture and harmony and a reassuringly, convincingly long finish.

Bollinger Grande Année 1999 Champagne

£45 Hennings. £47 Swig, £47.95 Divine Fine Wine, £50 H&H Bancroft, £54 The Wine Society, £75 but £44.99 if two bottles are bought from Majestic

Tight and fine-grained on the nose but pretty evolved on the palate. A lovely drink in the short term but I wouldn't keep it very long. Surprisingly evolved for Bollinger – presumably a reflection of this relatively low acid vintage.

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne 1998 Champagne

£64 H&H Bancroft, £84.95 including ice bucket from drinksdirect.co.uk, £87.01 Four Walls Wine, Chilgrove, and widely available elsewhere

The top wine of a [blind tasting of 18 top quality champagnes](#) two months ago – stunningly taut and refreshing. Compact and intense - like a coiled spring. Very rewarding and should be delicious for at least the next five years too.

Veuve Clicquot, Grande Dame 1998 Champagne

£79.96 drinksdirect.co.uk (reduced to £71.95 if 2 bottles are bought), £85 Connolly's of Birmingham, £87.99 Bibendum

The best vintage of this de luxe cuvée I can remember. Low-key lemon on the nose with some distinctive mineral notes. Almost like a champagne you should decant to get it to express its undoubted qualities a bit better. No hurry to drink this.

Mumm Cuvée R Lalou 1998 Champagne

£99 Selfridges

If **Mumm Cordon Rouge NV** is still a bit dull despite lots of hard work on it, this brand new luxury cuvée has masses of personality - as it should at the price and the fact that it's made only from Grands Crus with strong personalities. Still quite tight but a very good first vintage.

Find lots more champagne tasting notes on purple pages.