Sparkling, sweet and strong wines for the holidays

22 Nov 2004 by JR

For the USA

For the UK

This is the time of year we tend to treat ourselves to the in-between wines. Not just the reds and still whites we drink all the time, but bottles plucked from all points along the strength, carbonation and sweetness spectra. Some of the best current offerings are listed below, grouped by the occasion that demands them.

Palate sharpeners

There are few greater bargains in the world of wine than unbranded sherry. These are wines aged for decades in barrels in Jerez and still cost less than a decent one year-Australian Chardonnay - and much less than a port of the same age.

Berrys Fine Dry Oloroso (£6.75 Berry Bros & Rudd of London SW1 and Basingstoke 0870 900 4301)

This dark, nutty wine from Barbadillo of Sanlucar is certainly an antique and is so dry that it would buck up the appetite at the same time as comforting the chilly.

12-year-old Solera Especial Amontillado (Half bottles £6.99 from major Marks & Spencer stores)

Anyone buying this for the easy sweetness of a commercial sherry labelled Amontillado would get a shock. This example from a 50-year-old Williams and Humbert Solera (12 is presumably the average age of the wine) is pale, taut and excitingly bone-dry.

Amontillado Pastrana, Hildalgo (£17.95 Berry Bros & Rudd of London SW1 and Basingstoke 0870 900 4301)

Lovely rich start and then bone-dry finish providing the same sort of jolt as a Sercial madeira. Perfect for Christmas morning - or indeed any morning after.

Sparkling stuff

Dry fizz is of course quintessentially celebratory and widely served as an aperitif, but there are also champagnes so big and intellectual that they are really better served at a special meal - see below. Deals on champagne abound but be wary of bottles on sale for less than about £14.

Amyot NV Champagne (£14.99 or £8.99 a half, 37.5cl, The Winery of London W9 020 7286

6475)

This mainly-Pinot blend from the Aube is certainly not short of character, though will be too heavy and toasty for some. Not fine but nutty and interesting. You could drink it with food too.

Le Mesnil Blanc de Blancs (£15.95 The Wine Society of Stevenage 01438 740222, £16.99 larger Waitrose stores)

This *grand cru* champagne comes from the co-op in a very fine village on the Côte des Blancs, Champagne's Chardonnay heartland. It may not be as dense as neighbour Salon but it is well made, appetising champagne, a vivacious counterpart to the Amyot style.

Laurent Perrier NV Champagne (£16.95 Lea & Sandeman of London SW10, W8, NW3 and SW13 020 7244 0522 as part of a mixed case)

One of the best deals around as this is serious stuff. Or you could buy an unmixed case of Laurent Perrier 1993 which works out at £24.95 a bottle. Both these wines will continue to improve in bottle for several years.

Nyetimber Classic Cuvée 1994 (£16.95 Berry Bros & Rudd of London SW1 and Basingstoke 0870 900 4301)

English wine's pride and joy. This Sussex wine operation has just been sold by its American owners but wines like this rich, full, complete copy of a mature NV champagne won them serious recognition. I prefer this to the leaner 1993 Blanc de Blancs.

Charles Heidsieck Blanc de Blancs 1982 (£90 Waitrose Direct 0800 188881)

This is probably the only 1982 champagne you can find for this price and is just gorgeous today. Most *de luxe* champagnes at this sort of price need time to show their best but this is an unusually reasonable price for full maturity. Not a penny has gone into fancy packaging, just lovely wine that demands to be drunk.

Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1964 (£495 Harrods of London SW1 020 7730 1234)

Perhaps of minority interest but a quite stunning, relatively recently disgorged bottle straight from Moët et Chandon's own cellars to drink with even strongly flavoured food. It stood up manfully to poached pigeon and date sauce.

With sweet things

Our sugar intake surely reaches an all-year high over the holidays, so why worry about a bit of residual sugar in the wine? Remember that, because of its counterbalancing acidity, the wine should be sweeter than the food served with it.

The Pioneers Raisined Muscat 2001 Miranda Wines (£4.49 or £3.49 if you buy two from Majestic)

Australia can offer scores of great stickie wines, notably Rutherglen's tooth-rotting Muscat, but this is surely the best value (and will be followed by many an imitator and a price hike). Muscat of Alexandria grapes are picked, then dried like an Italian *passito* before being pressed. Pale, extremely tangy golden syrup.

Waitrose Solera Jerezana Rich Cream (£5.59 Waitrose)

You can tell how old this sherry is by the greenish tinge to its tawny. This is lively, tangy and raisiny with both age and life! Congratulations to Diego Romero for producing a perfect wine to drink with Christmas cake or Christmas pudding.

Moscato d'Asti 1999 La Morandina (£9.99/£6.95 a half The Winery of London W9 020 7286 6475)

This featherlight (5.5 per cent alcohol) style of wine is a godsend. It refreshes with its gentle sparkle yet is sweet enough even for plum pudding (though it is better with fruity desserts). Lemon sherbet in the best possible form.

Coteaux de l'Aubance, Les Trois Demoiselles 1997 Domaine Richou (£13.25 per 50cl Haynes Hanson & Clark of London SW1 and Stow-on-the-Wold 020 7259 0102)

Pure Loire Chenin Blanc that is bursting with life and richness.

Coteaux du Layon, Clos des Bonnes Blanches 1999 Domaine Ogereau (£14.65 for 50cl Caves de Pyrène of Artington, Surrey 01483 538820)

Almonds, apricots, and extreme richness. An enormous wine that manages to be beautifully well balanced. A knockout. (Waitrose ask £18.99 for 50cl of a Bonnes Blanches from debut winemakers Agnès and René Mosse).

Escherndorfer Lump Riesling Beerenauslese 2000 Horst Sauer (£30.99 for 50cl Noel Young Wines of Trumpington 01223 844744)

Very exciting, razor-sharp nectar with some lime flavour and great depth. From one of the best growers in Germany's Franken region, it comes in one of those funny flask bottles that fit into no wine rack. No matter; it is already lovely.

Grande Cuvée Trockenbeerenauslese No 10 1998 Alois Kracher (£25.99 a half Noel Young Wines of Trumpington 01223 844744)

The 1998s are some of this genius's finest sweet wines from the Neusiedlersee in eastern Austria. Sixty per cent Chardonnay, 40 per cent Welschriesling and 100 per cent noble rot plus new oak equal a tooth-rotter with seven per cent alcohol and 330g/l residual sugar. The number 10 means it's the vintage's sweet bombshell.

After the meal

In theory, we sit by the fireside after the meal, minimising any additional pressure on our

digestive systems with gentle sips of a fortified wine, traditionally port.

Dow's Crusted Port 1997 (£12.99 most Waitrose)

This thick, sweet heart-thumper may be too exciting for after a copious meal. Decant it as a treat after cold turkey.

Smith Woodhouse 1990 Bottle Matured Port (£15 Nicholas Corke Fine Wines of Holbeach 01406 365654)

Pruny nose with a certain flowery elegance and some maturity already. Decant this wine bottled at four years old (a *real* Late Bottled Vintage) and drink it any time over the next four years.

Taylor's 10-Year-Old Tawny Port (£14.99 Majestic, £16.49 Sainsburys, £16.99 Safeway)

Vigorous and not too sweet.

Henriques & Henriques 15-Year-Old Bual Madeira (£24.77 Edward Sheldon of Shipston on Stour 01608 661409, £26 Selfirdges of London W1 020 7629 1234)

Madeira is so useful because it remains vibrant in an opened bottle for weeks. This is one of the best value: smokey gunpowder whiffs on a gentle, reverberating palate. Much, much deeper-flavoured than the same firm's 10-year-old.

Wiese & Krohn Colheita Port 1965 (£49 Inspired Wines of Cleobury 01299 270064)

Colheita ports are made from a single vintage aged in wood and can be enjoyed as soon as they are bottled. This example, bottled this year, delights with treacle toffee, orange peel, very sweet, full and fat - just the present for an old crone (the word Wiese does not appear on the bottle).

Quinta do Noval Nacional 1960 (£260 Berry Bros & Rudd of London SW1 and Basingstoke 0870 900 4301)

For a real thrill, blow £260 on a bottle of this pale red slice of pre-phylloxera history with a wild, gamey nose and layer after layer of licorice. Amazingly, there is still some tannin here. Although it is delightfully gentle there is a fiery sweetness too. Absolutely no hurry to drink this wonderfully old-fashioned bottle (marked Da Silva). It would make a very special present.

For the UK

For the USA

This is the time of year we tend to treat ourselves to the in-between wines. Not just the reds

and still whites we drink all the time, but wines that are much fizzier, stronger and/or sweeter than our usual choices. Some of my favourite current offerings are listed below, grouped by the occasion that demands them.

Palate sharpeners

There are few greater bargains in the world of wine than unbranded sherry. These are wines aged for decades in barrels in Jerez and still cost less than a one year-old Californian Chardonnay - and much less than a port of the same age.

Several of the most passionate sherry producers currently operating - Hildalgo and Barbadillo spring to mind - are based in Sanlucar de Barrameda, the riverside town responsible for Manzanilla, the tangiest of all sherries and the one that acts best as a true aperitif, a drink to refresh the most jaded of palates and restore appetite. Any Manzanilla is worth a punt (it certainly will not be overpriced) but ask your retailer how long it has been in stock. If the answer is more than four months the wine may have lost its freshness.

Hildalgo's Amontillado Pastrana is one of the finest dry sherries around. Its lovely rich start and then bone-dry finish provide the same sort of jolt as a Sercial madeira. It would be perfect for Christmas morning - or indeed any morning after.

Sparkling stuff

Dry fizz is of course quintessentially celebratory and widely served before meals, but there are also champagnes so big and intellectual, such as most of the luxury bottlings, that they are really better served at the table. Deals on champagne abound as there is still surplus stock in the supply chain which means that most bottles should have sufficient age on them to have rubbed off the green edge of very young champagne.

My favourite producers of classic non-vintage blends, the bread and butter produce of virtually all champagne houses, include Billecart-Salmon, Delamotte (good value), Charles Heidsieck Mise en Cave bottlings, Laurent Perrier, Louis Roederer, Pol Roger, Vilmart.

There are bargains to be had away from the big names, however. Look kindly on anyone who is offering you a champagne direct from a grower - although check that the letters on the label before the numerical code are RM for *récoltant-manipulant* and not RC for one whose wine is made by a cooperative or NM for a producer who, like all of the big names, buys in grapes or wine. CM is the code for a wine made and sold by a co-op and MA means that this is just a label stuck on by a contract bottler.

Vintage-dated champagne from a house with a decent reputation is generally serious and interesting, although you are expected to pay through the nose for the extra ageing these wines are given before release - and even then they can often still benefit from two or three more years in bottle.

For serious luxury, and price tags of over a hundred dollars and more, Dom Pérignon, Krug and Roederer Cristal all make gifts that would thrill even the most hardened wine enthusiast. A new name in luxury champagne to me is Henri Giraud whose 1993 Äy Grand Cru in a simple

but eye-catching bottle is sumptuously creamy.

With sweet things

Our sugar intake surely reaches an all-year high over the holidays, so why worry about a bit of residual sugar in the wine? In fact this is a great time of year to indulge in wines designed to be drunk with desserts - a category strangely neglected by the majority of wine producers in the United States, despite America's notably sweet tooth. Remember however that, because of its inherent acidity, the wine should be sweeter than the food served with it.

Producers in one corner of Australia on the other hand have a long and unbroken tradition of producing top-quality sweet wine. Around Rutherglen and Glenrowan in north-east Victoria, almost on the border with New South Wales, make wondrous wines rightly known as stickies, which until recently were called Liqueur Muscat and Liqueur Tokay depending on whether they were based on Brown Muscat or Muscadelle grapes respectively. Today some law forbids them to use the L-word (presumably reserved for such natural delicacies as Tia Maria and cherry brandy) but they are as dark, rich and satisfying as ever.

The grapes reach sterling sugar levels and the resulting ferments are fortified before being aged in old oak casks in baking hot sheds. The result is a curiously refreshing mixture of the *rancio* of oak ageing with an intense and often grapy sweetness so marked that they can be paired with virtually anything. Chambers and Campbells are two of the most respected producers of these dentists' nightmares; Grand and Rare the two finest categories.

Top-quality sweet sherry such as a fine Pedro Ximenez or Gonzalez Byass' Matusalem is often overlooked as a great-value sweet wine, although it is always high in alcohol. At the other end of the strength spectrum is Piedmont's flirtatiously elegant Moscato d'Asti. La Morandina's 1999 is a fine example.

Of course the classic dessert wine is Sauternes and Barsac but, like everything from Bordeaux, if it is very good it tends to be very expensive. Better value and often more exuberant are the best sweet whites of the Loire valley such as great Vouvrays from the likes of Huet and intense Coteaux du Layon from the likes of Domaine Ogereau's Clos des Bonnes Blanches 1999.

And then there is Germany, whose Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese are miracles but tend to be on the light side for drinking with food. Horst Sauer in Franken is making exciting wines with more guts than most.

And if it is sweetness and guts you are after, you could hardly do better than to track down the Austrian sweet whites of Alois Kracher (imported by Lauber Imports of New York 1 800 247 9243) whose Grande Cuvée Trockenbeerenauslese No 10 1998 is a miraculous blend of nobly rotten Chardonnay and the local Welschriesling. These grapes plus new oak equal a tooth-rotter with seven per cent alcohol and 330g/l residual sugar.

After the meal

In theory, we sit by the fireside after the meal, minimising any additional pressure on our

digestive systems with gentle sips of a fortified wine, traditionally port.

To the most traditionally reliable names of Dow, Fonseca, Graham, Taylor and Warre should be added the much newer house of Churchill run by a youngish Englishman and Niepoort run by the cosmopolitan Dirk Niepoort who believes every bit as passionately in Colheita port (wine from one year aged in wood) as in the Englishman's favourite vintage port (the same aged in bottle).

Dow, Graham and Warre are all owned by the Anglo-Portuguese Symington dynasty but their second-tier labels Quarles Harris, Gould Campbell and, especially, Smith Woodhouse can all be excellent value, especially in vintage port. Their great rivals the Fonseca/Taylor's group has recently acquired port shippers Croft and Delaforce which will provide them with considerably extended vineyard and winemaking capacity.

Perhaps the most exciting development in the port trade recently however has the been the dramatic upgrading of Quinta do Noval under the managment of the AXA insurance group. This shipper's 10-year-old Tawny is one of the most vigorous on the market and its Late-Bottled Vintage 1996 is extremely creditable too.

One of the most exciting wines I have tasted recently pre-dates the AXA régime at this port farm by many years. Quinta do Noval have always bottled two vintage ports, the Nacional bottling being made from a specific top-quality vineyard that is planted with ungrafted vines. Quinta do Noval Nacional 1960 is a thrilling, pale red slice of pre-phylloxera history with a wild, gamey nose and layer after layer of licorice. Amazingly, there is still some tannin here. Although it is delightfully gentle there is a fiery sweetness too. There is absolutely no hurry to drink this wonderfully old-fashioned bottle (marked Da Silva). It would make a very special present and is available at £260 from Berry Bros & Rudd of London SW1 (www.bbr.co.uk) who regularly ship wine overseas.

Madeira, like sherry, is shamefully overlooked. Indeed the Symington family now own so much of it - Blandy's and Cossart Gordon for a start - that it must be rather a handful to steer the good ships Port and Madeira at the same time. The vineyards of this anomalous Atlantic island, a green cone rising up from the ocean many hundreds of miles off Portugal, are in a state of transition. For years the wines were named after the classic vinifera vines grown there but actually made from a much less distinguished hybrid Negra Mole. Labelling has been made more stringent however and any wine labelled Sercial, Verdelho, Bual or Malmsey (local word for Malvasia) should be made from these grapes.

One exciting independent madeira shipper is Henriques & Henriques who own a considerable amount of vineyard. H & H's 15-Year-Old Bual is wonderfully deep-flavoured and rich - just the thing with nuts - or nothing. Madeira is so useful because it remains vibrant in an opened bottle for weeks.