Dry whites for celebrations

11 Dec 2004 by JR

Note that the version of this article printed in today's Financial Times *had to be cut. This is the uncut version with rather more wines recommended.*

This week, some smart dry white wine to serve over the holidays. There is some stunning Chablis around at the moment – virtually any 2002 Chablis has something to give and there are many good examples from older vintages. I have therefore separated Chablis from the other representatives of that classic white wine for entertaining, white burgundy.

There are also some fascinating whites from an entirely 'new' part of France and, having berated Italian wine producers for the high prices of their reds last week, I find myself recommending a raft of Italian whites below, at really quite sensible prices considering how well they are made.

Sauvignon enthusiasts may find themselves even more short-changed than usual as France's 2003s tend to be a bit flabby for my taste and many of New Zealand's 2004s seem to lack excitement – perhaps because of the exceptionally generous yields.

CHABLIS

Sainsbury's Classic Selection Chablis 2003 Dom Ste Celine Brocard £7.99

Jean-Marc Brocard is a quite exceptionally reliable producer of keenly-priced, irreproachable Chablis. Great aperitif.

Chablis 2002 Domaine Christophe £8.79 ABV

Solid, something to chew on here.

Chablis Les Serres 2002 Oudin £9.75 SVS

Utterly correct and lively with green fruit flavours.

Chablis Grand Cru Valmur 2001 Jean Claude Bessin £22.50 Swig

At Grand Cru level Chablis becomes something worth ageing for even longer than a Côte d'Or white burgundy. This one is already pretty dense and majestic – although there is no hurry to drink it. Definitely a wine for food.

Chablis Grand Cru Grenouille 2001 La Chablisienne £35 IC WR

Anyone who seeks textbook top quality Chablis with its lean, cool purity and merest hint of wet wool (yes I know it sounds strange) should look no further, though this is not cheap. La Chablisienne is one of France's finest wine co-operatives and supplies many big UK retailers.

OTHER WHITE BURGUNDIES

Givry Blanc Les Galaffres 2002 Dom Chofflet Valdenaire £9.95 SVS

Exceptionally good value from the Côte Chalonnaise. There is a hint of licorice in this very full, dense wine with a dry finish and no excess of oak.

Mâcon Fuissé Vieilles Vignes 2003 Christophe Cordier £9.99 Maj

Tight, dense, smoky – reduced from £10.99 even for single bottles. A rich undertow here.

Pouilly Fuissé Vigne Blanche 2002 Saumaize-Michelin £13.50 SVS

This producer has a magic touch: delicate winemaking results in a wine from Vergisson that is obviously fully ripe yet has so much natural acidity it is not remotely heavy. Drink or keep.

St Aubin Premier Cru En Remilly 2002 Dom Laure £14.50 SVS

Appellations such as St Aubin and St Romain can provide the Côte d'Or's best white wine bargains in a ripe vintage such as 2002. Classic with a hint of lemon syllabub.

Beaune Premier Cru Pertuisots 2002 Vincent Girardin £186 a case Mont

This works out at a VAT-inclusive £15.50) a bottle which is a very fair price for such a spicy, sleek wine made from vines of the old Henri Clair domaine.

St Romain 2002 Morey Blanc £16.99 Odd

Very tight and refreshing from the winemaker at Domaine Leflaive but not for those who seek weight. The Meursault's for them.

Meursault, Grands Charrons 2002 Dom Michel Bouzereau £228 Mont

Yes, Meursault from Montrachet is what I am recommending – a big, ripe, creamy mouthful at what works out at £19 a bottle.

Chassagne Montrachet 2002 Dom Fernand & Laurent Pillot £22 Swig

Pure lemony flavours, great purity and a bit of bite on the finish. Another food wine. Clean as a whistle but not cheap.

Puligny Montrachet Clavoillon 1999 Dom Leflaive £83.45 magnum L&W

Obviously this will be of minority interest but it is such a treat to find mature, top quality white burgundy available retail that this is worthy of attention.

VAGUELY AROMATIC

Dr L Riesling 2003 £5 Odd

This open, easy introduction to tingly German Riesling is on special offer, from £5.99, at two for £10 until 09 jan. Carefully made at Loosen in the Mosel from bought-in fruit.

Blue Slate Riesling 2003 £7.49 Bib

A more concentrated wine from Erni Loosen's own vineyards, exclusive to Bibendum.

Gobelsburger Grüner Veltliner and Riesling 2003 Kamptal £5.99 and £7.49 respectively WR

Waitrose has a trio of truly excellent Austrian whites at great prices. Schloss Gobelsburg is on a roll, and very kindly selling these fruit bombs for a relative song. Difficult to think of a finer introduction to Austria's racy, dry yet plump white

wines.

Felsner Grüner Veltliner Mossburgerin Kabinett 2003 Kremstal £7.99 WR

Thunderingly good and a great buy from a family firm.

Leasingham Magnus Riesling 2003 Clare Valley £7.99 WR

Is this the giant Constellation group's best-value white wine? Very tight and concentrated yet bone dry. Australia's food-friendly Riesling under screwcap. No hurry to drink.

Tim Adams Riesling 2004 Clare Valley £7.99 Tesco

Nothing wrong with youth when the wine is as lively and punchy as this. Great with anything Pacifically sweet and spicy.

J & K Frostline Riesling 2003 £8.99 Odd

This is South Africa's leading answer to Oz dry Riesling, from an exceptionally high, cool vineyard. Screwcap of course.

Leitz Rüdesheimer Magdelenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese 2002 £9.99 Booths, Oddbins

The opulent, age-worthy face of Riesling, from its homeland Germany. Oddbins Fine Wine has some more (and more expensive) 2002s from this extremely talented young winemaker.

Riesling Grand Cru Eichberg 2002 Philippe Zinck £9.99 Maj

This is a very good price for a top Alsace. Rich greengage fruit with real zing – although two out of three bottles tasted seemed to have had been tainted by poor quality corks.

Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese 1994 J J Prüm £12.99 IC WR

Very rare to find such a mature wine of any colour available retail, but Dr Prüm's wines take an age to open up. When they do, it is worth it. This feather-light yet multi-layered, off-dry wine would make a very special aperitif of serious interest to wine lovers.

Kröver Paradies Riesling Spätlese ** trocken 2003 Martin Müllen £18.50 The Winery London W9 and at Liberty

Who says dry wines do not work in the Mosel? This is very exciting and tense with a strong mineral undertow and amazing length of flavour.

REST OF FRANCE

Moulin de Regain MMII Vin de Table £9.95 Handford, London SW7

Master of Wine Liz Berry and her husband Mike left La Vigneronne to pursue a sunnier life and this wine from ancient, once-abandoned Clairette vines near St Rémy de Provence is the result (along with some olive oil). It could hardly have more personality – honeysuckle with a bit of apple skin - yet is not too potent or heavy. Sip this hand-made liquid thoughtfully.

Pouilly Fumé, Villa Paulus 2002 Masson-Blondelet £10.25 SVS

This is absolutely ready to drink but has much more race and nerve than many 2003 Sancerres and Pouilly Fumés.

Le Soula Blanc 2001 VdP des Côtes Catalanes £22 The Wine Society, £22.95 Berry Bros,, £19.56 ABV

This is probably the most exciting new white wine to have come my way in many a year. From the hills around Maury in Roussillon, and made by Gérard Gauby, it is a seriously, and unexpectedly, fine wine with real minerality and spine. The 2002 and 2003 are increasingly luscious (if perhaps not as long-lived) and available from A&B Vintners, with some magnums too.

Matassa Blanc 2003 VdP des Côtes Catalanes £21.99 Adnams

This is another very exciting full-bodied, ambitious white made very close to Le Soula (see above) by Kiwi Master of Wine Sam

Harrop and South African Tom Lubbe of The Observatory. Grenache Gris. Chock full of character.

REST OF EUROPE

Vernaccia di San Gimignano 2003 Panizzi £6.99 Maj

Tense, exciting wine with good length of flavour.

Soave Classico 2003 Suavia £8.49 Bib, Flying Corkscrew

Tight, nervy, exciting nose is followed by a rich, dense fruit on the palate. Banish memories of Soaves past. This is serious white wine. Good value.

Dom Biblia Chora 2003 £8.49 Booths

Very exciting, refreshing Greek blend of Assyrtiko and Sauvignon Blanc.

Pinot Grigio, Colli Orientali del Friuli 2003 Ronchi di Manzano £9.99 Maj

Full-bodied, fine, serious wine that is lightyears from standard Pinot Grigio.

Fiano d'Avellino 2003 Vesevo £9.99 Lib, Noel Young

Substance and nerve and a fair price for this fashionable appellation. Better value perhaps is Inycon's fullblown varietal Fiano 2003 from Sicily which Booths have been selling for just £4.99. Long and rich yet dry.

Pinot Bianco Haberlehof 2003 Alois Lageder £10.99 Bib

Half Italian, half Tyrolean, Alto Adige can make great white wines such as this grown in the high Haberlehof vineyard and partly oak-aged.

NON-EUROPEAN

Ken Forrester Chenin Blanc 2003 Stellenbosch £6.99 WR

This is far too cheap, and tastes much more like a Loire Chenin than most Loire Chenins. This positively throbs with ripe, honeyed fruit and scents of fresh hay and provides an almost obscene amount of flavour for the money. Forrester has spent considerable time in the Loire from his base in South Africa.

Fort Simon Chardonnay 2003 Stellenbosch £6.99 Tesco

Another ridiculously cheap wine from South Africa. Creamy yet fresh, from well-established vines in the Bottelary Hills.

Blue Rock Semillon/Sauvignon 2003 approx £7 Aitken Wines, Butlers Wine Cellar, Chippendale Fine Wines, Flying Corkscrew, Lib

Good value export label from South Africa's innovative Fairview. Very showy.

D'Arenberg, Hermit Crab Marsanne/Viognier 2003 McLaren Vale £7.99 Booths

Opulent Rhône blend that will not improve but admirably over-delivers on flavour.

Father Oak Vineyards Chardonnay 2002 £7.99 Paso Robles M&S

Mature southern California Chardonnay at a relatively good price.

Shaw & Smith Sauvignon Blanc 2004 Adelaide Hills £9.95 Australian Wines Online, Bennetts of Chipping Campden, Booths, Lib, Villeneuve

Yet another fine vintage from Australia's most consistent producer of Sauvignon Blanc. Drier and more ambitious than most examples from New Zealand's Marlborough.

Yalumba Eden Valley Viognier 2003 South Australia £9.99 WR

The family firm of Yalumba pioneered this perfumed grape in Australia and as the vines age the wines get better and better.

This has real depth of flavour and an appetisingly dry finish.

Rustenberg Chardonnay 2003 Stellenbosch £9.99 WR

Savoury, underpriced fine wine from an impeccable South African address.

Springfield Wild Yeast Chardonnay 2002 Robertson £9.99 Bib, Bin Two, Off the Vine

Another fine South African at half the price of an equivalent white burgundy. Dry and racy.

Eyrie Pinot Gris 2001 Oregon £13.50 Swig, £9.90 Savage Selections of Northleach 01451 860896

Eyrie is the granddaddy of Oregon producers and makes remarkable age-worthy wines. This really does have the perfume of Pinot Gris but with surprisingly minerality and great persistence. Serious stuff.

Zind 2002 £13.99 WR

Fascinating lively, fullblown wine from the gifted Zind Humbrecht in Alsace which has to be sold as mere vin de table because it contains ‘illegal’ Chardonnay with its Pinot Blanc.

Brokenwood, Forest Edge Chardonnay 2002 Orange approx £14 Harvey Nichols, Lib, Moriarty Vintners, Noel Young

Very fine cool climate wine for ageing from New South Wales.

Clayvin Chardonnay 2001 Marlborough £16.95 L&W

New Zealand’s best Chardonnays are increasingly interesting, and can age much better than Chardonnays from warmer wine regions such as much of Australia and California.

Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Furstentum Vieilles Vignes 2002 Albert Mann £17.50 IC WR

Exciting depth of lychee flavour with some ginger notes but a firm, dry finish. Fair price.

Penfolds Reserve Bin 00A Chardonnay 2000 £19.99 IC WR

This blend of cool climate fruit from the Adelaide Hills and Tumbarumba, regions 500 miles apart, started life as a trial blend for Yattarna, the so-called ‘white Grange’ of which early bottlings were a mite disappointing, but this is pretty impressive.

ABV - A&B Vintners*, Brenchley 01892 724977

Bib – Bibendum Wine*, London NW1 020 7449 4120

L&W – Lay & Wheeler, Colchester 0845 330 1855

Lib - Liberty Wines*, London SW8 020 7720 5350

M&S – Marks & Spencer

Maj – Majestic*, prices generally given per bottle if two bottles are bought

Montrachet*, London SE1 020 7928 1990

SVS – Stone, Vine & Sun*, Twyford, Winchester 01962 712351

Swig – Swig*, London W4 020 8995 7060

WR – Waitrose (IC stands for Inner Cellar, generally available only in Canary Wharf and Kingston)

* - minimum order 12 assorted bottles

Ch – Château

Dom - Domaine

VdP – Vin de Pays

Next week – champagne and other fizz