What to give a wine lover

21 Nov 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

What to give a wine lover? The obvious choice is of course our new book *Wine Grapes*, recently described by wine writer Stuart Pigott as 'the only important new standard work of recent times; revolutionary!' Or, if 7lb is a little heavy for you and you'd rather just provide a special card in a purple envelope, you could give a year's membership of our award-winning Purple Pages. See here.

It can be difficult to choose a bottle for a wine fanatic. How can an outsider judge a knowledgeable connoisseur's personal taste or identify the holes in their cellar? I can say, however, that for wine insiders - other than those for whom money is no object (in which case you'd better give them not a wine but a château) - bottles of de luxe champagne are the gift currency of choice. Krug Grande Cuvée or Dom Pérignon are standard issue, but if you would rather favour a family-owned enterprise than LVMH then consider Roederer Cristal, Bollinger Grande Année, or one of Selosse's particularly winey champagnes.

Those shopping in London could take advantage of the special offer in Selfridge's wine department on Fridays and Saturdays up to Christmas Eve. You can buy Moët's new, drier, considerably improved, standard non-vintage blend (called Brut Impérial; the old White Star bottling that used to be sold in the US is no more) in bottles, magnums (containing the equivalent of two bottles), jeroboams (four bottles' worth) or methuselahs (eight) and have them 'personalised with a festive illustration and message written in gold calligraphy and accented with Swarovski crystals'.

But you may wish to give something more durable than a bottle of wine, however sparkling its accent. The new toy of the season for serious wine collectors is a Pourvin, a battery-powered gadget designed by an Australian couple that you hang round a bottle neck to provide a strong light under the bottle to highlight the sediment during the decanting process. Or, you could buy them a candle, and save yourself almost £50 for the silicone version (shown top left) and £130 for the stainless steel model, but this is unlikely to satisfy the gadget lover.

If all that decanting malarkey seems just too, too nineteenth century, there's a neutral stainless-steel filter from the corkscrew specialists Screwpull that will simply filter out the sediment. Be warned though that if it's anything like the earlier model I have, the mesh can rapidly become blocked so you need to pour very slowly.

I'm distinctly *vieux jeu* myself, so what would make my heart beat faster would be yet another antique decanter to add to my collection. (I have never forgotten the entirely correct advice that the ideal present for someone with a dozen chess sets is a thirteenth.) Those specialising in such things include Susan Antiques of Portobello Market, Jeanette Hayhurst of Kensington Church Street (both in London), Laurie Leigh on Oxford High Street, and Delomosne near Devizes.

An alternative would be to buy a well-designed modern decanter. I have always liked Berry Bros' simple bottle (£43) and, especially, magnum (£53) decanters with handsome flat stoppers. These seem rather better value than their new range of wine glasses specially designed for an attack on the American market (so much easier than anything involving alcohol). Berry's glasses are certainly attractive, but at about £50 a pair and designed for hand washing, I find myself preferring Zalto's Denk.Art Bordeaux ones, even though they can be as much as £30 each, partly because they are so explicitly dishwasher-friendly as well as exceptionally thin.

You could personalise a decanter by having it engraved. Ex head of Christie's wine department Michael Broadbent MW recommended the extremely reliable, aesthetically trustworthy Chris Ainslie to me. Chris is swamped by work at the moment but recommends Tracey Sheppard of Winchester, a very highly regarded Fellow of the Guild of Glass Engravers who might just be able to engrave a fine initial or two in time for Christmas.

The problem with decanters though is that, unlike bottles, they do not identify the wine inside them. You can always scrawl something on them with felt tip pen but it is hardly an elegant solution. Some arch traditionalists like to hang the relevant cork round the decanter neck, skewering it on prongs on the end of a chain, typically decorated with vine leaves. You can order such a thing from London's specialist store for wine accoutrements, Around Wine, and the various models cost between £20 and £30 each.

Design devotees would probably prefer ZeBag, a clever carrier for six bottles on their side with a smart and sturdy aluminium handle. This thoroughly 21st century item folds flat when empty and is a sort of Conran-esque alternative to the much more cumbersome, and potentially tights-snagging, six-bottle wicker basket. But ZeBag is £50, considerably more than most of its wicker counterparts.

Much more reasonable at £20, and just the right shape for a stocking filler, is the brand new, cleverly designed and cunningly marketed Corkcicle. It looks like an icicle attached to a cork in a range of designs and, via the freeze gel inside the plastic icicle, cools your wine - either keeping a white cool or chilling a red that is a little too warm (a cardinal sin). It may not be quite as effective but it's certainly more compact than those jackets you also prepare by putting in the deep freeze, and much less messy than an ice bucket. And it's a novelty that the whole family can play with. It was one of Oprah's Favorite Things this year. Need I say more?

Needless to say, corkscrews make some of the most popular wine hardware gifts. Screwpull was the prototype model for those of us looking for something that would reliably extract a series of corks with minimal effort. (The oil engineer who designed them meant them to be of particular use to us feeble women.) The standard model costs about £50, the fancy one closer to £130, and they come with a guarantee - which is just as well for those who pull as many corks as I do, even in this increasingly screwcapped wine era. I should point out, however, that the lever action of the Screwpull can be too forceful for very old corks, for which I usually revert to a simple antique corkscrew with a hollow helix and a particularly sharp point (the two vital qualities in a corkscrew).

An alternative recently designed expressly for old corks, which may easily crumble or be too damp for a more vigorous instrument, is the Durand at a cool £125. This is a combination of a classic screw with, at right angles to it, the two-pronged instrument commonly known in the US as an Ah So or butler's friend, which you insert either side of a cork and wiggle it out without piercing it at all.

The one bit of equipment that can on occasion seem absolutely vital is Screwpull's champagne star at £16, a strong, simple four-pronged twister that fits into the grooves of a recalcitrant champagne cork. It can spell all the difference between frustration and celebration.

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