

Books

A perennial favourite. This year has seen the publication of a number of good books for both the beginner and the expert. For the beginner it's still hard to beat Oz Clarke's *Introducing Wine* (£7 on Amazon). Although this is not a new book, it is written in an easy-to-read approachable style and Oz Clarke is much more knowledgeable than his somewhat blokey style infers. For someone looking to advance up the ladder of wine knowledge, *Cracking French Wine* by Hugh Thurlow Baker (£10 on Amazon) is a great introduction to the complexities of French wine: which grape is grown in which region and how do the wines taste. It is very well structured (betraying the fact that it is written by a management consultant!) and I particularly like his notes on "If you like this then try that". The gold standard reference book is *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Hardcover) by Jancis Robinson (£18 on Amazon), published in a brand new edition. Don't be put off by the title 'Companion', this is more like an encyclopaedia. There have been a number of excellent new detailed regional guides, some of which are completely updated versions of old classics, including: *The Wines of the Northern Rhone* by John Livingstone-Learmonth, *Wine Atlas of Australia and New Zealand* by James Halliday, *Bordeaux: Medoc & Graves* by Stephen Brook and *Greater Burgundy: Chablis, Chalonais, Mâconnais and Beaujolais* by Anthony Hanson. Last-but-not-least is Hugh Johnson's invaluable *Pocket Wine Book*, a wealth of useful detail packed into a really convenient format, one I buy every year and a snip at £10.

Decanters

A particular weakness of mine is decanters. Virtually all wine benefits from decanting and for high-class reds, it's almost criminal not to. However, there are loads of pretty decanters which are functionally useless. My personal favourites come from the firm of Riedel (www.riedel.com) who for me get the mix just right. My current *cris de couer* are their Vinum Extreme Duck and Amadeo Lyra, both striking designs that will fully aerate a wine without losing any of those wonderful aromas.

Wine

What the holiday festivities be without good wine? Around the world, there are huge differences about what we are celebrating, should we be celebrating and what we should eat. However, this is one time of year for no half measures and bargain hunting is put to one side in favour of the tried-and-tested classics.

It's hard to beat champagne as an aperitif. I would push the boat out and go for a good blanc de blancs (made 100% from chardonnay grapes), ideally an NV grand cru or a vintage e.g. Billecart Salmon BdB NV (£35), Selosse NV (£50) or if you're feeling flush, Krug's famous Clos du Mesnil 1990 at £350 per bottle!

If you are having a UK-style meal with turkey, either pinot noir or a full-bodied chardonnay are safe bets. The classic pinot is good Burgundy from the home of the pinot noir grape. At the higher quality levels, the 1997's are the youngest wines that are already drinking well but the 95's and 96's are also good wines. Good Burgundy is not cheap but rather than plumping for the big name grand crus, try a premier cru or even a 'villages vieilles vignes' from one of the top producers on the Côte de Nuits such as Roumier in Musigny, Chevillon or Gouges in Nuits St Georges. Elsewhere in the world, Oregon and New Zealand make very good PN but it is difficult to find decent bottle age. For chardonnay, go for Meursault from Girardin, one of the Montrachet's or a stylish American (not an oxymoron, I assure you) from cooler climates parts of California or Oregon.

If you're having a meaty meal, the classic wine is a Bordeaux blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot. From Bordeaux, the 1996 vintage was a classic on the Left bank. Although the higher quality wines are not yet ready for drinking, there is good value to be had amongst 5th growths such as Batailley, which is just opening up and is sold by the Wine Society at £23. Amongst the 1st and 2nd growths, 1988/89/90 are great vintages, now drinking well but expect to pay at least £60, if you're lucky. I also really rate Ridge Montebello from California; the 1997 is drinking beautifully for about £80. Or go for a Brunello di Montalcino Riserva from 1995.

Finally, something to help the digestion. There are some very good Late Bottled Vintage (LBV) ports for £10+ or 20yr Tawneys at just under £20. But if you really like your port, roll out the barrel and go for a tasty vintage. One can buy single vintage 'quinta' wines from lesser known years or something like Warre 1985 for approx £40. Or if you want something to wash down the fruit cake, Madeira is a much underrated drink and perfectly matches the dried fruit flavours. Try a Bual (not as dry as Sercial which is better as an apéritif, not as sweet as Malmsey) from Blandy or Henriques & Henriques.

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