

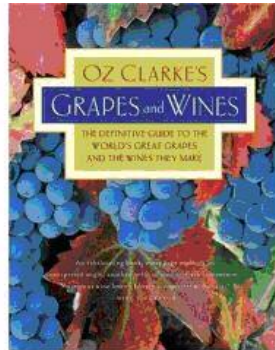
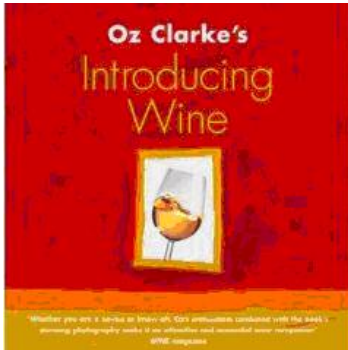
## Seasonal Gifts For The Wine Lover and The Wine Lover's Lover

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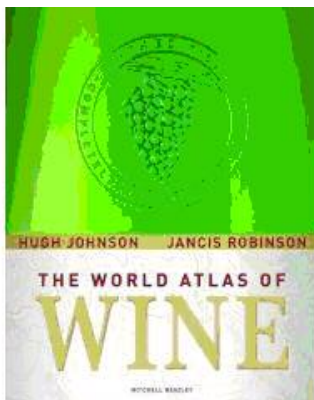
Yes, it's that time of year again; Christmas is coming and the geese are getting fat. So here are a few gift ideas from Stirling Wines which might be helpful to the wine lover – or indeed the wine lover's lover!

### Books

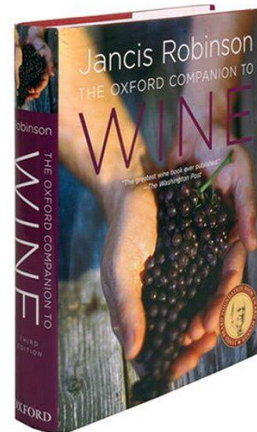
Books are a perennial favourite of mine but then I am a drinks nerd. This year has not been a great year in terms of new books but there are always the hardy perennials. For the beginner it's still hard to beat Oz Clarke's *Introducing Wine*. Although this is not a new book, it is written in an easy-to-read style and Oz Clarke is much more knowledgeable than his somewhat blokey style infers. For someone working their way up the grapevine, I heartily recommend another book by Oz Clarke: *Grapes and Wines*, which goes through the world's grapes from A-Z, giving very approachable descriptions of the wines they make.



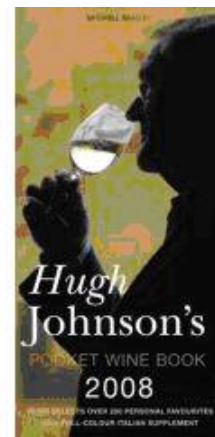
In terms of updated classics, the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *World Atlas of Wine* by Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson has just been published. A heavy tome with 400 pages and 200 maps, it has sold more than 4 million copies since the first edition was published in 1971.



However, the gold standard reference book remains *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Hardcover) by Jancis Robinson, published in a new edition last year. Don't be put off by the rather English title 'Companion', this is the closest the wine world gets to an encyclopaedia.



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.



### A Wine Course

It was Alexander Pope who first said that "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing". However, we all have to start somewhere; so why make your New Year Resolutions early and not book yourself on a course for the 2008. Probably the best place to start is one of the courses administered by the Wine & Spirit Education Trust [www.wset.co.uk](http://www.wset.co.uk). They offer a ladder of courses, combining theory and tasting, ranging from an 8-evening introduction to a two year semi-full-time Diploma. The courses are offered

right round the world but are not that common in the USA. For readers based in London, Berry Bros & Rudd run an introductory course using wines from their list to illustrate each region and variety. A good way to kill two birds with one stone [www.bbr.co.uk](http://www.bbr.co.uk)

### Decanters and cork-removers

As I have confessed before, I have a particular weakness for decanters. Not everyone agrees but I think that virtually all wines (except very delicate old flowers) benefit from some decanting and for most 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](http://www.riedel.com)) who for me get the mix of aesthetics and functionality just right. My *cris de couer* continue to be their *Vinum Extreme Duck*



and Amadeo Lyra,



both striking designs that will fully aerate a wine without losing any of those wonderful aromas.

Corkscrews are an object of obsession for some collectors but for me are strictly functional. My favourites are the Screwpull range; their lever action models are not cheap but they are incredibly efficient and easy to use.



Another useful contraption is the Butler's Friend, so called because it reputedly allowed the staff to remove a cork, have a swig from the bottle and then replace the cork. It works by inserting two prongs on either side of the cork and then removing it with a combined twist and pull. It takes a bit of practice to master the technique but is invaluable for old crumbly corks.



### 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.

### Bubbles

It's hard to beat champagne as an apéritif, ideally a blanc de blancs (made 100% from chardonnay grapes). Amongst the more widely available brands, a personal favourite is Pol Roger NV. Pol Roger is one of the few remaining, great family-owned Champagne houses (along with Bollinger and Roederer) but their NV style is just a touch lighter and more elegant than the more full-bodied style of the other two.



If you want to roll the boat out try their top cuvée, Winston Churchill. Pol Roger's relationship with Churchill started in 1945 after the liberation of Paris. Legend has it that at a luncheon given by the British ambassador, over a glass (or two) of the 1928 vintage, Winston flirted with Odette Pol-Roger. Thereafter, Odette would send him a case of vintage champagne each year on his birthday.



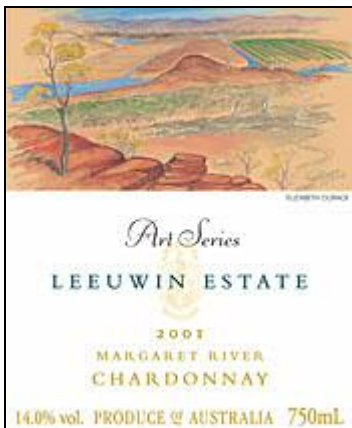
However, if you've had a really good bonus, try Krug's famous Clos du Mesnil, a vintage blanc de blancs from the Mesnil vineyard.



If you are having a UK-style meal with turkey, either Pinot Noir or a full-bodied Chardonnay are safe bets.

**Chardonnay**

For chardonnay, go for a full-bodied style, more Meursault than Chablis. From Meursault, try a premier cru from Boillot or one of the big names. Further up scale are the Montrachet's such as the inelegantly named Bâtard Montrachet (insert an 's' and you get the English translation) or at the top of the tree Le Montrachet. As a new world alternative, go for something from the cooler climates parts of California (e.g. Saintsbury in Carneros) or Oregon. Finally, Leeuwin Art from the Margaret River region of Western Australia will give all but the very best burgundies a run for their money

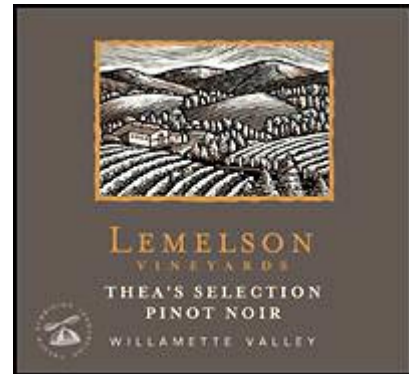


**Medium-bodied reds**

The classic medium-bodied red is Pinot Noir from Burgundy the home of this temperamental grape. At the higher quality levels, the 2000's are starting to drink well; but this was an unusually hot year so you need to be careful not to get a 'jammy monster'. The 1997's are definitely drinking well and the 95's and 96's are also classic wines that will benefit from further bottle age. 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, Cheillon or Gouges in Nuits St Georges.



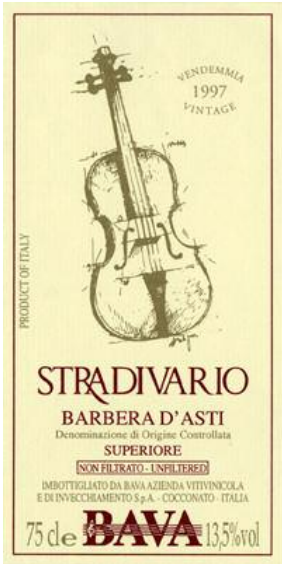
Elsewhere in the world, Oregon and New Zealand make very good Pinot Noir but it is difficult to find decent bottle age so expect a fruitier style drink. In Oregon, the Burgundian house of Drouhin make excellent wines and the Willamette Valley is also a great source of top-quality wine. A particular favourite of mine are the wines from Lemelson.



In New Zealand, there are many fine Pinots, albeit typically at the fruity end of the spectrum. For a more European style, try something from Central Otago on the South Island where the cooler climate brings more sophistication e.g. Mount Difficulty



For a really toothsome, alternative to Pinot Noir, try a Barbera from Piedmont in Italy. Barbera is the 'everyday' red grape of Piedmont, high in acidity and flavour but low in tannin. As such, it makes for a perfect marriage with new oak to make a really savoury, fruity, medium-bodied wine. There are many excellent Barbera's from the regions of Asti and Alba, that represent very good value for money and are widely available. If you can, go for something with approx 5 years bottle age, ideally from 2001 which was a superb vintage. One of my favourites is from one of the best of the new generation of producers – Enzo Boglietti. For a slightly more expensive wine, try a Barbera from Bava or La Spinetta



wines are very well made and in particular, I really like their Brunello Riserva – Poggio All'Oro.



**Dessert wines**

The classic wine to serve with dessert is Sauternes, and a very fine wine it is. For something a little different, venture off the beaten track. There are fantastic sweet wines from elsewhere in France. After a rich meal, a good apple pie with vanilla ice-cream is often what is required and Pacherenc de Vic Bilh from near the Pyrénées is the perfect accompaniment. Elsewhere in Europe, the sweet wines of Austria are undervalued by everyone except the Austrians. For my money the king of these wines is a man called Alois Kracher, who produces wines near the Hungarian border. Here the mists that rise from the Neusiedlersee give the perfect environment for the botrytis mould which creates the world's most sublime dessert wines.

**Full-Bodied Reds**

If you're having a more full-bodied meal than turkey (we'll be tucking into pheasant for Christmas), it's hard to beat 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.



Amongst the 1st and 2nd growths, 1988/89/90 are great vintages, but have really ramped up in price in the last year. As an alternative, try the superlative Ridge Montebello from California; the 1997 is drinking beautifully for about £80.

Or go for a Brunello di Montalcino Riserva, ideally from 1995. Banfi is widely available and sometimes critics look down their noses because of its ubiquity. However, their



**Digestif**

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 like your port, roll out the barrel and go for a tasty vintage. Perhaps the best value at present is single vintage 'quinta' wines from lesser known years. Good examples include Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos and Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas.



Higher up the scale try something like Warre 1985. Or if you want something to wash down the fruit cake, Madeira is a much underrated drink and perfectly matches the dried fruit flavour: 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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