

Toasting the Holidays

By Peter Csizmadia-Honigh

LONDON, ENGLAND--There is nothing more exciting about December than Christmas. It's probably the only time in the year when all families forget about work, put problems aside and celebrate with loved ones in the warmth of their home, whilst ghastly winds and snowstorms may be howling outside. The small ones tend to get excited about the tree, stockings filled with presents and hung at the fireplace and Santa, of course; whilst we adults look forward to enjoying good wines and delicious home cooking.

Speaking of wine, here are some of my picks for the season.

A Sparkling Holiday

As with every moment of celebration and joy, there is no Christmas without the sparkles of champagne. There's a huge choice selection in the market; here are two good ones—not Greek, but wonderful just the same.

Bollinger's NV (non-vintage) champagne is a perfect example of what France's

classic sparkling wine production region is all about. It offers a refreshing glass of fizz, with the purity of ripe fruits, such as apples and strawberries, along with class borrowed through a touch of doughy and yeasty flavours that it obtains through the secondary fermentation in bottle, a production technique often referred to as *méthode champenoise*, because it originally was invented in the Champagne region of France. This wine being non-vintage, it comes at an affordable price point and provides for the perfect glass at any time during the festive season.

If you are looking for something extra special and are prepared to pay a higher price, *Perrier-Jouët's Belle Epoque 1990* is



a fine choice. Whilst the essence of champagne is that it's not a vintage wine, there are exceptional years when the chef de cave, the wine-maker, wants to capture the singular beauty of the given year. 1990 was such for Perrier-Jouët despite the harsh spring frost, which was then

followed by perfect conditions in the summer. This wine has a really impressively lively nose with a weight of heavily toasted almond and brioche followed by a fine mélange of vegetal tones and fruits. It's bone-dry, with marked acids and a great mix of lemon zest, grapefruit, turnips. The mousse is soft and generous. Its intensity is impressive; the length is not compromised at any point and offers a mouth-filling persistence.

Festive Reds

Every family has their own traditions when it comes to Christmas dinner. One thing is certain though—we all enjoy pulling the cork of a bottle of red. Here are some suggestions, from the island of Crete.

Miliarakis Winery's Metikos 2010 is a blend of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon (70%-30%) and was matured in French barrels for 10 months. A lovely ruby color with a purple hue is followed by an elegantly understated intensity in the nose with a complexity of dark cherries, thyme, black-peppercorn and paprika. A lovely weight combined with the velvety feel of tannins, this wine is just perfect for crispy roasted meats, stuffed or served with sultanas or dried fruits.

Symbolo Grand Cuvee 2005 from the Lyrarakis Winery will offer a step-up in terms of seriousness of structure, which is built through the combination of excellent concentration, higher alcohol and tightly packed tannins. It bursts with paprika, cocoa, cinnamon, black-peppercorn and sour-cherries. It's a blend of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Kotsifali (75%-20%-5%), ideal for after dinner conversations next to the roaring fireplace.

If you want something truly Greek that reflects the warmth

and energy of the Mediterranean sun in the midst of winter, Tamiolakis Winery produces the must-have Christmas red. *Profesi Red 2009* is a blend of Kotsifali and Syrah, which was matured in oak barrels for 12 months and bottled unfiltered. It has a very impressive depth of crimson and purple colour with an attractively savoury nose of sour-cherry, smoky and almost meaty tones. A big red wine as far as concentration is concerned, Profesi has a beautifully smooth texture. It's fresh and very appealing with dark fruits, paprika and smoked wood flavors before a nice long finish. Perfect with meat dishes served with chestnut or vegetable casseroles with pumpkin and sweet potato.

A Sweet Finish

There is always place for cake and dessert over the Festive Season and, therefore, my picks would not be complete without dessert wines. Lyra-rakis produces a *Malvasia of Crete*, a non-vintage wine, which makes a perfect accompaniment to desserts with fruits or cream. The concentration of this wine is achieved through drying the grapes in the sun before the bunches are pressed—resulting in a lovely intensity of orange peel, dried apricots, marmalade and almonds. It's low in alcohol (11.5%), but

refreshing on the palate, thus cutting through the richness of Christmas desserts.

Cheese boards have become an alternative to desserts in many households, and there is a wide selection of wines to pair with your cheese. *Efrosini's Aureo 2007* is a special wine, even if the design of the package would not suggest that. It's made from the black grape called Liatiko—only after five-to-six days of drying in the sun are these grapes pressed and the juice is fermented over the course of four weeks. The resultant wine is deep garnet in color with shades of olive green and lemon. Almost exuberant with roasted almonds, orange peel, dried apricots and mushrooms. It's sweet and lush, yet nicely fresh. It's made precisely to be drunk with salty and crisp cheeses.

Pairing Food and Wine

When you seek wines at your local merchant and don't find the above wines, always think about your menu before making a selection. Is your Christmas meal light or heavy, simple or spicy? Are the meats dry or fatty? Will you have gravy or creamy sauces on the side? Are you looking for wines to be savoured with food or enjoyed over family conversations after a meal? This

will help you select the “right” wine. Enjoy your wine responsibly. Wishing you a Merry Christmas from London!

Peter Csizmadia-Honigh is a Hungarian transplant living and working in London, UK. His day job keeps him busy with the management of a global wine education program, whilst he dedicates his free time to wine

writing and winegrowing. Peter regularly writes for VinCE, the largest wine magazine in Hungary, and Sommelier India, the wine title in India. As co-proprietor of Royal Somló Vineyards in Western Hungary, he crafts wines for Michelin-star restaurants in London, Amsterdam and Budapest from Juhfark, an indigenous Hungarian variety. Follow Peter on Twitter @BorVilag,



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