

Christmas choices could be a bargain Burgundy or a big-name Champagne



Absolute Corkers

with NED HALLEY

Christmas Day is precisely two weeks away, so it's time to settle on the wines. I've made up my own mind, whittling down a great many wines tasted to the modest number recommended here. I have picked out a "classic" wine for the special meal or occasion and also a good budget alternative to keep the enjoyment up and the cost down.

First to fizz. Champagne is being heavily promoted by supermarkets this year, so there's every chance of a (relative) bargain. I like the look of *Veuve Clicquot Brut* at £26.49 from Tesco or £27.49 at Sainsbury, in both cases £6 off. *Veuve* is the fullest in flavour of the big name non-vintage champagnes, and the easiest to enjoy.

Alternative sparkling wines are infinite in their variety, but the one that has impressed me more than any other this year is Griffith Park. It's from Australia, made from the same grape varieties as champagne – Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – and has abounding orchard fruit, a really persistent fizz, and breezy freshness. OK, it's not champagne, but at £6.99 from Morrisons, it is not trying to compete. And if you like your fizz pink, I also recommend Griffith Park Sparkling Rosé at the same price. It has a pleasing colour, eager strawberry scent and bright summer-fruit flavours.

White wine to drink with Christmas treats such as smoked fish needs to be "assertive" – full enough in taste to compete with strong, cured flavours. Alsace wines are the natural match. Try *Gewürztraminer Wunsch et Mann 2008* at £11.99 from Oddbins or £8.99 if you're buying half a dozen bottles, any mix. *Gewürztraminer* is the most exotic of all the wines from the French region, which borders Germany but has a very different wine style to its neighbour's. This one has the classic lychee aroma of the grape and pungent, tropical but dry fruit flavours.

Cono Sur Gewürztraminer 2009 from Chile (Waitrose £5.69) is a lighter, simpler wine than the *Gewürztraminer*, but I do commend it for its expression of lychee aroma and flavour. It's very good value.

And for the roast turkey? I have just tasted a Bordeaux red that would do justice, *Château Larcis-Jumeau 2005*, a "Grand Cru" of the great appellation of St Emilion. At around £14.99 this is a grand wine indeed, from a legendary and now-maturing vintage. You get the unmistakable cedary perfume with a sweet violet note and dark, slinky, minty, ripe black fruit that so typifies the appellation.

Among Bordeaux bargains I must mention Sainsbury's *House Claret*. It costs only £3.79, but has convincing blackcurrant-and-plum fruit and true ripeness – remarkable quality at the price. For a fuller style of red from

the classic grape of Bordeaux, try *Extra Special Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon 2006* at £6.79 from Asda. From Australia, this is a mellow, mature red with dark fruit (that brings to mind flavours of fruitcake and coffee; smooth and very shirpable).

One more red to match the roast bird: *Préférence Côtes du Rhône Vieilles Vignes 2009* is £10 for two bottles, down from £6.79 apiece, at Sainsbury's. A popular brand from Skalli, one of the giants of Rhône production, this wine is a huge success in the fabled 2009 vintage, tasting way above full price, let alone at a fiver. Inky dark purple-black with a lavish whiff of blackberry and cream and fruit that is at once rich and intense and fresh, complete with the authentic spice and grip of its sun-baked origins.

And what about a white wine to drink with the turkey? I recommend a generously fruity Chardonnay like *Macon-Milly-Lamartine Clos du Four 2009* at £11.99 from Majestic. From Burgundy, this is a classic of the buttery-rich, ripe and opulent by dry Chardonnay to which the region has a unique claim.

And so to port. True vintage port is a great extravagance. The year on the label needs to be at least a decade past, and the wine will need careful decanting off the crust of yeast detritus it throws as it matures in the bottle. But for a great occasion there's nothing like it. My pick this year is *Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos 1999* at £25.99 from Sainsbury's. It's as dark as night, perfumed with figs and cinnamon, cloves and sweet nuts, and richly sweet and savoury. It is pure silk to drink now, and will go on for years if you resist opening it. It is one of few ports now made entirely from grapes pressed in the old way – underfoot.

Quinta do Noval Late Bottled Vintage 2004 at £17.99 is my first alternative port. This is the pick of the LBV ports of the moment – wines matured in cask then bottled when they are ready for drinking.

Most are filtered before bottling, so will not continue to develop, but this one has escaped the process and has a long, interesting future. But never mind that, because it is gorgeously opulent, rich and minty to drink right now.

Finally, the bargain port of the year: *Croft Indulgence* is a simple ruby with real character that I have mentioned more than once here this year because Tesco keep halving it in price. It would not be a snip at the shelf price of £11.99, but at £5.99, as it is now, it's a mellow, fruitcake-rich comfort entirely in keeping with Christmas.

And don't overlook our great regional beverage, cider. Real cider – the kind made on farmhouse rather than factory principles – can make a



Ned has been impressed by Griffith Park for its 'persistent fizz, and breezy freshness'

brilliant match with rich, meaty foods.

My pick with chicken or turkey is *Thatchers Katy*. Unusually, *Katy* is a rosy-red "dessert" apple rather than the customary blotchy-green bitter-sweet varieties, and the finished cider is delicately perfumed and flavoured, light in weight, quite dry, brightly fresh and with poised acidity and a gentle sparkle. *Martin Thatcher*, who has taken on his family's century-old firm, still in its original *Myrtle Farm* site at Sandford in North Somerset, admits that *Katy* does have a wine-like appeal. It's 7.4 per cent alcohol, quite strong for cider, but very much less kicky than most wines. Price is about £1.67 for 500ml at Sainsbury's and the countless other retailers now stocking it.

The gamier flavour of goose calls for *Sheppy's Dabnet*, a mellow medium lightly sparkling cider with the most gorgeous apple-pie flavours and

7.2 per cent alcohol. From the *Sheppy* farm at Bradford-on-Tone southwest of Taunton, this cider is widely available in supermarkets across the region (Sainsbury's £1.73 per 500ml) or from the superb shop on site.

These serious ciders need to be served with due respect – discreetly chilled, in generous-sized wines glasses.

FURTHER READING

The new edition of Ned Halley's annual guide, *The Best Wines in the Supermarkets 2011*, published by Foulsham at £7.99, is now available from bookshops.

Ned is the author of a number of books on the pleasures of drink including a humorous compendium, *Absolute Corkers* (Constable £7.99) and *The Ultimate Cocktail Book* (Wordsworth £3.99).

Ned, who lives in Somerset, recently won the UK Beer Writers' Guild award for his