

Last: A Christmas wine primer

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I know Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy and good cheer, and it can be, but it can also be stressful and fraught with challenges. On the entertaining front, I can at least offer some advice on things to drink over the holidays, be it with dinner or simply general imbibing. To start, I thought we would look at the basic holiday food groups; turkey, beef and salmon and a high and low cost option for each, followed by some great sparkling wines to have on hand.

Turkey: The basic consideration with turkey is twofold; it can be on the dry side and it is a mildly flavoured meat. As such, a big wine could easily overwhelm so I tend to stick to light-bodied wines with ample fruit and bright acidity but low in tannins (if you are doing red). Here are a few options:



Red, high: Brewer Clifton Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 2016 — \$43

Greg Brewer and Steve Clifton have been producing high quality Pinot Noir from the Santa Rita Hills region of California's south central coast since the late '90s and, although they eventually sold to Jackson Family Wines, they remain as the winemaking team — and part owners — and the quality has remained solid. The abundant bright red fruit and lively acidity make this a great option for big bird.



Rose, low: Saint Sidoine Rosé 2018 — \$21

Rosé and turkey is a natural pairing; the thirst-quenching nature of the style helps offset the dryness of the bird, especially if it's been languishing in the oven for seven hours. Sidoine is a classic Provencal style, think strawberry/cranberry fruit and juicy acidity.



White, high: Terre Nere Etna Bianco Calderara Sottana 2018 — \$50

Terre Nere is one of Sicily's most prized wineries, crafting amazing wines from the northern slopes of Mount Etna. The volcanic soils endow this wine with stone fruits, honeysuckle, minerals and slight saline/floral note with just a touch of oak, ideal with turkey or salmon.

Beef: If prime rib or some other slab of red meat is on the menu, then full-bodied red wines are the obvious choice. The options are myriad but here are a few of my favourites of late:



High: Chateau Camensac 2014 — \$59

This chateau delivers solid value wines — by Bordeaux standards — and the 2014 is starting to drink well with just enough grip to accompany red meats. There is some classic black fruit, graphite and cigar box notes; I would decant it a couple of hours prior to serving.



Low: Perrin La Vieille Ferme Rouge 2018 — \$15

The Perrin family of Chateau de Beaucastel fame make a wide array of wines and you would be hard-pressed to go wrong with any of them. La Vieille Ferme is a blend of Carignan, Cinsault, Grenache and Syrah. A spicy red with ample fruit, it remains one of the best deals going in the red wine realm.

Baked salmon: Salmon has become a popular choice for those looking for a healthier alternative to the usual Christmas fare and while you could do a red — such as Pinot Noir or Gamay — my first choice would be:



Chateau-Fuisse Pouilly-Fuisse Tete de Cru 2016 — \$42

This is perfectly balanced Chardonnay from Burgundy, racy and brimming with minerality but with a nice degree of richness in the form of butterscotch and pear tatin (it would also be a good match with turkey). While not inexpensive this wine over-delivers in the pricey realm of Burgundy.

Bubbles: As far as I am concerned no dinner party or celebration is complete without sparkling wine of some description, be it Champagne or any number of the delicious alternatives out there; here are a few to try:



Pierre Peters Cuvée Réserve Blanc de Blancs — \$61

If I was forced to drink Champagne from one producer, Pierre Peters would likely be my first choice. They are a grower producer — meaning they own all of their own vineyards — specializing in Chardonnay (Blanc de Blancs). You can spend way more for way less wine from Champagne; it's not widely distributed but well worth searching out.



Le Mesnil Blanc de Blanc — \$65

Le Mesnil is a co-operative founded in 1937 but they are really not much different than the big name houses in that they purchase grapes from the hundreds of growers in the region. As the name would suggest, all of the grapes are sourced from the Mesnil vineyard in the town of Mesnil sur Oger, one of the best sites in the Champagne region. The wine is elegant with a classic toasted brioche note along with some citrus zest and stone fruits.



Raventos i Blanc de Nit Rosé 2017 — \$37

When I feel like Champagne but fiscal reality kicks in, I often opt for the wines from Spain's esteemed Raventos i Blanc. In terms of quality, they outclass many wines from Champagne costing twice as much. The rosé is made from indigenous grapes, a full-bodied style that could easily be served with turkey or salmon. I served it alongside some smoked salmon canopies and it was just about perfect.

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Geoff last is a longtime Calgary wine merchant, writer and broadcaster. He teaches cooking classes at the Cookbook Company Cooks and was recently awarded a fellowship to the Symposium of Professional Wine Writers based in Napa Valley.