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When ‘Drinks’ Is the Only Box Left Unchecked

Last-minute decision-making for Thanksgiving beverages does not have to be an ordeal. But you do need to make a few choices.



Emon Hassan for The New York Times

This Thanksgiving you are organized. You’ve got checklists and spreadsheets. Nobody can say you have left things until it’s too late.

Except for that one column marked “drinks.” It’s empty.

No worries. Even at the last minute, it’s not hard to fill in the blanks. In most states, some wine seller is always open Thanksgiving morning for the stragglers

(not that I would recommend waiting until then). Luckily, we are not quite there yet. You still have a few moments to think about things and plan. Here are some questions to consider.

How would you like to greet people as they arrive?

You could move immediately into whatever you are planning to pour during the meal. That would be fine. But if you prefer to be a little more ceremonial about it, it's nice to offer a welcoming aperitif.

Sparkling wine has performed that ice-breaking, appetite-whetting chore for ages. You cannot go wrong with this choice. The question is how much you are willing to spend.

Champagne is always wonderful, and for a small group, it's ideal. Excellent, widely available nonvintage choices like [Louis Roederer](#) Brut Premier, [Taittinger](#) Brut La Française, [Pol Roger](#) White Label or [Deutz](#) Brut Classic will all run around \$40 to \$45 a bottle.

If you would like to splurge for blanc de blancs Champagne, a particularly good aperitif made entirely of chardonnay, I would suggest nonvintage bottles from either [Pierre Péters](#) or [Bruno Paillard](#) for around \$55 to \$65.

Most people, though, will not want to pay that much, particularly if expecting a big crowd. You still have excellent options, beginning with [cava](#), the sparkling wine of Spain. [Parés Baltà](#) Brut Cava is a fine choice for \$15 to \$20. If you want a good rosé cava — make that rosado — [Raventós i Blanc de Nit](#) is about \$20 to \$25.

If you prefer an [American sparkling wine](#), I very much recommend Roederer Estate Brut, also for around \$20 to \$25.

But maybe you would rather not serve bubbles, or regard it as a cliché. What about other options?

For an intrepid wine crowd, a good [manzanilla](#) sherry is a wonderful aperitif, particularly if you are serving oysters, salted nuts (Marcona almonds are a great pairing with manzanilla) or various cheeses. [Bodegas Hidalgo La Gitana](#) is a classic, and costs less than \$20 for a 500-milliliter bottle. Valdespino Deliciosa is another good manzanilla, particularly if you can find bottles labeled “en rama,” which indicates that the wine received less processing. It will cost \$20 to \$25 a bottle.

Manzanilla can be polarizing, though. Many people are not used to its bracing, saline flavors, so it's wise to have an alternative available. You could retreat to sparkling wine. Or you could try vermouth, a fortified wine infused with a variety of herbs, spices, botanicals or more.

Good [vermouth](#) is a great aperitif, sometimes slightly sweet, sometimes slightly bitter, but always balanced. I love those from Uncouth Vermouth and Matthiasson. But they can be expensive at \$40 or so a half bottle, and hard to find. Dolin Vermouth de Chambéry from France is dry, widely available and moderately priced at \$10 a half bottle. Serve over ice.

For some people, cocktails are a traditional greeting. I can understand the appeal of a dry martini, but spirits can be a little overwhelming at the start of a very long meal. One good alternative would be a punch, particularly one in which the base ingredient is less alcoholic. I like the idea of a cider punch, which carries a little New England Thanksgiving resonance.

I asked the cocktail guru [David Wondrich](#) for a recipe, and he offered [this one for Flutemaginley](#), a cider punch adapted from a 19th-century bartender's manual and possibly, Mr. Wondrich said, named after Tim "Flute" Maginley, a New York flutist of the 1860s. It can be scaled up as needed.



Christopher Testani for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Barrett Washburne.

What should you serve with dinner?

After you have decided on an aperitif, you should choose something to serve with the meal. Wine is an obvious choice, and we'll get back to it, but what about cider?

In the Northeast, many good dry ciders are available, and they seem to radiate Thanksgiving. If it feels more comfortable, think of cider as apple wine. Industrial cider is often sweetened, adulterated, made from concentrate and altogether unpleasant. But the good stuff can be great.

The [best ciders tend to be local](#) or regional. Here in the Northeast, look for ciders from [Fable Farm Fermentory](#), [Aaron Burr Treasury](#), [Eden Farnum Hill](#), [Sundstrom](#) and [West County](#). These will all cost roughly \$20 to \$25 for a 750-milliliter bottle.

Plenty of beers will also go well with the meal. I would opt for dark beers like porter and brown ale, which feel seasonal, are not high in alcohol and are versatile with the myriad dishes that might find their way to the table.

Most people will [end up with wine](#), however, and who is going to complain about that? Even at the last minute, you ought to have many good choices. Plan on having both a red and a white so that people can choose for themselves, and plenty of each. The only thing more unthinkable than running out of wine (or whatever you choose to drink) is running out of food.

Beaujolais makes a great, crowd-pleasing choice. If you are buying in bulk, [Beaujolais-Villages and plain Beaujolais](#) make sense as they are less expensive than cru Beaujolais, bottles that come from the best terroirs and have names like Morgon or Fleurie on the label.

Good small producers are making superb examples, which generally run \$15 to \$30. If you are in a bind at the last-minute, bigger producers like [Louis Jadot](#) or [Joseph Drouhin](#) offer reliable bottles of Beaujolais-Villages for around \$15.

Among whites, sauvignon blanc is always a popular choice. [Frog's Leap](#) in Napa Valley makes a good one for around \$20, as does [Huia](#) in the Marlborough region of New Zealand for about the same price. If you want Sancerre, bottles from [Lucien Crochet](#) or [Alphonse Mellot](#) are about \$30.

Want to stick with American wines? You have plenty of choices. If you have access to wines from the Finger Lakes, look for dry rieslings from [Ravines](#), [Dr. Konstantin Frank](#), [Hermann J. Wiemer](#), [Terrassen](#) or [Forge Cellars](#). Among reds, cabernet francs from the Finger Lakes tend to be light and fragrant. Look for Wiemer, [Keuka Lake Vineyards](#), [Lakewood](#) or [Bloomer Creek](#). All should be \$15 to \$25.

You could also consider a pinot noir from [Montinore Estate](#) in Oregon for around \$20, a chardonnay from [Foxglove](#) on the Central Coast of California for around \$15; cabernet sauvignons from [Broadside](#) in Paso Robles for about \$20; or delicious blended reds or whites bottled by Matthiasson, an excellent Napa producer, under the Tendu label. They cost about \$20 for a one-liter bottle.

What about that final drink?

You could end it here. But many people find themselves after the Thanksgiving dinner with a rather bloated feeling. I have a cure for that, a digestif, the bookend of the aperitif. Digestifs generally consist of an alcoholic base that is infused with herbs, plants and other botanicals. Just as the name indicates, they are intended to help with digestion.

I particularly like the Italian versions, or digestivos. Many are quite bitter, and so are grouped together as amari, a word that refers to the bitterness.

You will find dozens of different amari, but one of my favorites is also one of the best known, Fernet-Branca, in which the bitterness is allowed to stand in all its bracing glory without compromising sweetening.

If this sounds fearsome, consider how you might feel Thanksgiving evening, overstuffed and perhaps a little uncomfortable. At that moment, the \$30 price of a bottle of Fernet may feel like the sweetest deal ever.