

# Mastering Christmas

If your household contained two Masters of Wine, Christmas would be pretty special. As it happens, we do know just such an expert couple – and they invited us into their home to tell us what they'll be pouring over the festive season

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**F**estive. What does that word mean to you? For some, it elicits a buzz of intense excitement. For others, it sends a chill down the spine – the thought of hosting all those relatives, and all that washing up... The majority will be somewhere in between – or both at the same time. And that includes us. So here's what we do to navigate the season. We raise a glass. It's a good time to be kind to ourselves – especially after the year we've all had. That treat you've been coveting? Now's your chance. And, in these pages, we have plenty of inspiration.

We've tasted hundreds of wines to come up with this spectacular line-up. Life is too short for tired classics at Christmas. Better to have one startling glass than two bland bottles. All these wines will surprise and delight – some may challenge, but we make no apologies for that. Right now, we deserve wine that counts.

We're recommending wines by occasion. But here are a couple of options to have open over the whole festive period – to keep you sane, to entertain unexpected guests, to quench a thirst. First up, two wines that you can't go wrong with: the classic, characterful **Isabelle & Denis Pommier, Hautérivien Petit-Chablis, Burgundy 2020** (£22.50 Lea & Sandeman); and the superb value, lip-smackingly dry **Berry Bros & Rudd, Amontillado Sherry** (£14.95).

Turning to red wines, the juicy, meaty, peppery bag-in-box **Michael Opitz, Buddy Talk Burgenland Red, Austria 2019** (£42.80/2.25L BIB Wine Co) should last you a fair while. And always have a bottle tucked away of the best value sweet wine in Britain: **Tesco Finest Dessert Semillon, New South Wales, Australia 2017** (£6.25/37.5cl). Because you never know when you'll be ambushed by a rogue mince pie.



## Party

As a self-employed couple, our office Christmas party is hardly the most raucous affair (even the photocopier declines the invitation). But there are always gatherings of varying kinds to plan for around this time, whether large or small. The one thing that applies to all of them? Good wine can be a lifeline.

Let's cut straight to the chase with a delicious bottle of **Booths Champagne Brut Rosé NV** (£27.50 in stores). It looks the part and makes a great impression, be it your boss or picky neighbour. It also works beautifully with savoury canapés.

For bigger gatherings, the **Castellore, Organic Prosecco Extra Dry NV** (£7.99 Aldi) is ideal. It's great value and ridiculously quaffable – not too ▶



cloying, just fragrant, floral and refreshing. Ideal for the younger crowd, too, with its easygoing style and lower (11%) alcohol.

Though we struggle to empathise, we're aware there are some non-fizz drinkers out there. Never fear. We have the ideal party white – **Berry Bros & Rudd, White Burgundy by Collopy & Terrier 2020** (£14.95). Yes it's own-label but it's a rare one that looks smart – so deploy it at everything from a big knees-up to a dinner party. Its elegant, creamy, appley style will impress even wine snobs.

Finally, we should address the elephant in this particular party venue: mulled wine. If you're a fan – carry on mulling. You can use a bottle of the absolute bargain that is **Pagos del Rey's El Aviador Tempranillo 2021** (£6.99 Majestic) from Castilla y León. But then again its bright red fruits make it brilliantly easy-drinking in its own right, Spain being such a good source of engaging value reds. No mulling necessary here.

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## Christmas morning

We've never been big on Christmas morning drinking. It's hard enough, blurry-eyed, not tripping over the kids – even pouring the tea successfully into the mug can prove challenging. Or maybe it's our desire to build anticipation for that lunchtime aperitif.

Nevertheless, we salute those of you who do embrace the celebratory atmosphere right from the off, and we have some glorious suggestions for you.

For those who want to ease into the day gently, look no further than the **Cà ed Balos, Moscato d'Asti, Piedmont 2021** (£16.50 Mother Vine, Pip of Manor Farm). This is the thinking person's Moscato – sweet but not syrupy, instead herb-scented and utterly revitalising. It won't just wake you up, it will usher you into Christmas day on a silken sedan, complementing your warm pastries and fruit platter perfectly. And, given the 5.5% alcohol, there's no need to worry about over-indulging.

Continuing the theme of moderation, **Drusian, Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Extra Dry NV** (Alc 11%; £15.95 Stone Vine & Sun) marries apples and pears with bubbles of great delicacy. If you really must blend away its subtle charms with white peach purée to make a Bellini, then go ahead – just save a bit to appreciate the wine, too.

Much the same goes for the **M&S Classics No12, Crémant de Bourgogne Brut NV** (£12 Marks & Spencer). This is a ridiculously good-value Champagne lookalike, full of bready, appley charisma. Mix it with fresh orange juice for a Buck's Fizz if you will – just don't match it with their music.

And for those who simply want a beautiful breakfast wine? We give you the **Champagne Barnaut, Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs Brut NV** (£35.50 Lea & Sandeman). Brimming with bruised apple, fresh bread and almost manzanilla Sherry character, this is a grower Champagne that turns on the style and envelops your senses. One glass is breakfast in itself – heaven with scrambled eggs and smoked salmon (kippers cry out for it too). ▶





## Christmas lunch

Where to start? At the beginning: fizz. Feel free to go off-piste with dry Sherry or whatever floats your boat, but we adore bubbles, particularly English ones. Even then: where to start?! The tyranny of good choice suggests you go with a favourite, or a good-value option – but we'd suggest this Christmas you look local for at least one wine. For us in Hampshire this might mean Black Chalk, Hattingley Valley or Raimes. For our neighbours in Sussex – there's Digby or Wiston; Dorset – Bride Valley or Langham; Kent – Gusbourne; Thames Valley – Harrow & Hope. You get the idea.

But here we've gone for a showstopper: the Ridgeview, Oak Reserve Single Vineyard Brut NV (£75 Ridgeview) from Sussex. It's the best wine this venerable English fizz producer has ever made – like grand cru white Burgundy with bubbles. The most characterful English fizz we've tried this year, unquestionably – its nutty, struck match, vivid apple character stopped us in our tracks. It's far from cheap but, with top English fizz now selling for nearly £200, it's not unreasonable. What's more, its structured, serious style means it will work not only as an aperitif but also as a match for your fish starter or even turkey main.

Our lunch tends to be quite classic – shellfish starters, then some sort of bird with trimmings. We make no excuses for being unreconstructed Chardonnay superfans, so white Burgundy it is – and we were particularly excited to discover the René Lequin-Colin, Back to the Roots

Bourgogne Chardonnay 2020 (£23.95 Stone Vine & Sun). We're constantly on the lookout for classic white Burgundy that has character and elegance but doesn't break the bank: this one hits the bullseye. (On which note, we tend to find a rich white works just as well as a red with the Christmas main course.)

One common thread between most Christmas feasts is the sheer range of flavours on the table. Only certain reds cope with this – one is Pinot Noir, particularly from the New World, given the extra richness of body and flavour. The Novum, Marlborough Pinot Noir 2020 (£38 The Sourcing Table) from New Zealand is like top Gevrey-Chambertin at a knockdown price – dark-fruited and intense but with great autumnal elegance, too. Then there's Rioja – and the Viña Arana, Gran Reserva 2015 (£34-£36.50 Booths, DBM Wines, Hic, Honest Grapes) is like sinking into a leather armchair after a long day: luxurious, perfumed, sensual. This is one of our favourite traditional Rioja producers and its wines seldom fail to impress.

As for sweet things – it wouldn't be Christmas without them. How about the Gonzalez Byass, Apostoles VORS Palo Cortado 30 Year Old (£19.99/37.5cl Waitrose)? It's a blend of nutty, tangy palo cortado with a dash of raisiny Pedro Ximénez: the result is rich but not overly sweet, and utterly glorious. You could pair it with pudding if you want – though we'd suggest cheese or chocolate. Or just savouring it mid-afternoon in a quiet moment. Even if it means locking yourself in the loo. ▶



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## Boxing Day

If you're anything like us, by the time you get to the 26th of December, you're struggling to keep up. This is a point in the festivities when a breath of fresh air is required – both literally (*think*: long walk in the driving sleet) and metaphorically (*think*: off-piste wines to fill you with an absurd sense of adventure).

Just one sip of sparkling Westwell, **Pelegrim Brut NV** (£32.50 Westwell) transports you to the scented hedgerows and brimming orchards of rural Kent. This small producer makes great-value, eclectic wines – and this one's bold appley, brioche character and excellent balance owes much to the fabulous 2018 vintage.

To revitalise the senses, a glass of zingy, peppery Villiera, **Sauvignon Blanc, Stellenbosch 2021** (£8.50 Marks & Spencer) is a great-value South African option – enjoy it with a Boxing Day curry, or as a fridge staple for a festive pick-me-up. An alternative on the white front from New Zealand

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would be the Hunter's, **Offshoot Chardonnay, Marlborough 2019** (£21.95 Jeroboams), which packs a serious nutty/struck-match punch – one for mackerel paté, or the hipster nephew.

Beaujolais was made for Boxing Day – none more so than the complex, slightly wild, elegantly bittersweet **Domaine de Fa, Roche Guillon Fleurie 2019** (£22.50 Yapp Bros), a long-term favourite of ours. For something equally adventurous, pour a large glass of the **Lonely Vineyard, Montepulciano, Eden Valley 2017** (£20.95 Corney & Barrow) from South Australia – its effusive smoky, floral and damson overtures will ease the flagging mind. ▶



## New Year's Eve

We've regrouped. The party outfits are dusted off. And the wines need to rise to the occasion. If there's ever a place for a large-format bottle, it's tonight. So why not kick off proceedings with a magnum of **Champagne Legras & Haas, Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2012** (£111 Private Cellar)? A lesser-known name, perhaps, but outstanding quality in its biscuity, tangy profundity. (If you want to play it safe, the **Bollinger, Special Cuvée Brut NV** magnum is £104.99 at Waitrose Cellar.)

We tend to get together with a big gang, and a curry is often the upshot. The perfect excuse to get stuck into some Riesling – and one producer that has thrilled us lately is New Zealand's **Pegasus Bay**, with its ultra-complex, rich but structured bottlings. Its succulent **Main Divide Riesling, Canterbury 2019** (£13.99 Majestic) is elegantly off-dry (21g/L residual sugar) and is our shout for the best-value wine on the British high street at the retailer's Mix Six price of £10.99 per bottle. Snap it up.

If you're looking to push the boat out and intrigue your fellow revellers, look no further

than the **Thymiopoulos, Rosé de Xinomavro 2013** (£30 The Wine Society), made by this year's Decanter Rising Star award winner Apostolos Thymiopoulos (see *Decanter November issue*), in Macedonia, northern Greece. Oak then bottle age, along with the Xinomavro grape, make for one of the most intriguing and complex rosés on the market. It's nuts – but at least you won't be ringing in the new year with boring wine. (It also comes with an in-built New Year's resolution: life's too short for bland rosé.)

One of our best festive finds this year has got to be the magnum of **Berry Bros & Rudd, Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir 2019** (£52/1.5L BBR), made for the merchant by Au Bon Climat. Words fail – it's just gorgeous. Smoky, gamey and generous, it's everything you want from cultured Californian Pinot (and would be great as a gift or for Christmas lunch, too). Just promise us you'll make time to raise a glass to Jim Clendenen, Au Bon Climat's guiding light, who died last year. (To make the tribute extra special, wear an outlandish shirt to do Jim proud.) ▶

# Gifting

Tired of pretending to be grateful about presents? Ask for – and give – the gift of wine. There are plenty of options here – even non-liquid ones, such as a gift-that-keeps-on-giving (ie, membership of The Wine Society, £40).

Canned wine has come on leaps and bounds this year and we'd be thrilled to discover a can or three of the honeyed (French) Banks Brothers, No16 Pinot Gris 2021 (£19.50 for 3x25cl, Banks Bros) nestling in our stocking on Christmas morning. Might it even be subtle enough to sneak into church? Perish the thought.

One lovely gift idea is the Foodie Feast (£65 The Little Fine Wine Co) – four delectable half-bottles to savour: English fizz (toasty Nyetimber Classic Cuvée), white (leesy Billaud-Simon Chablis), red (warming Fontodi Chianti Classico) and sweet (refined Carmes de Rieussec Sauternes).

We all need presents for teachers, co-workers or other critical figures in our lives. A bottle of

the smartly packaged, richly mulberried Doppio Passo, Primitivo, Puglia 2021 (£9.49 Adnams) from southern Italy will ensure you are in their good books all year. Alternatively, the intensely flavoured South African Porseleinberg, Swartland Syrah 2018 (£59 The Wine Society) will ensure VVIP status wherever you tread.

How have we got this far without mentioning Port?! Perhaps an appropriate end point. The Croft, Quinta da Roeda Vintage Port 2004 (£24.99 Majestic, £18.99 on the Mix Six deal) is both elegant and intense: sweet but fiery and ageing beautifully. A festive wine – in all the right ways. **D**

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PHOTOGRAPHS CATH LOWE PHOTOGRAPHY STYLING GEORGINA RUGGLE

