

Party wines

By Michael Pinkus

HERE WE SIT, on the eve of party season: a dreaded time for some because of the massive amount of cooking and cleaning; for others, there are worries about what to bring or what to serve.

Well have no fear, I'm here to help with a few holiday wine ideas to get the party started, and some tips and tricks to help make your wine choices easier.

Many people find wine confusing, especially the order in which wine should be poured. Any great party starts with white wine — well actually, it starts with bubbly, but we covered that last year, so let's move on to the next great party starter.

From there, it's actually quite easy if you follow three rules: white before red; dry before sweet and light-bodied wines before heavy ones.



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Here are a few examples. Because it is light-bodied, Sauvignon Blanc is served before Pinot Gris or Chardonnay; but all three get poured before their red wine counterparts. Pinot Noir or Gamay Noir, two lightweight reds, see the bottom of your glass before the Merlots, Cabs or Shirazes, because the latter usually have more alcohol and more presence on your palate.

The reason for the pouring order is quite simple. A light wine dances across the tongue, while a heavier wine sits on the tongue; if you drink a light wine after a heavy one, it will skip right over the heavy dance floor you've laid and you won't taste a thing (or it might taste bitter and unappealing).

HERE ARE TIPS FOR WHAT TO SERVE — AND WHEN



As for dessert wines (icewines, ports, sweet sheries and the like), these wines have a tendency to numb the tongue to subtle flavours and make everything that comes after them taste bitter.

When all else fails and the mind can't seem to remember all these "rules" — simple or not — remember this one. White goes before red: dark colours can hide light colours, but

light gets swallowed up by the dark.

Now here are some ideas of what to serve or give this holiday season, starting with some homegrown recommendations. I'll also provide some talking points so you can sound wise about what you're giving or pouring. Let's start with the ones that are easy to find.

The LCBO carries a wide selection of Ontario wines these days, but they're not always the best Ontario has to offer — after all, the board is in "competition" with the wineries. But sometimes a great wine slips through, and that's the category the **Vineland 2009 Dry Riesling** falls into.

This is an exceptional value at only \$13.95.

Talking point: 2009 was the year of acidity in Ontario, and Riesling benefited big time. Vineland seems to be one of the last producers to release an '09 Riesling and it was really worth the wait: mouth-puckeringly delicious (**** 1/2+).

For those looking for simple pleasures, pick up the **Southbrook 2011 Connect White** (\$14.95).

Talking point: This wine is made with the Vidal grape, which should be familiar to icewine fans.

Southbrook has kept a wee bit of sweetness here so this goes down easy and smooth, yet it, too, seems to bite back with some nice acidity on the finish. And you can feel good about yourself because the wine is both organic and biodynamically made.

Both wines are great party-starters and easily available.

If you're in the mood for a road trip before the holidays, head to Niagara for two more party-pleasing wines: **Cave Spring Cellars** (in the cute little hamlet of Jordan) has a Chardonnay that's sure to please: the **2010 Dolomite Chardonnay** (\$16.95).

Talking point: This is the inaugural vintage for this wine.

The winemakers have kept the fruit of the grape intact along with nice minerality and just a kiss of oak to round it out. This wine is worth a multiple purchase as it is perfect for serving and for gifting. ▶

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► I know I promised to keep it light (and white) this time, but man (and woman) can not live by white alone — a supple, sexy Merlot might be a nice addition to the party-goer's glass. And one of the most sippable can be found at **Rosewood Estates** (also in Niagara). The **2010 Merlot** (\$22) is supple and seductive, a perfect party-platter partner (****+).

Talking point: Rosewood is not only a winery, it is also Niagara's only meadery, which means they're making wine from estate-harvested honey.

Finally, give the gift of humility this holiday season and order yourself some **Nyarai Cellars 2010 Cadence** (\$19.95). Nyarai means humility in the South African Shona dialect. Cadence is a blend of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot and it really over-delivers for the price. It's a great gift for those who like some oomph in their wine (**** 1/2).

Talking point: Winemaker/owner Steve Byfield is a Kitchener man making wine

at Coffin Ridge (Grey County) and for his own label out of Niagara. Purchase the wine online at www.nyaraicellars.com.

Heading back to the liquor store and back to our original white topic (before I get too off course), look for what many consider to be the alternative to Chardonnay: Viognier.

This grape is beginning to gain traction, not only in Ontario but also on the world stage. You should start seeing the name Viognier more and more over the next few years, so commit it to memory.

A good place to start is Chile's **Cono Sur Viognier** (\$9.95), which is plump and juicy in the mouth. It's available on the general list. Always go for the freshest date possible. (****)

Viognier is exciting and "new," but some don't like to stray too far from the norm, and that's OK. After all, there's a reason Chardonnay is the No. 1 selling grape in North America — it's familiar and comforting.

I'm not a huge oak fan when it comes to my Chardonnay and I don't want to break

the bank either, so I head to where Chardonnay took root, Burgundy, for a bottle of **Bouchard Père & Fils 2010 Mâcon-Lugny Saint-Pierre** (\$15.60). It has enough fruit and enough creaminess so that one does not overpower the other — in the wine world we call this "balanced." This one is as comforting as a warm glove on a cold day. (****)

Finally, we come full circle, back to Riesling, but this time from New Zealand. There are those who like the sweeter style of Riesling — it harkens back to their Black and Blue days (Black Tower or Blue Nun).

But this one has a sophisticated twist. **Giesen 2011 Marlborough Riesling** (\$15.95) is a little sweeter than the earlier recommended Vineland (Ontario) with less acidity. It glides effortlessly over the tongue and reminds one of summer.

Sometimes during those cold days of winter it's nice to be reminded that summer isn't so far away — or that you can always find it in your glass.

Happy holidays, everyone. ●

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