

Tonight's Theme – Winter warmers for Christmas

Get the wood burner stoked, cook up some hearty food and make the most of the dwindling daylight whilst getting the most from the cosy nights. This demands wine to suit. We're also bang in the middle of the run-up to Christmas festivities, so we need a bit of forethought to drink good quality juice over the break.

As ever we have a mixture of price points so you can have a treat once in a while but enjoy less costly bottles too. We've kept in mind variations on Christmas dinner to ensure we all have universal wine matches. And knowing it's a bit tighter on money this year we've been realistic with prices. This means taking advantages of wine shop offers in the run up to Christmas.

Like the wine you tasted tonight? If they came from The Wine Society and you don't want to sign up for a membership then speak to Tom or Marc and they'll add you to their next order. Other than that all the wines are available locally as indicated except the Vintage port and those online.

The Wines

1. Carpentier Champagne, France (£13.99, Lidl, Inverurie)

The nose on this wine is standard fare – yeasty and brioche. Getting champagne at this price point is proving tricky but this one works well. It's got a fair bit of acid but has enough going on to get the night started with a bang. Note, though, you'd need a box of Rennie if drinking a lot of it – quite acid.
Food friends: Smoked salmon blinis, meaty fish (monkfish, cod), Prawns with Marie Rose Sauce.

2. Ochagavia Silvestre – Cabernet Sauvignon, Chile (Arkwrights Wines, £6.95, online)

Marc says pure Cabernet Sauvignon is really nice – this one features a bright ruby red colour. Its highly fruity aromas are dominated by ripe blueberries and a spicy, peppery touch. The palate offers a nice concentrated body with smooth ripe tannins – not too mouth puckering!
Food friends: Beef, venison, steak, veal, beef stew.

3. Specially Selected Rousanne, France (£7.99, Aldi, Inverurie or Elgin)

This grape variety is grown in the region just below Lyon, and it has some heft to it. Not like your nimble sauvignon blanc but with a bit more oil and broader shoulders. You might not have tried this grape variety before, and it can be a "Marmite" grape but it's good for food.
Food friends: Partridge, Pheasant, Chicken, Turkey, nut roast for the veggies, goose, duck, pork.

4. Chateau Charmail, Bordeaux, France (£17, The Wine Society)

If you want to have a red wine which has the nice side of claret but no budget busting price then get this. Tom has been drinking various vintages of this for a while and he says it's consistent. It ain't the thinner end of the spectrum (because there's less merlot) but you still get the barnyard, tobacco box, sweetness with some a**e to it!
Food friends: Beef, lamb, hotpot or any other stew, a good drinker in its own with no food.

5. Primitivo di Manduria, Italy (£5.49, Aldi, Inverurie & Elgin)

Marc picked this up thinking it would be soupy, rough and just a plain dud. But no! When tested on a group of eight willing volunteers they (a) couldn't guess the price and (b) went out and bought it the

next day. This grape variety is called zinfandel in the USA. It is hearty, sweet and can be drink on its own.

Food friends: Cheeses such as cheddar, olives, salami, pepperami, beef.

6. Poggio Anima Samael – Montipluciano Abruzzo, Italy

(£12.75, Vagabond Wines, online)

Opaque ruby. Smoky black plum, earth and brown sugar on the nose, along with a hint of blackberry liqueur and mint. Sweet fruit, concentrated and yet refreshing, with an attractive note of dark berries and chocolate with lingering acidity. Finishes strong with pronounced tannins.

Food friends: olives, pasta with pesto, porchetta, vegetarian fare (nut, mushroom dominated)

7. Three Fleets Shiraz, Barossa Valley, Australia

(£9.99, Lidl, Inverurie or Elgin)

Once in a while Marc likes a red which puts some lead in his pencil and this fits the bill nicely. It's a warm, cosy and luxurious quilt of a wine with a hint of pepper but a trug of red fruits. It lines your insides but is still drinkable. The wine label is a 'rip off' of the more expensive Penfolds brand, but the wine is fair for the money.

Food friends: Rib of beef, featherblade cooked on the smoker for 12 hours, boeuf Bourgne.

8. Chateau Caronne Ste Gemme, Bordeaux, France

(£14.95, The Wine Society)

Tom and Marc tried a ton of claret (11) to arrive at those which were chosen for tonight. Some were as rough as Tom's post-panto hangover, a lot were too young ('green' tasting), and many just needed opening up well in advance. This is one of the 'open early' type – place it in the kitchen, open it up, decant it. The nose is delightful, and the lighter end of the spectrum.

Food friends: Short rib of beef, rabbit, steak and ale pie, goose, mushroom risotto, venison.

9. Fletchers Ruby Port, Portugal

(£6.69, Aldi, Inverurie & Elgin)

The lads have been a bit cheeky – they've served you up the lowest end of the Port ladder and then with the final wine took you to heaven and back. But, saying that, this grog is drinkable and for the price it's OK. You could do a port and lemon with this, or use it to bulk out a gravy....Or serve it to those who Father Christmas doesn't think doesn't deserve the Vintage stuff.

Food friends: cheeses, milk chocolate, or lash a fair slug in your gravy and flame it off!

9. Taylor's vintage port, Portugal

(About £75, various online places)

Tom and Marc went halves on a case of this lithe siren of "party" sensuality at an auction in 2019. It's as smooth as the cashmere codpiece Tom wore under his Dames outfit for the panto! Lashings of red fruits, a lovely intensity but without the 'hotness' of early years vintage port, and it settles you deep into the leather armchair on Christmas Day. Don't try and do what Marc's elder brother did – drink it in one sitting – messy.

Food friends: Cheese, chocolate desserts, stilton, Roquefort, chocolate fondant, Christmas pudding

Tom and Marc's quick wine tips.

Where we buy. We use all sorts of merchants but these three are good;

- **The Wine Society); Tel: 01438 741177**

This co-operative organisation is owned by its members. Lifetime membership costs a one-off £40 but you get £20 of this refunded off your first order. An amazing selection of wines and really helpful staff make it the best wine retailer in the UK. Their own brand Society and Exhibition label wines are brilliant value. Delivery is free if you order more than £75 of wine or 12 bottles. Smaller orders cost £5 delivery. This is not a subscription-based wine business, so you won't be lumbered with a case of wine arriving each month!

- **Waitrose Cellar (www.waitrosecellar.com); Tel. 0800 1888881**

A fair selection of wines but be careful about prices as they can be a little on the high side. Wait for their twice yearly "25% off everything" sales (they happen around April and June each year), or other offers (they always have some kind of offer). They also have a good selection of port, sherry and other spirits. Delivery is £5.95, free over £150.

- **Marks and Spencer (www.marksandspencer.com); Tel. 0333 0148423**

Surprisingly good for wine, and quite an array of different grape varieties. Fairly keen on price, albeit in their 1/3 off sales you can pick up silly bargains. Their website has a much better selection than local stores. Delivery is £4.99, or free over £100.

We can share thoughts about others - Laithwaites, Majestic, Spey Larder, ASDA, Sainsbury, Lidl, Gordon & MacPhail, Spey Larder, Amazon, Cru London, Berry Bros. and Rudd, A & B Vintners, Millesima, Aldi, Tanners, Farr Vintners, Nickolls and Perks, Morrisons, Naked Wines, Seckford, Virgin Wines, Wood Winters, etc. Delivery can be expensive for smaller merchants, so be careful.

Decant red wine: Bring any red wine out of the bottle for half an hour or more before drinking. No need for a decanter, any wide bottomed glass jug will do. In general terms you don't need to decant white wine or pinot noir. Marc buys his decanters from charity shops for about a fiver.

Wine glasses: A larger red wine glass (cheap from Tesco) gets the juice opened up. A larger glass often makes poorer quality wine taste better. Also, if you serve too much white wine in one go it can heat up and taste less appealing so use a smaller glass & more frequent pours.

Faulty wine: If your red wine smells of wet cardboard, looks cloudy or seems 'soupy' then it's corked. Don't drink it. Pour what you didn't drink back into the bottle and put the cork back in. Take it back to the shop for refund or exchange.

Chill it, don't kill it! People tend to drink white wine quite cold – my fridge is too cold at 6deg. c.. Cold white wine tastes bland, but chilling cheap white wine makes it more drinkable. Take white wine out of the fridge for 20 minutes before serving. Serve white wine between 8-10 deg. c., red wine 16-20 deg. c.

Storing wine. Don't store wine in a warm place, keep it horizontal and away from vibrations. Dark, dry and a consistent temperature between 8-12 deg. c is perfect. Be careful about garages: around here the temperature is too cold in winter and bottles can spoil or break. Wine freezes at -4 Deg. c. Don't store wine too long in a fridge – it dries the cork and lets air seep in which spoils the wine.

Keeping opened wine fresh. If you have an opened bottle of wine (red or white) and want to drink it the next day then stopper it (not cork) and put it in the fridge. We keep an empty half bottle so less than half bottles can be stored with less air. When you want to drink it bring the wine out the fridge to warm up. Air is the enemy of wine: it makes it oxidise (go off). Drink wine up within two days, port and sherry within a few weeks. Madeira is indestructible, so can be left open for years!