

Lifestyle

A stocking full of surprising wines

The seasonal holidays herald not only festive cheer, but also many festive "cheers!"

Special wines are stored or bought in time for the celebrations to accompany the fabulous meals to be shared with family and friends. We are so spoilt by the many choices in the wonderful world of wine that this is a perfect time of year to try some tasty alternatives. Enjoy your traditional dishes by pairing them some less traditional wine selections. The following suggestions can help you ring the changes.

Sparkling wine

Prosecco is an easy-drinking style of bubbly from the Veneto region of Italy. It is the kind of sparkling wine that gives year-round pleasure, brightening the mood on a warm winter evening by the fireside just as much as a hot day in the summer sun. It's soft, light and creamy, and the better examples tend to be dry in style. You can also find rosé versions as well as off-dry and sweet styles, though the added sugar often makes up for lower quality wine. For any budding bartenders it makes the perfect Bellini, the classic sparkling wine cocktail of Prosecco and peach purée created at Harry's Bar in Venice. Serve as an aperitif, with panettone or even with a brunch of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon and a selection of pastries.

White wine

The Rias Baixas region on the Atlantic coast of northwest Spain produces crisp and fragrant white wines made from the Albariño grape variety. Zesty notes of lemon and grapefruit combine with white peach flavours to deliver a fresh sensation in the glass as bracing as the sea-breeze. Serve with smoked salmon, seafood starters and fish, such as sea bass.

Red wine

New Zealand is starting to do with Pinot Noir what it has done so successfully with Sauvignon Blanc. It has created a distinctive expression of the grape variety that adds real interest and sets it apart from other countries. Regions such as Martinborough and Central Otago (the most southerly wine-producing region on planet Earth) benefit from cool climates in

which Pinot Noir thrives. The wines are elegant and medium-bodied with smooth flavours of succulent cherries and red fruits, which truly linger on the palate. Serve with roast turkey and other roast meats as well as dishes with wild mushrooms.

Sweet wine

Tokaji is the original sweet white wine from the northeast corner of Hungary. There the understanding of the botrytis fungus, which produces the highly prized and so-called noble rot, predates all other countries by a few centuries. Made from the Hárslevel and Furmint grape varieties, Tokaji is brimming with lively acidity to counter-balance the sweetness. The wine reveals characteristic flavours of caramelised orange, lemon candy and honey, with a long finish reminiscent of orange marmalade. On the label the designation "Puttonyos" refers to the number of ladles of super-ripe, shrivelled berries ("Aszú") that are added to each traditional 136-litre barrel. Aim for at least five Puttonyos to enjoy the full-on Tokaji experience. Serve with warm foie gras or blue cheeses such as Stilton and Roquefort, as well as with desserts such as bread and butter pudding or treacle tart.

Fortified wine

In southern Spain the region of Montilla-Moriles, a neighbour to the better-known Sherry region, is the hottest part of the country. The vineyards are dominated by the Pedro Ximénez grape variety, which not only revels in the sweltering climate, but also produces extremely sweet grapes. The result is known as PX, a sticky elixir as black as molasses and best described as liquid Christmas pudding. The wine's aromas are pronounced and complex evoking raisins, tobacco and liquorice, while the palate overflows with the bitter-sweet flavours of dark chocolate, roasted coffee and fruitcake. Serve on its own as an alternative to dessert or with Christmas pudding, brownies and dark chocolate fondant. Try pouring it over vanilla ice cream for an unforgettably luxurious combination.

Simon Hardy holds a Diploma in Wines & Spirits. He is the founder of Fitting Wines, which provides a range of personalised wine services in Switzerland. simon.hardy@fittingwines.com.

