



TASTINGS

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER



Wines That Belong on Your Guest List

How to Give Holiday Parties

The Right Festive Spirit;

The Time to Just Say No

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When the Wall Street Journal's newsroom throws a party, our bosses ask us for wine advice, as you might expect. They're generally looking for simple, tasty wines that are both readily available and -- here's the key -- inexpensive. Sometimes our choices really ring a bell. After one recent party, our colleague Cathy Reynolds said she was enchanted. "After a few mouthfuls, I thought, 'Wow, this is delightful.' It has a light and dry taste, but has that fullness that makes you savor the experience. And it was easy to drink without food. Some wines need something to munch on as a complement."

It's flattering when people enjoy a wine that much. How can you make that happen? Because many people and businesses will need exactly that advice over the next few weeks, we thought we'd share with you what we tell our own bosses.

We are looking for wines that will be widely popular. This means that, while we may love Riesling, for instance, we'd avoid it because many people don't love it, or at least don't know they'd love it if they gave it a chance. And because some people only drink white and some only drink red, it's important to have one of each. We suggest wines that simply taste good without explanation and aren't fussy.

Whatever you choose for a party, sample it before you buy it in bulk, if possible. Either buy a bottle and try it yourself first or ask the store to open one so you can taste it (if that's allowed in your state).

We'd guess that many merchants this year will

be pushing Australian Chardonnay and Shiraz for parties because there's a glut and stores are probably swimming in them. Just say no. Too often, these are sweet and charmless and won't add to your party. If you really want something from Australia, go with Cabernet Sauvignon (but not the popular Yellow Tail, which didn't show well in our most recent tasting). We'd also guess that wine stores will be pushing inexpensive American Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay because the end of the year is a good time to dump their losers, but we'd avoid them, too, both because many of them don't taste good and because they're so overexposed that people may be bored with them.

There are better bets from around the world. We have tried to focus on wines that cost from about \$10 to around \$15, especially if bought by the case, which should bring at least a 15% discount. Shop around. Especially at this time of year, stores often have big sales. Below, we have listed some specific examples of each wine that have done well in our tastings through the years, but it's impossible to know what labels you might see. As always, if you have a wine merchant whom you trust, that advice is valuable.

Whites

Muscadet from France. This is the wine our colleague Cathy enjoyed so much. From the Loire Valley of France, it is always a crowd-pleaser. It's made to be drunk young and has juicy tastes of tropical fruits and melons on a foundation of minerals, which lends it a pleasant tartness. It's clean and refreshing. Plus, Muscadet is often drier and has less alcohol than many whites these days. The words "sur lie" on the label indicate that the wine stayed in contact with its sediment for a while, which gives it extra body and complexity. Good names to look for include Domaine de la Quilla (Daniel et Gérard Vinet), Château de la Chesnaie, Château du Cléray (Sauvion) and Marquis de Goulaine. Like all of the whites in this list, get the youngest you see.

Pinot Grigio from Italy. Don't sneer. Good Pinot Grigio is a delight. Too much Pinot Grigio tastes like lemon water, but when it's right, this wine has ripe fruit, lively acids, earth and minerals and it can be soulful. If you get one of these, plan to buy plenty. Good names to look for: Alois Lageder, Tiefenbrunner, and **Kris from Franz Haas**. Others include Zenato, Placido, and Folonari. This grape hits its heights in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige regions, so look for that on labels.

Saint-Véran or Mâcon from France. It would be good to offer a Chardonnay, since that's America's favorite varietal by far, and that's where these two Burgundies come in because they're both made from that grape. Saint-Véran can be hard to find (and could stretch our price limit a bit), but if you happen to see it, grab it. The best remind us of lemon-cream pie -- rich, vibrant and delicious. Some have hints of nutmeg and because they're made from Chardonnay, can have that familiar Chardonnay oiliness and mouth-feel while others are crisp and tart like Granny Smith apples. Look for Verget, Joseph Drouhin and Domaine des Maillettes (Guy

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher write "Tastings," the weekly wine column of The Wall Street Journal. They also are the authors of "Wine for Every Day and Every Occasion," "Love by the Glass: Tasting Notes from a Marriage" and "The Wall Street Journal Guide to Wine." A complete revision of that book, called "The New and Improved Wall Street Journal Guide to Wine," was published in September 2002. Ms. Gaiter and Mr. Brecher have been married since 1979. Ms. Gaiter was a national reporter and editor covering issues of race for the Journal from 1990 to 2000. Mr. Brecher was Page One Editor of the Journal from 1992 to 2000. They began writing "Tastings" in 1998 and became full-time wine columnists in 2002.

Sauvignon). Mâcon tends to be simpler than Saint-Véran, but it's loads of fun, less expensive and far easier to find. Some names to look for: Labouré-Roi, Cave de Lugny and Louis Jadot.

Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand. Just about everyone likes this wine and that's a good thing, since there isn't a more consistently good, reasonably priced white on the shelves these days. Juicy and mouth-watering, with lime, passion fruit, kiwi, minerals and hints of green pepper, it's a consistent winner. Buy the youngest you see (ideally 2006). Names to look for include Giesen, Chimney Creek, Kim Crawford, Stoneleigh and Monkey Bay. The Marlborough region is a hot spot for these wines.

Reds

Portuguese red. These will not be available everywhere, but they're worth a search as a really special treat for your friends or your colleagues at work -- earthy, dry, rich and very real. People who only associate Portugal with Port will be amazed. These are often made from the same grapes as Port and you can sometimes taste the relationship, with flavors of blackberries, raspberries, pepper, herbs and even some chocolate fondue. They tend to be inexpensive because they haven't been discovered yet. We wouldn't try to give you specific names because it's so hard to know what you'll see, but you might want to look for wines from the Douro region.

Beaujolais-Villages from France, not to be confused with Beaujolais Nouveau. These are soft, fruity, easy-sipping wines. So effortless. In fact, they're so approachable that we often recommend them to white-wine drinkers who would like to make the transition to reds. Georges Duboeuf is reliable and ubiquitous. Louis Jadot is light on its feet. Be sure to get 2005.

Cabernet Sauvignon from Chile. Everyone is familiar with this grape, but in Chile it has a new twist. As with other Chilean wines, the country's terroir expresses itself with herbal, peppery tastes and sometimes a dollop of bittersweet chocolate. These are dry and earthy. Your guests will know they're tasting something different and interesting -- and the Cabernets can be tremendous bargains, too. Look for Montes or Luis Felipe Edwards from the Colchagua Valley. Santa Rita "120" from the Rapel Valley is good, too.

Pinot Noir from the U.S. American Pinot Noir has become one of the country's most consistent wines. Year after year, America's Pinots retain their real, true-fruit tastes of blackberries, black cherries, earth and vibrant acidity. They haven't gone for heft, like some of their more-expensive siblings. Good names: Beringer, Sterling, Kendall-Jackson and Trinchero. We also like Cambria and Clos du Bois.

Petite Sirah from California, not to be confused with better-known Syrah, another grape altogether. These are almost black, with earth, spices and great acidity, but the tastes you experience most are juicy blackberries and blueberries. Petite Sirah, sometimes called Petite Syrah, often needs to be opened early to give it enough air to calm down. These tend to be heady, lusty, lively wines. Among the most reliable producers are Parducci, Bogle, Concannon and Guenoc. These are especially good in cold weather.

• Look for our Wine Notes column in the Pursuits section of the Journal's Weekend Edition. Every Saturday, we answer questions from readers. If you have a question, drop us a note at wine@wsj.com. Be sure to include your full name, city and state.