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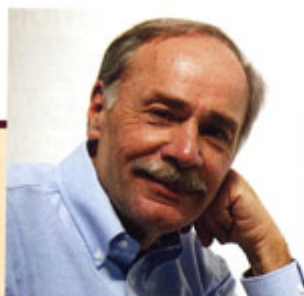
A VERY BORDEAUX CHRISTMAS

★ Médoc crus classés 1998: classic claret and bargain buys
★ Best value crus bourgeois
★ Mouthwatering Sauternes & Barsac

GREAT FESTIVE WINE BUYS:
Reds, whites, sparkling, port...

PLUS: HAUT-BRION | CALIFORNIA CABS 2002

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NORM ROBY – WHITES

OVER RECENT YEARS, the availability (and attention span) of the grandchildren largely determine our Christmas Day activities. We do reserve the two days before Christmas for getting together and sharing fine wines in the Napa Valley with our two closest friends. Then it is off to do the family rounds, literally spreading cheer as I make sure everyone, especially every new parent, is well supplied with good wine to get them happily through the holiday festivities.

Even at Christmas, Californians still prefer a glass of chilled, non-edgy white wine as an apéritif. Typically the apéritifs carry over into the first course. For these reasons, Pinot Gris, Viognier and lightly oaked Chardonnay will be well represented this year. The 2004 Viognier

from Clay Station, Lodi, (£7.95; WSe) easily meets all requirements, and its ripe peach fruit and creamy, round texture make this ideal for a large group. The same applies to the 2003 Pinot Gris, Paul Blanck, Patergarten, Alsace (£13.04; Arm), a lovely wine, with excellent spice and a silky texture. The lighter but crisper 2003 Columbia Winery's Pinot Gris (NA UK: +1 425 488 2778) from Washington is another favourite.

Traditionally both turkey and baked ham, a daunting wine-challenging combination, are presented as the main course, so we will be looking to highly versatile Chardonnays, flavour-enhancing Sauvignon Blancs and full-bodied Alsatian Rieslings. Acacia's 2003 Carneros Chardonnay (NA UK: +1 707 226 9991) with plenty of crisp apple fruit and creamy texture, and Hartford's 2004 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (NA UK: +1 707 887 1756) with apple fruit and mineral notes are Chardonnays that work well with either dish. Craggy Range's 2003 beautifully crafted Gimblett Gravels Chardonnay (£15.67; FBK) offers rich,

racy flavours and subtle oak that will bring out the best in the food. Among Sauvignons that will rise to the challenge are the juicy melon- and citrus-laden 2004 Sterling Vineyards (£3.25; LSm) and the fascinating 2004 Chimney Rock Napa Valley Fume Blanc (£12.55 (2003); McK), which combines fragrances of a New Zealand wine with California's ripe flavours.

However, if only one white is to be served this year, fine Alsatian Riesling may be the most versatile of all. With its perfumed and exotic flavours, the 1999 Riesling from

Domaines Schlumberger, Grand Cru Kitterlie (£18.99; MMB) has now rounded into perfect shape. For a smaller, more intimate Christmas lunch, there is nothing finer than the 2002 Zind-Humbrecht Riesling, Clos St-Urbain, Rangon de Thann (£43.25; Gau) which is so compact and complex that it changes and delights with each sip.



FESTIVE BUYS

