

## Gift wines

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Sunday, November 29, 2009



Unless you get a shopping list from the potential recipient, buying wine as a gift comes with its perils. It's enough to make even skilled retailers scratch their heads. How do you find something that's not available everywhere and that shows you've taken the time to think about what's not just another wine?

We've done some of the thinking for you. Here are five suggestions that should please even a seasoned wine lover.

**Well-aged Cabernet:** If there's an upside to the glum economy, it's that people with big wine cellars are trying to shrink them. And because Napa Cabernet has long been in many cellars, now's a time to try out historic wines - or to share them with friends. You can find bottles like the 1986 Robert Mondavi Reserve Cabernet (\$100, K&L Wine Merchants), 1992s from Diamond Creek, multiple vintages of Dunn, Beringer Private Reserve and more. These aren't inexpensive, but considering the freight on a current-vintage bottle of many wines (the 2006 Mondavi Reserve is \$135), you essentially get the cellar work for free and a chance to see why aging great Cabernet pays off. Look for older wines at K&L Wine Merchants, Adel's Wine Cellar in San Francisco and other retail shops.

**Burgundy's big talents:** It's a tough year to buy Burgundy, but give your Francophile pals a subtle treat with a more humble bottle from one of the region's superstars. The 2008 Les Heretiers du Comte Lafon Macon (\$20; importer: Beaune Imports) directs the abilities of Dominique Lafon of Mersault's Comte Lafon to the modest Chardonnay soils of the Maconnais. And there's the standout 2007 premier cru Chablis from houses like Christian Moreau and Jean-Marc Brocard; keep an eye out for Moreau's Vaudésir. Or the entry-level 2007 Bourgogne Rouge (\$32) from Leroy, a more low-key foil to Lalou Bize-Leroy's Richebourg.

**Serious sherry:** This year has witnessed the arrival (or return) of many of Jerez's finest examples to local shelves. Consider the Gonzalez Byass Muy Viejo Palo Cortado Apostoles (\$40/375 ml), from the rarest form of sherry, aged more than 30 years and drawn from a solera started in 1862. That's a lot of history in a tiny bottle. Or look for the Williams & Humbert Dos Cortados Palo Cortado (\$50), aged at least 20 years.

**Great white:** There's plenty to be frustrated about in California Chardonnay. So why not redeem a friend's faith in this always-maligned category? The Santa Cruz Mountains are quietly turning out some standouts, including the 2006 Mount Eden Vineyards Estate (\$48), always one of the state's most powerful, long-lived Chardonnays. From Portola Valley's Spring Ridge Vineyard, the Varner brothers got the best from the fine 2007 vintage; the 2007 Varner Bee Block (\$39) has their signature coiled-up energy, this time providing momentum for deep roasted-citrus flavors. Ridge's low-key winning streak for Chardonnay continues too, with its 2007 Santa Cruz Mountains Estate (\$40), defined by a polished oak presence and creamy mineral-edged Meyer lemon.

**Cava:** It may be made using a Champagne-style method, but this Spanish fizz is too often considered insubstantial. That might be true for the under \$10 choices, but for just a little more it's possible to pick up a bottle of serious sparkling wine. The 2006 Raventos i Blanc L'Hereu Reserva Brut Cava (\$19, William Cross Wine Merchant, San Francisco) features precise citrus flavors, while the NV German Gilabert Cava (\$15) is full of fresh mineral bite.

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This article appeared on page **K - 8** of the San Francisco Chronicle