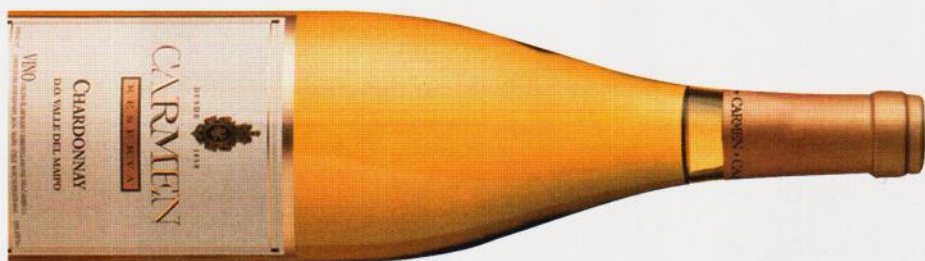


GRAPE PRESS

Holiday Cheer

CHAMPAGNE PARTIES ON BEER BUDGETS

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

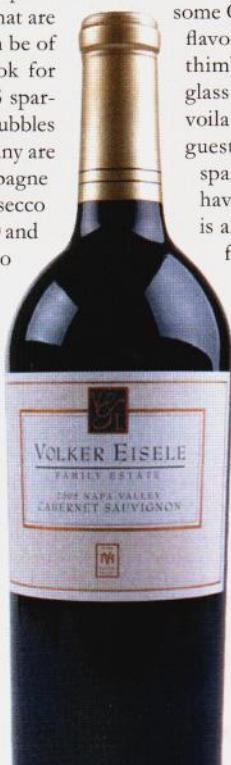


Nothing warms a winter chill like a cozy gathering of friends and wine – and despite the cash-strapped times, you don't have to tighten your belts this holiday season to throw a simple yet elegant soiree.

First off: Save the Champagne for yourself. Italian Prosecco and Spanish Cava are two sparkling wines that are reasonably priced and can often be of surprisingly good quality. Look for bargains with Australian or US sparklers. They can provide all the bubbles at a fraction of the price and many are made in the traditional Champagne style. Generally speaking, a Prosecco should be around RMB 100-200 and Cava, although a little harder to find, should be similarly priced. Decent Australian sparkling wine starts around RMB 150 and up. Shop around if you can. You may be surprised by what is actually available on supermarket shelves or from importers keen on capturing a piece of the market.

The cheaper the white or sparkling, the colder it should be served – use lots of ice or just stick the bottles outside for a decent length of time. Another tip for serving cheaper whites is to buy

If you've got really cheap bottles, the best thing is to brew up a vat of mulled wine



some Crème de Cassis (the blackcurrant-flavored liqueur from France); pour a thimble-full into a conventional wine glass and top up with white wine, et voila! A fruity, refreshing kir for your guests. If you have really tart, acidic sparklers, repeat the process and you have a kir royale. Sounds classy, but is also a good way of covering up the fact you haven't spent all that much.

Even if you fork out for the Crème de Cassis, it keeps well in the fridge for repeat wine cocktails over several weeks.

Cheaper red wines are a bit more of a challenge – try to buy New World party reds, particularly from Australia and Chile. These countries sell quite a bit of wine to China, so good bargains appear from time to time. These kinds of wine should offer fruitier flavors for less cash.

But if you've got a whole load of really cheap and actually quite

nasty red wine, the best thing for these cold nights is to brew up a vat of mulled wine (*Glühwein* or *vin brûlée*). Just pour all bottles into a large pot – don't worry about mixing different wines together. Bring to a gentle simmer and then add a good slug of brandy, lots of orange slices, cloves, cinnamon or cassia bark and a healthy heap of sugar. Simmer and infuse for about 20 minutes and enjoy in large mugs. You can't go wrong.

SELECT SIPS

One to quaff:

2007 Grace Vineyard Premium Chenin Blanc, Shanxi, China (RMB 118)

New to Beijing, this is Grace's latest offering. Green-gold in color, the nose has attractive citrus and white peach aromas followed by a refreshing palate with lively acidity and good length. Very food-friendly and a great party wine. (Available from Torres China, www.torreschina.com)

One to drink:

2006 Carmen Reserve Chardonnay, Chile (RMB 163)

Chile sends a lot of wine to China, so it's nice to see higher-quality producer Carmen on Beijing soil. Lovely gold in color, this Chardonnay has citrus and slight tropical fruit flavors with elegant oak, uplifting acidity and decent length. (Available from ASC, www.asc-wines.com)

One to savor:

2005 Volker Eisele Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa, California (RMB 360)

It's not every day you see quality Napa Cabernets for this price in Beijing. Dark purple to black, this wine boasts appealing blackcurrant and blackberry fruit, subtle oak and a stylish palate with lifting acidity, chewy tannins and considerable length. (Available from California-Asia Wine Exchange, 6299 3910)

Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker run Dragon Phoenix Fine Wine Consulting (www.longfeng-wines.com), Beijing's first independent wine consultancy. They are authors of the Dragon Phoenix Wine Blog.