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These Splurge-Worthy Wines Are Perfect For Celebrating The Holidays This Year

Brian Freedman, CONTRIBUTOR

The weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years Eve more easily justify the popping of pricey corks than any other time of year. Whether it's in a restaurant or for a quiet night at home, there's a genuine sense of occasion that results from treating yourself and your loved ones to a bottle of something that you otherwise might not normally open up.

“Wine is experiential and is best enjoyed when it is shared with those that you love,” Jamie Pollack, Managing Director – The Americas for Zachys Wine Auctions, explained in an email, “so the holidays are the perfect time to pop a cork (or four).” She added: “What makes these wines so special is that they offer a depth and complexity, nuance and intrigue, that is a moving experience for the drinker.”

She recently was impressed with the Domaine Ramonet Bienvenues-Bâtard-Montrachet 1988 (\$1070 per bottle), and recommended it to pair alongside the traditional Italian Feast of the Seven Fishes. She also loved the Armand Rousseau Chambertin-Clos de Bèze 1991 (\$3250), Château Haut Brion 1989 (\$1300), and Harlan Estate 2001 (\$800). “When I think about these wines, I can still taste them—and I haven't had some of them for months or years,” she elaborated. “I know exactly where I was and who I was with while drinking them, and it brings a huge smile to my face and a glow to my being. It is like your first kiss, or even better, your best kiss. You never forget!”



This time of year is perfect for purchasing or opening special-occasion wines. These bottles, from the 19th century and recently discovered in Becov castle in Western Bohemia, would certainly qualify as splurge-worthy, but there are infinite other options, too (Credit: MICHAL CIZEK/AFP/Getty Images).

Jessica Altieri, CEO, Wine Channel TV Digital Network, told me that she loved the Gaja Costa Russi 1997 (approximately \$320); she recommends pairing it “with extra black truffles if you really want to blow your mind.” Altieri also fell for the Giuseppe Ferrari Riserva del Fondatore 2001 (approx. \$100), a sparkling gem from Italy’s Trento region, and the Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 1997 (approx. \$220).

Rob Davis, winemaker at Jordan Winery—which itself has been making excellent wines for more than 40 years—leans French when the time comes to splurge. In addition to other favorites, he enjoys opening up great Bordeaux like Château Pichon Baron 1990 (approximately \$300) and Château Ducru-Beaucaillou 2006 (approximately \$150), and Grand Cru Champagne like the AR Lenoble Blanc de Blancs Gentilhomme 2006 (approximately \$70). To these, I would also add Chateau Haut Brion 1995 (approximately \$485), which, though it still has decades of life left, is in a great place right now, with sweet currants and cassis, as well as violets, exotic spice, and a gunpowder-like minerality.

As for me, I’ve tasted a phenomenal range of pricier wines in the past 12 months that are more than worth the money, especially this time of year. These are wines—many are

samples that I have deemed worthy of recommending and other I have either purchased at retail, enjoyed in restaurants, or experienced elsewhere—that I have not recommended in this column prior to now, and that all ring in at more than \$75. There are, of course, many thousands of great wines for under \$75, but I had to draw the cut-off line somewhere in my definition of “splurge-worthy.”

Among Champagne, the Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 2005 (approximately \$143) is still young even at 11 years old, but a fantastic partner alongside richer holiday foods. Or you could just lay it down for the next two decades and let it continue to evolve. Right now, however, I adored the aromas of freshly baked bread and gunflint minerality dancing with flavors of nectarine, apple, and honeysuckle. I also was impressed by the Champagne Collet Esprit de Couture Brut NV (\$130): The honey, peach, vanilla, and cereal grain notes are transporting. Champagne Leclerc-Briant La Croisette (approximately \$90 per bottle) is a single-parcel marvel of Chardonnay, with torrefaction, lemongrass, hard apple, and a saline minerality that demands another sip, and then another. Champagne Duval-Leroy Rosé Prestige (\$80), a Premier Cru, makes that pedigree clear with its balance of fruit and more savory notes that, as the chill comes off the bottle a bit, grow even more intriguing. From Champagne Laurent-Perrier, the Cuvée Rosé (\$99), with its remarkable notes of red-berry and citrus fruit alongside a bit of toast and plenty of mineral, is a reliably delicious and fantastically food-friendly bottling. Their Grand Siècle Brut NV (\$150), a blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from only Grand Cru villages, is a supremely elegant beauty, with fantastic concentration and finesse to the brioche, honey, hard apple, and chalky mineral notes.

White wines, though still too frequently passed over in favor of reds in the wintertime, can be perfect this time of year, especially when they achieve the levels of complexity and richness that these do. Dopff & Irion Domaines du Château de Riquewihr Les Murailles Riesling is a standout vintage after vintage—and an affordable one, too. A few months ago, I had the almost ridiculously good fortune to taste eight decades worth of these wines, and the 1945 (in general, their wines from the 1940s cost approximately \$500 – \$1500 per bottle), with its white licorice, Granny Smith apple, and chamomile layered with apricot, yellow plum, and mineral, is history in a bottle from that epoch-defining year. It’s tough to put a price tag on history like that. For something a bit younger from Alsace, I heartily recommend the Domaine Zind Humbrecht Clos Saint Urbain Rangen de Thann Grand Cru Riesling 2014 (\$75): Its notes of sun-warmed rocks, smoky herbs, and hard apricot are haunting.

For fans of California reds, perennial standouts like the Robert Mondavi Winery Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon To Kalon Vineyard (\$165) is always a smart option. The 2013, their 50th anniversary bottling, is dense and savory, with currants, black cherries, tobacco, and enlivening notes of tea and purple-blossomed flowers. The delicious M by Michael Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon 2012 shows aromas of cafe viennoise, creme de cassis, black cherry liqueur, and a touch of melted licorice. Lokoya's four 2013 Cabernet Sauvignons (each sourced from either Spring Mountain, Howell Mountain, Diamond Mountain, or Mt. Veeder, and priced at \$375 per bottle) stunningly embody the unique character of that standout vintage while expressing it, and their high-altitude places of origin, in thoroughly different and utterly delicious ways. Blackbird Contrarian 2013 (\$135), a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot, is a phenomenal red with blackberry liqueur, graphite, warm figs and licorice, and charred sage. Taylor Family Vineyards Cumulus 2012 (\$225) is stunningly complex, showing currants, charred orange peel, chocolate-covered cherries and blackberries, tobacco, and excellent structure. Gamble Paramount 2012 (\$90) is a Bordeaux-style blend with fig, chocolate, and spice, all of it balanced and elegant.

Apsara Amoenus Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 (\$80) brings a lovely cardamom- and nutmeg-tinged spice to brambly fruit and vivid minerality. Mathew Bruno Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 (\$100) is perfect for this time of year with its winter spice and black-cherry compote on the nose and flavors of kirsch-filled chocolates and licorice. Chimney Rock Tomahawk Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 (\$155) needs time to evolve, but it's already delicious with lots of red berry fruit, sappy tannins, and high-toned acidity. The Paradox X2 2013 (\$95) is rich with cafe mocha, cardamom, blackberries, plums, and forest floor notes.

Heading to Chile, Concha y Toro's Don Melchor 2013 (\$125) brings together bay leaf and raspberries with plum, cocoa powder, eucalyptus, and tobacco. Hentley Farm, in the Barossa Valley, is producing some of the most exciting wines that I've tasted from Australia. Their flagship Clos Otto 2013 (\$165) is concentrated and exceptionally expressive, with black cherries, whole peppercorn, and chocolate ganache that waltz with fresh acidity and a tannic structure that promises decades of development.

Bottom line: Splurge away this holiday season. I cannot think of many more pleasurable and memorable ways to celebrate than with a great bottle or two of wine, shared with loved ones, and remembered for a lifetime.