



Perfect bottles and more for everyone on your list

Inside
 Wines and gadgets, **G8-9**
 Spirits, **G9**
 Books, **G9**
 Store directory, **G10**

THIRST By Jon Bonné

Drink in the holidays

The only thing more challenging than matching the right drink to the right person in your life? Doing it during the holidays.

Because we know that Mom only wants the Sauvignon Blanc in the pretty green bottle, and your friend Tina only likes really peaty whiskies, this year we decided to hunt gifts at all prices that accommodate both the easy and the more unusual scenarios you're likely to face — whether it's shopping for a perfect bundle to put under the tree or a perfect bottle to bring to the party.

So I have donned my gift matchmaker hat. Glassware for the klutzy Champagne hound? Got that. Pinot Noir that won't bankrupt you? Got that, too. Whatever your holiday needs for the wine and spirits lovers in your life, we're here to help. Read on.

Jon Bonné is *The Chronicle's* wine editor. Find him at jbonne@sfchronicle.com or @jbonne on Twitter.



For: The crusty Francophile skeptic in your life.

The plan: Beaujolais Nouveau worth drinking.

The details: These have been hard and largely self-penalized times for the carefree side of Beaujolais. New vintage wines were, for a couple of decades, spirited quickly across the water to be pimped on these shores as a harvest tribute. (Thanks, M. Duboué!) This concept was bound to wear out for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the generally grim, banana-accented flavors that came to define Beaujolais Nouveau. It was worth writing off — except that this year, there are a few mouthwatering examples to grace your table. (For more, go to sf.ly/uyOIQU) In particular you might seek out the **2011 Jean Foillard Beaujolais Nouveau** (\$20, 11.5%, Kermi Lynch Wine Merchant), with its heady spice and the story depth of its terroir near the village of Ville-Morgon. This tastes like baby Morgon, and the raspberry and watermelon fruit — to say nothing of the reduced-weight bottle — will make a statement on your friends' holiday table.



For: The Pinot lover who still doesn't grok that grape's economics.

The plan: Brilliant negotiator bottles that overdeliver.

The details: Worthy Pinot on a budget is tough. But there remain a few brave folks willing to play in that sandbox (looking at you, Banshee). To get a peek at the light touch of last year's vintage, there's the **2010 The Forager Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** (\$20, 14.4%), made by Jonathan and Susan Pey, the Marin team behind Pey-Marin and several other labels. With a dusty earth edge to dusky plum and roast strawberry, it's got bulk but ample subtlety and proper oak. To use the name of another of the Peys' labels, it's textbook.



For: Your collector friend who doesn't know they need a bargain.

The plan: Capitalize on the quiet fortunes of 2008 Burgundy.

The details: We admit we're suckers for the subtle, high-acid charms of Burgundy's 2008s — both red and white. As the ripe 2008s arrive, some of them showing enough precision to taste right, some just overwhelmed by ripe fruit, reach back to the 2008s still lingering on shelves. There's something eminently affordable and drinkable, like the **2008 Charles Audoin Cuvée Marie Rogeon Beauvillain** (\$33, 13% alcohol, Martine's Wines), but you could always go large with the subtle, musky **2008 Domaine de Montille Pommard Pezerolles Premier Cru** (\$95, 13%, Beaune Imports), which always tastes more like Etienne de Montille's home village of Volnay than leathery Pommard. Any which way, these are a chance to pick up a proper slice of ageable Burgundy without paying the premium. (For more, go to sf.ly/lazsKy)



For: Those who still use a yardstick.

The plan: Big bottles, preferably without a big price tag.

The details: Nothing stokes the fires of gratitude like an oversize bottle of wine. I mean, you could bring someone a regular bottle of Echezeaux and they'll be happy, but bring a magnum of anything short of Franzia and they'll get that knowing little grin. So we are, unabashedly, big believers in big bottles. And plenty come with a reasonable price tag — Prosecco, good Muscadet, Beaujolais. For a crazy deal, grab a bottle of the **2010 Leitz Rudeseimer Magdalenenkreuz Rheingau Spatlese Riesling** (\$54, 7.5%, Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines), a perfect opening to Germany's stupendous 2010 vintage (see item at right). A top winemaker's single-vineyard bottling of one of the top vintages in memory, in magnum, for less than \$60? Righteous.



For: The unrepentant old-school California red lover.

The plan: Give them a snapshot of the modern version of what they like.

The details: If there's a time for the uncumbered joys of a simple California red, it's the holidays. To keep things close to home, let's first extol the virtues of the **2010 Rock Wall Super Alameda California Red** (\$50, 13.5%) from Kent Rosenblum's new Alameda winery. A mix of Sangiovese, Montepulciano, Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, it has a fleetness to its spicy cherry fruit and tomato-leaf aromas that's just right for the table. Even more affordable is the **Marietta Cellars Old Vine Red** (\$11, 13.5%) from Genservill's Billro family. Their Zinfandel-based blend (currently on Lot No. 50) brims with a friendly, soft fruit that tastes honest in the way so many wines at that price don't.



For: The Chardonnay lover who could use a refresher course on top quality.

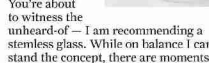
The plan: Bottles that fit their worldview, but blow their minds.

The details: There's something thankless to the errand of finding the right wine for the die-hard Chardonnay fan in your life. (And yes, we know, it's just a euphemism for white wine.) So this year, blow their minds a little with real, dramatic Chardonnay. My pick would be the **2009 Hanzell Sonoma County Chardonnay** (\$60, 14.5%), which has that trademark Hanzell power — a subtle oak toast (it's a bit like roasted peanut) with fig, pastry cream and a nerve of acidity that gives away its potential. The **2010 Fess Parker Ashley's Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay** (\$35, 14.1%) gives a more immediate, but plenty gratifying, take.

For: Your favorite bubble hound with slippery fingers.

The plan: Glassware that will keep up, in any situation.

The details: You're about to witness the unheard-of — I am recommending a stemless glass. While on balance I can't stand the concept, there are moments to reconsider — and trying to drink a decent bottle of fizz with a jelly jar or Dixie cup is a waste of good bubbles. So Govino has extended its glassware line, intended for picnics and other glass-unfriendly situations, to the fizzy realm. These **BPA-free stemless flutes** (\$13/four-pack) actually provide a solid container for sparkling wine (or shots of Tequila, later in the evening) and frame the wine perfectly.



For: Your impatient wine-geek friends.

The plan: A sneak peek at Germany's electric 2010 vintage.

The details: Germany had a beautiful freak of a year in 2010, with dramatically low yields but such a high combination of sugar and acidity that some vintners chose to remove acid from their galvanizing wines. (Go to sf.ly/lhOXPs) Those are now starting to appear, especially the basic QbA wines from top houses. We'll fully review the vintage this winter, but in the meantime, the first arrivals are a carnival all their own. Consider the **2010 J.J. Prun Mosel Riesling Kabinett** (\$25, 8.5%, Valckenberg International), the estate wine from arguably Germany's finest property. It's still ridiculously young, but the snap and acidity are almost ungodly — so much that its peach-nectar sweetness lasts nearly dry. With celery and freesia accents, it's a gorgeous drama queen.





For: Beer lovers with notions of tradition.
The plan: An oversize classic from a San Francisco landmark.
The details: It's been a few years since we tapped the mammoth-size bottle of Anchor's 2011 Christmas Ale (8% ABV, 5.5%). Even though the landmark brewery changed hands last year, the quality in its seasonal efforts hasn't wavered. So go there. It's as festive a time as you can have for under 20 bucks.



For: Your cousin who has a crush on Pinot Grigio.
The plan: A slight expansion of horizons, in the minerally white realm.
The details: In that gap between rich Chardonnay and tweaky Sauvignon Blanc lies a third option for white-wine fans, one too often occupied by wines masquerading as water. The solution to fill this third way is Pichon, the southern French grape that combines bracing minerality with rich fruit. And the 2010 Chateau Font-Mars Languedoc Pinet (12%, 12.5%, Weygand-Metzler) is a focused, pitch-perfect example, full of waxy apple and mandarin, with great sally and floral accents. This sort of balance in an everyday white makes it the fail-safe hit to bring along to any gathering.



For: The barbecue/kalbi/hot pot holiday party.
The plan: A pepper-smoke red that's a perfect house gift.
The details: If your friends prefer a bit of spice to their winter meats of pork, bœuf bourguignon, or duck, the Loire is your great solution. And while there's no shortage of options (go to sf.gly.us/HCCN), in this case it's hard to beat the simplicity for price of the 2009 Cave de Saumur Lieu-dit Les Epinats Saumur Rouge (12%, 12.5%, Grape Expectations) from an outstanding-op in Saint Cyrin Bourq. Its red is thirst-quenching and finessed, with a pleasant dusty edge to dried-chile spice and tart, fresh plum fruit. A thinking man's party wine.



For: Party gifts for a Barolo fiend.
The plan: A simpler take on Piedmont that overdelivers.
The details: Barolo may have the magnitude, but then there's plenty of possible disappointment wrapped up in Piedmont's lesser Nebbiolos. Luckily, there have been a raft of standout Langhe bottles lately. Look no further than the 2009 De Forville Langhe Nebbiolo (80%, 14%, Rosenthal Wine Merchants), a classic specimen full of tarry earth, burnt orange, rose hip and roasted cherry. It's got a mellowness, but with enough chalky depth to make it the perfect bottle to tote along to a party. You might be tempted to buy it by the case. Alternately, there's the 2010 Giacomo Penocchio Dolcetto d'Alba (80%, 12.5%, Terrell Wines), a reminder of how refreshing the humble Dolcetto grape used to be — full of plum, blueberry and quarry dust, and light on its feet.



For: Collectors of older wines with imperfect storage.
The plan: A gadget that combines the best of two cork extraction methods.
The details: Lovers of older wines will be familiar with the so-called "ah-so," a two-pronged thingie that can, when wielded gently, pull out delicate old corks without crumbling them. But sometimes they need the added force of a corkscrew. The Durand (8125 at the durand.com) combines the best of both methods with a device that is sure to become the new must-have accessory among the collectible set. Not for young bottles — but when that 1949 Musigny is staring you in the face, nothing but the best technology will do.



For: The Zimmer in need of redemption.
The plan: Dig up a tribute to old-school Zinfandel.
The details: Amid all the candied, overwrought specimens of Zinfandel that have left their original partisans scowling, there's still room for hope. Look no further than the 2008 Storybook Mountain Mayemas Range Estate Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$34, 14.7%), a savory, floral take on Napa Zin that smells like plums and tulips in a wooden window box. Jerry Seps is a master of Zin nuance, as this latest example shows. Or look for the 2009 Bucklin Bambino Old Hill Ranch Sonoma Valley Zinfandel (\$24, 15.2%), a young-vines effort from one of Sonoma's oldest vineyard sites. It's not only an homage to proper field blends (Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet and more appear), but it also offers that perfect mix of bramble fruit and dark pepper spice, with raspberry jam and bay leaf tones. Both are perfect choices for when holiday roasts come out to play.



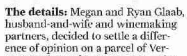
For: The Tuscanophile who needs a reality check.
The plan: A Super Tuscan like they've never seen.
The details: It's only too easy to sneak Cabernet into Tuscan fare like Chianti. But the traditionally minded producer Montesecondo took the opposite approach — showing what Bordeaux grapes can do in Tuscan soil, unimpeded by the stylish ventering that accompanies so much of the region's modern mind-set. Silvio Messana's biodynamically farmed Chianti estate includes plantings of Cabernet and Petit Verdot, which go into the 2009 Montesecondo Rosso del Rospo Toscana IGT (\$23, 14%, Louis/Dresser Selection). Aged in steel tank, it shows beautiful loam and briar accents that radiate Chianti's calcareous terroir — through a different grape. A gorgeous reminder that Cab can still be a vehicle for great soils.



For: The Chardonnay partisan with wanderlust.
The plan: A sneaky little substitute of a grape.
The details: It's likely that said fan is just falling back on old habits, but it's also possible that the reason they like Chardonnay is a textural richness and not too much acidity. So basically, if you serve them Riesling, they'll balk. Here is where Pinot Blanc comes in — another white grape with genetic ties to Pinot Noir. California has a fine tradition of Pinot Blanc, and the 2010 Lico Anile Vineyard Chalone Pinot Blanc (82%, 13.8%) dates back to a site planted by Chalone's Richard Graff in 1983. Chalone's Pinot Blanc (which lives on in the version made by Graff Family Vineyards) was famous in California wine circles for its long life, and this version with its precise pear and blanched-nut highlights follows a fine tradition.



For: The couple that discusses skin contact (the wine version) at the dinner table.
The plan: A pair of bottles from an equally wine-obsessed couple.
The details: Megan and Ryan Glaab, husband-and-wife and winemaking partners, decided to settle a difference of opinion on a parcel of Vermentino by crafting two wines. She wanted to depict the freshness of Italy's coastal versions of this grape; he wanted to pay tribute to Italian skin-fermented whites. The solution: partner wines that prove both were right. The 2010 Ryme Cellars His/Hers Las Brisas Vineyard Carmellos Vermentino (each \$33, 14.2%/13.8%) brilliantly show two sides of the grape: His is full of pine pitch and dried apricot; hers brings with sea salt and fresh guava. The results will have wine-obsessed couples arguing into the wee hours.



For: When you absolutely, positively need a surefire party hit.
The plan: Rely on the reliability of Cotes du Rhone.
The details: Though at times they can be less than compelling, at their best the reds of the southern Rhone offer some of what everyone likes in red wine: deep fruit, immediate nuance. Which brings us to the Grenache-focused 2009 Domaine des Escaravilles Les Sabieres Cotes du Rhone Rouge (\$13, 14%, Jeff Welburn Selections/Wine Agencies), with its chestnut edge to dark strawberry, thyme and pepper. There's a ton of wine for the money, with a depth that makes it right to bring to just about any holiday fete.



For: Wine hounds who want a dose of summer in December.
The plan: A spice-filled red whose sunny disposition is still just right for prime rib.
The details: There's nothing wrong with big, rich wines for the season. But the 2010 La Clarine Farm Cedarville Sierra Foothills Mourvedre (\$22, 14.2%) aromatically trends more toward the other solstice. With a stellar nose of thyme and dried sage, it evokes walking through a dry Sierra field in the heat of June. Tart berry and balsam round it out, and yet for all its light steps it has plenty of weight to take on the season's dishes. The best of Mourvedre's sunnier side.



For: Those who want a lighter touch to their holiday reds.
The plan: Tap the bounty of the Jura, where alpine snow and light wines live in harmony.
The details: With the weight of holiday food, and holiday drink, why not put your cheer in vinous form with something that brightens your step? That's where the 2010 Domaine de la Tournelle L'Uva Arboisiana Arbois Poussard (\$21, 12.5%, Jolivin) comes in. Tournelle keeps these wines from a newly hip region quite affordable, so the cool floral edges to almost transparent berry fruit are something anyone can experience. Consider it for a latke pairing.



For: A sweet-tooth friend seeking enlightenment.
The plan: A bit of Moscato from heavy hitters in the red realm.
The details: Moscato d'Asti is one of life's great uncomplicated pleasures — fizzy, fresh, ready to please. While Moscato in general is on a crazy roll into mass popularity (one of the wine industry's best ideas in years), there's purpose to learning from the masters. In this case, there's good reason why some of the top names in Barolo also dabble in Moscato. It's irresistible when done well. Which brings us to the 2010 Massolino Moscato d'Asti (\$22, 5.0%, Domaine Select Wine Estates), made by Serralunga d'Alba's master of Nebbiolo. With a flourishes nose of ginger, tarragon, clove and rose petal in addition to the usual orange blossom and heady peach fruit, there's plenty here to add some serious weight to the carefree. Versions from Barolists like Vietti and G.J. Vajra will do the same: offer a great, fresh treat from those who've staked their names on very serious winemaking.



Photos by Craig Lee/Special to The Chronicle