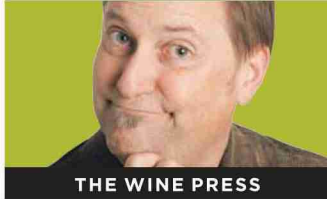


GRAPE GIFTS FROM NEAR AND FAR

DOUG FROST



might set you back a bit more,



December is a good time to reward yourself with some bubbly or, even better, real Champagne.

but hey, it's December.

Real Champagne is even more deserved: I drink Billiot, Roederer, Charles Heidsieck, Laurent Perrier, Chiquet, Pierre Peters, Jean Milan and, well, just about any Champagne, if you're buying.

There are literally hundreds of California producers worth drinking, but I like to spend my money on Au Bon Climat, Qupe, Ridge, Laurel Glen, Bonny Doon, Morgan, Lang & Reed (owned by former Kansas Citians), and they all make pretty tasty gifts, too.

From Washington state, Woodward Canyon, Gramercy Cellars, Pepper Bridge and Andrew Will wines number among my passions.

Oregon, too, has my heart: Adelsheim, Cristom, Domaine Serene, Ponzi and Ayres, the last one also the work of former KC'ers.

The best wine gifts have high-flown, foreign names with expensive-looking real estate depicted on the label. France and Italy excel in such puffery:

Bordeaux has gotten harder to find and even harder to afford in our area, but most skilled producers created lovely wines in 2005, so if it's at a price that's friendly, grab it.

Burgundy is famously complicated, but in truth, names such as Jadot, Bouchard and Girardin can be fairly easy to find and can be trusted. The Rhone Valley has had a string of excellent vintages; 2005, 2006 and 2007 all represent deliciousness from most producers. You can feel confident at just about any price level, so let your wallet be your guide.

Italy has as vast a wine landscape as France. Any wine list like this is necessarily truncated and anemic, but I share my short list in hopes that it might save you a few minutes: from Piedmont, Moccagatta, Altare, Spinetta, Vietti or Produttori di Barbaresco; from Tuscany, Selvapiana, Fonterutoli, Badia a Coltibuono, Felcina or Frescobaldi; and from the Veneto, Bertani, Zenato, Masi or Allegrini.

Closer to home, the Bastianich clan makes impressive wines; you don't have to travel to Lidia Bastianich's namesake downtown restaurant, Lidia's, to get them. They're sold in stores, too.

But if all these names fog your eyeglasses as well as your mind, relax. Trust your retailer to find you something nice; give in to the server who wants you to buy some unknown Chardonnay. It's gonna be OK. It's just the holidays.

Doug Frost is a wine and spirits consultant based in Kansas City. He holds the rare dual distinction of master of wine and master sommelier. His column appears in this section monthly. Reach him at wine@kcstar.com.

You're busy. I get it.

For years I labored in the restaurant and retail industries, and for me the holidays were a blur; indeed, I was more or less excused from the usual holiday family and friends activities. I was jealous of all those people with "normal" jobs who had all that free time during the cheery festive season.

Wow, was I deluded.

Now that I'm not a restaurateur or retailer, I have no excuses. And it turns out that this is a really busy, busy time for people with "normal" jobs: shopping for gifts, parties with people where you give them those gifts, returning those gifts to the store because they're the wrong size or color.

So I offer this short list of wines in hopes that it might speed your shopping or save you a few minutes in a restaurant, when instead of perusing a massive wine list doubling as a phone book (perhaps you remember those now-quaint objects) you just want a drink, and you want one right now.

First, let me recommend bubbly: it's the holidays, and though bubbly is often a luxury, it's deserved, particularly at this time of year. Domaine Ste. Michelle from Washington State is utterly affordable; Gloria Ferrer from California is nicely priced, too, and I recommend everything they make.

Iron Horse or Roederer Estate

