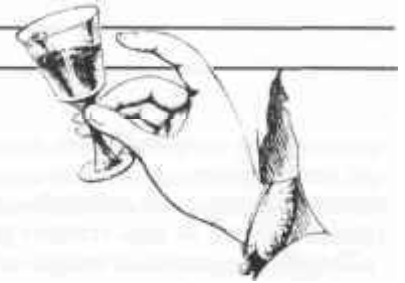


Channel Five



CHRISTMAS WINES

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Few of us in Britain drink wines regularly, so we usually think of even the least expensive Christmas bottle as a costly luxury. But compared with what we pay for other consumables, wine still remains remarkably inexpensive, except at the higher levels where other considerations such as investment and speculation apply. So while the pound of 1970 is now worth only 25p in purchasing power, we can still buy wine for less than £2 a bottle in spite of the duty and the 15% VAT.

Wine would cost less over here if one of the baits held out to us as an inducement to join the EEC — namely that duties would be eliminated and we would drink wine roughly as cheaply as the French and the Italians — had been genuine. For although custom duties were cut, excise duties were raised and we now pay as much as 85p on a 75 cl. bottle. There are several reasons why, in spite of these duties, wine remains reasonably cheap. To a degree, it is a result of over-production as mirrored in the EEC wine lake and the very large distillation programmes carried out both in France and Italy. If taxes were lower, the demand would surely be a good deal larger and would assist the many thousands of growers of fairly basic, but decent wines such as appellation controlee Bordeaux Rouge, of which over 1.8m hi were produced last year but whose unprofitable price of 4,000 francs a tonneau (1200 bottles) has not risen for three years. However, the duty we pay in Britain is exactly the same whatever the quality of the wine, so it is clear that, up to a certain limit, we receive better value the higher the proportion of the retail price accounted for by the wine. It is only the VAT which increases with the rise in the final price, thus making the quality of the wine proportionately higher.

The relatively low price of wine in Britain is also the result of competition from countries that, in the past, paid little or no attention to exporting wines — countries such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, Argentina, Chile and the 'new' producers like Australia, New Zealand and California (although they have long been producers). Even Canada would now like a foot in the wine shop's door over here.

It wasn't until the 60s when wine licences ceased to be hard to obtain and

resale price maintenance was banned, that the brewers and chain stores 'discovered' wine.

Since then, the rapidly expanding consumers' market led to the remarkable success of the High Street wine outlets, with Sainsbury's now claiming to be the biggest wine merchant, with some 15% of the trade. And while the convenience of buying wine in the High Street is undeniable, it must be borne in mind that price, allied with rapid turnover, must be a determining factor in selection and that this factor applies far less to the 'traditional' merchants of wine. This case is exemplified by looking at the vintage wines, for whereas the traditional merchant would be inclined to buy as soon as the latest vintage is available to trade buyers, the High Street grocers can only select those wines available that are mature enough for immediate sale. So the advantage here lies with the traditional merchant.

So what are the best recommendations for the consumer of wine over the Christmas and New Year period?

For aperitif *champagne* is the best but is undeniably expensive. Alternatively, *Sparkling Saumur*, at about half the price (£4 - £4.50) is commendable, and the *Cremant de Loire* from the same source at a little more, is crisper, and lighter. But the best value aperitif is certainly sherry,

underpriced owing to over-production and a weak market. A dry Fino (£2.50 - £3) 'cleans' the palate before a meal while the sweeter ones tend to cloy it; all sheries, however, keep well for at least a week if re-stoppered after opening.

Any choice of dry white wines to accompany the meal would be bound to include the *Muscadei*, Bulgarian *Chardonnay*, *Macon Villages*, *Sauvignon* from the Loire, Bordeaux, Graves, or Alsace (preferably *Riesling*), Yugoslav *Riesling*, dry *Moselle* and one of the cheaper Californian whites. Higher up the price scale would come the *Pouilly Fuisse* and vintage *Chablis*. The huge variety of red wines available present even more of a problem though the best value probably are the *Cotes du Rhone* and the Spanish *Riojas*. Among the Italians *Chianti* and *Valpolicella* are obvious choices but it is still worth paying a little more to ensure quality; the same applies to *Chdteau-neuf-du-Pape*. Burgundy is dear, but goes particularly well with festive foods: *Rully*, *Givry* and *Mercrey* from the Cote Chalonnaise cost less than the Cote d'Ors, but a good Cote de Beaune Villages at around £6 is likely to be fuller and rounder.

For dessert, but not with the Christmas pudding, the finest accompaniment is *Sauternes*. This is inevitably expensive and very attractive cheaper alternatives are the Bordeaux *Cérons*, *Loupiac* and *Ste-Croix-du-Mont*, *Monbazillac* from Bergerac, *Muscat-de-Blaumes-de-Venise* from the Rhone, and the luscious Austrian Burgenland wines. Finally, port is reasonably priced, but for Christmas it is well worth buying a fine Tawny (c £7) which tends to be lighter and dryer than vintage varieties. Just one word of warning, though, do not buy a much cheaper port since the fine tawny colour will no doubt have been obtained by mixing young white wine with red.

This Christmas the most likely claret, red burgundy and red Rhones vintages for drinking now will be those from years 1976 and 1979 and my short advice is to buy as high as can be afforded. But be sure to buy early for the choice is sure to be wider until that week of panic buying just before Christmas. The table wines will also benefit from a rest before the corks are drawn on the 25th.

