

Just the Stuff for Roasts and Reveling

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Never one to miss an excuse to open a great bottle of wine from his impressive collection, Michael Gelb is the ultimate holiday pluralist. "I celebrate everything," he recently told us. "Hanukkah, Christmas, winter solstice, Kwanzaa and Festivus."

It comes in handy having a friend like Gelb, a former Washingtonian and the best-selling author of "How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci" (Dell, 2000) and "Innovate Like Edison" (Dutton, 2007): He's a proven source for early holiday tips. When we're deciding what to drink for Christmas, we note which wines he enjoyed most at Hanukkah. This year they included a 2005 Kaesler "The Bogan" Shiraz (\$56). Gelb characterized the wine, poured with lamb, as "blueberries, blackberries and chocolate cloaked in scintillating purple velvet."

No matter what's on your holiday table -- lamb, beef, ham, turkey, another meat or maybe something vegetarian -- we'll bet it's slow-roasted in the oven this time of year. Roasting creates the wonderful aromas we prize in home cooking, and its bigger, caramelized flavors generally demand bigger wines. This week's holiday picks include wines at two price points, one sane and one a splurge, because there are at least a few days out of the year that we don't like to skimp.

From the first house credited with creating a brut champagne comes the elegantly dry **NV Champagne Pommery Brut Royal Apanage** (\$50). Made from 45 percent chardonnay grapes, it has a floral nose, light lemony-citrus flavors and abundant bubbles that pair particularly well with smoked salmon canapes -- or just as well with our favorite holiday brunch of French scrambled eggs (gently cooked in a double boiler) topped with creme fraiche and caviar.



Photo Credit: By Julia Ewan -- The Washington Post Photo

Charles Krug Cabernet Sauvignon Yountville-Napa Valley, from left, Lucien Albrecht Cremant D'Alsace Brut Rose, Corison Napa Valley and Kronos Vineyard Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon, Barboursville Vineyards Octagon.

Just a few hours by car from Champagne, delightful bubbles can be found in Alsace in the form of the **NV Lucien Albrecht Cremant D'Alsace Brut Rose** (\$20), a light-bodied pink sparkler made from 100 percent pinot noir grapes. It boasts bright strawberry fruitiness and lots of rolling bubbles, and it's a fine match with hors d'oeuvres, lighter first courses, even ham or turkey.

One of our favorite wines of the year will be hitting area wine store shelves shortly: the **2004 Talbott Sleepy Hollow Vineyard Cuvée Carlotta Chardonnay** from California (\$60). Released for the first time in November, this wine was inspired by the grand-cru-style chardonnays that captivated winemaker Robb Talbott 40 years ago. It's unfiltered and features a fascinating parade of flavors: ripe, juicy pears and apples upfront, a minerally middle and a tropical-fruit finish. Named in honor of Talbott's grandmother, this wine would do any nana proud. It went beautifully with roast turkey and baked ham, and we'd also pair it with roast chicken, pork or even lobster. Performing well with the same foods was the **2005 Kendall-Jackson Grand Reserve Chardonnay** (\$20), a lighter-bodied, creamy-textured selection with apple flavors, butterscotch notes and a hint of coconut on the finish.

The clear winner of our beef-only tasting, which included rare filet mignon and braised short ribs, was the **2003 Corison Kronos Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$98) from winemaker Cathy Corison. It took a full 40 minutes for this wine to open up and for its black-cherry fruit, pink peppercorn spice and bitter cocoa notes to show at their best. The next night, we opened the **2004 Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$70), which impressed us with its black-cherry flavors plus hints of cocoa and, of all things, Mr. Pibb. (Note to fans of the "Saturday Night Live" "Lazy Sunday" video: "Corison + beef = crazy delicious.")

Another night, when we blind-tasted a dozen red wines ranging in price from \$26 to \$116 against roast beef, lamb and portobello mushrooms, the two clear victors turned out to be the night's two lowest-priced wines. The winning **2004 Stags' Leap Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$48), with its velvety texture and bright blackberry and black-cherry flavors, soared with and without food. Second place went to the **2004 Charles Krug Cabernet Sauvignon Yountville-Napa Valley** (\$26), whose rich black-cherry flavors with hints of white pepper became even brighter with red meat.

Looking for elegance and complexity in an impressive red to drink now, or one that promises to age into an even more special gift? This year, visionary Bordeaux winemaker Bernard Magrez released his first California wine: the **2004 Bernard Magrez Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$190). This stunning Bordeaux-style blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and petit verdot grapes holds the promise of even greater enjoyment in the years to come.

Not in your price range to drink or give? No problem; check out another of our favorite Bordeaux-style blends, the **2004 Barboursville Vineyards Octagon** (\$40) from Virginia, now in its seventh edition.

Whatever holiday (or, in our friend Michael Gelb's case, holidays) you celebrate this month, it's the perfect time to raise a toast to the roast -- and to splurge a little.

In the Wine Aisle

2004 Barboursville Vineyards Octagon (Seventh Edition)

Virginia, \$40

Flavors: black plums meet cassis in this well-balanced, big Bordeaux-style red

Alcohol: 13.5 percent

Pairs with: beef, braised meats, lamb, short ribs, steak, veal

Distributors: District: the Country Vintner, 800-946-3005; Virginia: the Country Vintner, 804-784-2886; or <http://www.barboursvillecellar.com>

2004 Charles Krug Cabernet Sauvignon Yountville-Napa Valley

California, \$26

Flavors: black cherries with notes of dark chocolate and pencil shavings

Alcohol: 13.9 percent

Pairs with: red meats

Distributors: District: Capitol Beverage Group, 410-439-1601; Maryland: F.P. Winner, 410-646-5500; Virginia: Republic National, 804-226-4362

2003 Corison Kronos Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

California, \$98

Flavors: black cherries with hints of tobacco and bitter cocoa

Alcohol: 13.8 percent

Pairs with: all kinds of beef

Distributors: District: Bacchus Imports, 410-633-0400 (available at the end of January); Virginia: Country Vintner, 804-784-2886

2004 Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

California, \$70

Flavors: black-cherry fruitiness balanced by firm tannins with hints of cocoa and Mr. Pibb

Alcohol: 13.6 percent

Pairs with: all kinds of beef

Distributors: District: Bacchus Imports, 410-633-0400; Virginia: Country Vintner, 804-784-2886

NV Lucien Albrecht Cremant D'Alsace Brut Rose

France, \$20

Flavors: light-bodied with bright and fruity strawberries and persistent bubbles

Alcohol: 12 percent

Pairs with: virtually everything

Distributors: District: Winebow, 202-835-3061; Maryland: F.P. Winner, 410-646-5500; Virginia: Select Wines, 703-631-8100

Note: *Prices are approximate. Call distributors to verify availability, or ask a wine store to order through the distributor. Other resources for finding wines at retail include Winesearcher.com and Wineaccess.com*