

Last minute Christmas wines

Banned from being festively unco-operative, Jonathan Ray finds solace in cut-price wine.

By Jonathan Ray

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After a brief spell out on parole, I'm back on the naughty step. I've grown to like it. I'm allowed to read the paper, have the occasional glass of wine and make phone calls. I'm forbidden, though, to criticise the decorations, hide any more Christmas cards or be "festively unco-operative".

Nor am I permitted to question the positioning of the tree (or its very existence), whine about how much better rib of beef is than turkey, or bang on about how I'd far rather drink mulled bathwater than mulled wine. Muttering under my breath and teasing the children are also verboten.

As a result, I find myself in something of a Zen-like state. I sit far removed from the fray and watch the boys head feverishly towards a spontaneous Christmas combustion while Marina teeters on the ladder, hanging yet another home-made bauble.

I've been excused carol-singing (apparently I'm not to be trusted) and so am left in peace to dream about the credit-crunch clarets I've tucked away and my bedtime glass of Gosling's Black Seal rum. We might have had to scrimp a bit on the boys' presents but I'm darned if the economic gloom is going to drive me and the missus into teetotalism.

Follow my suggestions below and you too can have good quality, cut-price vino this Christmas. Bunk off the carols and we can share a glass on the naughty step.

LAST-MINUTE FIZZ

Montana Sparkling Chardonnay/Pinot Noir Brut Cuvée (12% vol, New Zealand; £6.99 reduced from £8.99, Morrisons). Aged on the lees for 18 months, this toasty, creamy bottle-fermented blend can easily compete with cheaper champagnes.

LAST-MINUTE PARTY WINES

Majestic has great deals at the moment (especially on champagne, with several well-known names at half price). Great party wines too, of which my pick are the soft, juicy and spicy **2007 Yali Winemaker's Selection**



Chinese researchers claim to be able to mature young wines within minutes Photo: JEFF GILBERT

Cabernet/Carmenère (14% vol, Chile) and the crisp and zesty **2008 Yali Winemaker's Selection Sauvignon Blanc** (13.5% vol, Chile). Both currently reduced to £3.99 if you buy two as part of a mixed case.

LAST-MINUTE REDS FOR TURKEY

If you like claret with your festive fowl, you won't be disappointed with the cabernet-dominant **Cru Bourgeois 2004 Château Sénéjac** (12.5% vol, France; £8.99 reduced from £12.99, Co-op), in its classy, non-credit-crunch-looking bottle, nor the fruity, merlot-based **Bordeaux Supérieur, 2005 Château Ducla** (13% vol, France; £6.49, Booths).

If you prefer pinot noir, then try the bitter cherry and mocha **2007 Cono Sur 'Visión' Pinot Noir Old Vine Block 68** (14% vol, Chile; £7.49 or £5.99 if you buy two as part of a mixed case, Majestic) or, if it has to be red burgundy, the soft, smooth, gamey **2006 Bouchard Père & Fils Savigny-lès-Beaune** (13% vol, France: £11.99 reduced from £14.99, Waitrose).

LAST-MINUTE WHITE FOR TURKEY

A fine oak-aged chardonnay might be the obvious white wine choice with turkey, but **2006 Tallarook Marsanne** (13% vol, Australia; £9.99, Marks & Spencer) makes an intriguing change and is full of toasty apricot, peach and cashew flavours.

LAST-MINUTE CUTTING-A-DASH-ON-THE-CHEAP (RED)

Chile and Portugal's Douro Valley have some of the best value reds. I am always staggered by the quality of **2007 Concha y Toro Casillero del Diablo Cabernet Sauvignon** (13.5% vol, Chile; widely available, but current best deal is £4.99, Tesco). Bung it in a carafe or decanter and no one will know how little you paid. **2005 Altano Douro** (13% vol, Portugal; £5.49, Waitrose) is crammed with juicy, complex fruit and is an ideal winter warmer.

LAST-MINUTE CUTTING-A-DASH-ON-THE-CHEAP (WHITE)

2008 Otterbrook Mill Chardonnay (13.5% vol, Australia; £3.99 reduced from £7.99, Co-op) is a versatile, crowd-pleasing standby. It's surprisingly supple and subtle, with a nice ripe finish. Otherwise tuck a case or so aside of the crisp, creamy **2007 Torres Viña Sol** (12.5% vol, Spain; £4.99 reduced from £7.49 if you buy three, Thresher, Wine Rack).

LAST-MINUTE PORT

Sadly, Christmas is often the only time we drink port. **Warre's Warrior Special Reserve** (20% vol, Portugal; £8.99, Morrison, Sainsbury's, Waitrose) is luscious, mellow and uncomplicated (and doesn't need decanting). If you're feeling more flush and can be bothered to decant, try the sumptuous **1998 Dow's Quinta do Bomfim** (20% vol, Portugal; £22.99, Tesco, Thresher) and ponder why you don't drink it more often.

LAST-MINUTE SPIRITS

Rum is all the rage and my spirit of choice at Christmas. **Gosling's Black Seal Rum** (40% vol, Bermuda; £15.99, Sainsbury's, Asda) is a beauty, whether sipped neat or as a "Dark & Stormy" and mixed over ice with the scrumptious **Fever Tree Ginger Beer** (£1.49 per 33cl, Waitrose). Failing rum, I usually opt for armagnac. The earthy, spicy **Waitrose Armagnac VSOP** (40% vol, France; £16.49, Waitrose) is very good value and widely available.

LAST-MINUTE BEER

A decent beer is essential during the festivities and I've stocked up on an English one, the citrusy, cinnamony **M&S Christmas Ale** (6.2% vol, from Cropton Brewery; £2.49 per 50cl, Marks & Spencer) and the **Nils Oscar "God" Lager**, (5.3% vol, Sweden, £1.49 per 33cl; Waitrose), a crisp and delicious pilsener-style palate cleanser.

LAST-MINUTE TREAT FOR NEXT YEAR

If, in these belt-tightening times, you're despondent at having to forgo a foreign holiday next year, despair not. Visit Evesham in Worcestershire, instead.

The Evesham Hotel is a wine lover's delight with a remarkable list of more than 600 wines, not one of which is from either France or Germany. Visit Stratford, Broadway and the Cotswolds by day and virtually every corner of the wine globe by night. Dinner and b&b start at £68 per person, per night (minimum stay, two nights).

The owner, John Jenkinson, has promised a complimentary bottle of something quirky to readers who book quoting "Telegraph". Call 01386 765566 or see www.evesham-hotel.com for more details.

COCK A LAST-MINUTE SNOOK AT THE CREDIT CRUNCH

Finally, if in a fit of financial defiance you laugh in the face of economic gloom, then treat yourself (or your adored one) to something outrageously camp and glam.

Moët & Chandon is offering bottles of their fizz customised with Swarovski crystals in the words of your choice. Visit the Atelier Moët at 70 Bond Street, London W1, between 11am and 7pm, Wednesday–Saturday (excluding Christmas Day) until Dec 28. Prices start at £50 per bottle (including next day delivery) and go up to £1,800 for a Nebuchadnezzar (equivalent to 20 bottles). Call 0845 871 1743 or see www.ateliermoet.com for further details.

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