



ABBIE CHOLEY

From finest fizz and classy claret to perfect port and aged ales, Jonathan Ray selects more of his favourite festive tipples

This time last year I was in New Zealand, happy as a lark. Instead of the guide of the holiday of a lifetime I had managed to craftily hoodwink my wife, Marina, and the boys into forgoing an English Christmas. And what fun we had, with neither turkey nor Christmas pudding in sight.

As a sop to Marina's seething ego, however, I did organise it so that we spent several days in Mafate Bay, in the Marlborough Sounds, which I thought was just festive enough. The boys had the time of their lives and never once moaned about the lack of a tree. Indeed, the little women might be tutting. When told that the row boat friend, Dinner – our boat's portly little pig, with whom they had become besotted – was destined for the festive boat, they put up a fine

display of territorial indignation and gained the lucky chop a slice of education.

To never forgive myself, I advised Ferry. "I don't care what I eat at Christmas, so long as I don't eat my friends."

We ended up with a hastily scrounged goose and dumplings good if not great. (Whip it up gently, but I've a feeling that Dinner might have not his maker come New Year's Eve.)

Inevitably, we drank plenty of Kiwi sauvignon and pinot, and drank jolly well too. I did, though, miss my Christmas glass of claret and have vowed to make amends this year.

See how, then, I'm my festive suggestions, from New Zealand, Bordeaux and beyond. Every bottle is ideal for Christmas lunch, dinner or for relaxing with friends, whether porcine or not.

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Festive fizz

Credit crunch or no credit crunch, we need fizz at Christmas. Sainsbury's Prosecco Fizzante NV, 10.5%vol, Italy (£4.99); Sainsbury's and Greeth Park Rose NV, 12%vol, Australia (£6.98); Aoda are perfect bubbles-on-a-budget; dry to off-dry and spot on for parties. Add a touch of fruit juice, bread or coral for instant cocktail.

Bottle-for-bottle chateau pinot sparklers, Wolf Blend Red Label Chardonnay/Pinot Noir NV,

11.5%vol, Australia (£8.99); Waitrose and Bluff Hill Best Rose NV, 12%vol, New Zealand (£8.99); Marks & Spencer are a step up in quality but still well under a fiver.

There are some superb deals on champagne in Majestic, Odeon and the supermarkets at the moment, so look for your favourite brands. Of all the ones listed, Sainsbury's Blanc de Noirs Champagne NV, 12%vol, France (£15 or £29.99 per magnum), a small award winner, is about as good as it gets.

I love sweet champagne, particularly at Christmas when it's ideal for mid-morning celebrations, festive toasts of pudding, and Veuve Clicquot Demi-Sec Champagne NV, 12%vol, France (£24.99); Bibendum 020 7722 5577 is my current favourite.

If you crave something new and can afford to push the boat out, try Lanson Extra Age Best Champagne NV, 12.5%vol, France (£52.50-£75). Just Chateau 01883 284884, Consey & Barrow 020 7285 2500, an exquisite five-bottle blend of three vintages blend new to the market.

Peachy pinots

New World pinots just get better and better. They're food-friendly, accessible and please many palates. 2007 Elnazur Wolf Blend Pinot Noir, 14.5%vol, Chile (£8.70-;

£10.50); Majestic, Booths, Taurus Wines 01483 548484, Stone, Vine & Sun 01627 123511, 2007 De Bortoli Pinot Noir, 19%vol, Australia (£15.59 as part of a mixed case, otherwise £16.99); Odeon; and 2006 Earth's End Pinot Noir, 13.5%vol, New Zealand (£14.99); Marks & Spencer are three excellent examples that have recently caught my eye. An equivalent burgundy might be more complex, but it might also be a lot more expensive.

Classy clarets

Despite my love of all things Kiwi, I really did miss knocking back a fine red Bordeaux alongside the festive fowl. I'll be making up for this year with the Eux 02 004 Château La Tour de By, 19%vol, France (£16.79-£19.99); Noel Young Wines 01223 566744, Corbis of Colham 01737 31020, Fleury Wright 01279 465618), a classy, nicely maturing, citrusy Bordeaux made from a great vintage.

The one-list 2007 Berje's Pomeol, 13.5%vol, France (£17.96); Berry Bros 0800 280 2440 and 2006 Margaux, 19%vol, France (£18.45); From Vinaya District 020 7400 9909) are real gems from the vineyards of Château Fyfi-Clair and – ahhh, don't breathe a word – Château Buiset respectively. Although more

than ready to drink, being classy, complex and somewhat, both will last for some time.

Ports and sweeties

Although I happily drink sweet wines throughout the year, it's only at Christmas that I can persuade my stomach to dearest to follow suit. Can't think why, for they're so versatile, as good alongside rich stews and sticky cheeses as they are with puddings or gelled back on their own. They can also be extra-long value.

2006 Couda Port II, Graves, 19%vol, France (£5.95 per 37.5cl); From Vinaya District 020 7400 9909) is a case in point. A decent price for an all-but-sustainable or better made yards from Le Château, Château Coustet. The luscious 2006 Château Laurette, Sainte Croix de Mont, 15.5%vol, France (£10.95); Private Cellars, too, would be twice the price if from a glass of appellation.

The 2002 Moscatel de Setúbal, 17%vol, Portugal (£7.99); Tannets 01743 234425) is a real discovery for me. Rich, concentrated and marinated by sweet, it's an absolute steal and perfect with mince or used on a better without them. Taste the D'Espresso Sweet Port X in a net Sherry, 19%vol, Spain (£5.49 per 50cl); Sainsbury's is daffily, gloriously delicious – Christmas pud in a glass.

Port, of course, is a must, but in these tough times it doesn't need to be vintage or 40 Year Old Tawny, 2003 Taylor's Late-Bottled Vintage Port, 20%vol, Portugal (£9.99 reduced from £12.99 until January 5; Waitrose) is sweetly enough to please even the most dedicated port-drinker.

Bored with wine

Sometimes only a gin and tonic will do and nothing works better as a non-bruising conversation piece than Gabriel Boudier Safran Gin, 40%vol, France (£23.95;

Arthur Rackham Empatia and selected independents). Serve neat on the rocks or with the inimitable Fever Tree Tonic (£2.99 per 4X 20cl, widely available).

And you'll need an occasional beer, of course. I always stock up on little stubbles of fine lager and keep them in the fridge door for emergency refreshment. For something a bit more weighty and tasty, I suggest the stunningly fine Link & Gunn Original Rum Cask Finish, 7%vol, Scotland (£1.49 reduced from £1.99 per 33cl until December 1, 9% alcohol). Try it with vital and ham pie or even tartan.

For a more refined night-time glass, I can't think of anything more suitable than Old Dutch Highland Park Age of Bee, 8%vol, Scotland (£4.35 per 33cl; Royal Mile Whisky 0131 524 9388), a rich, dark, chocolaty porter matured in cask for only used to age 18-year-old Highland Park Single Malt. But enjoyed straight in as a treat by the fire.

CHRISTMAS Wines PART 2

More wines online

See Part 1 of Jonathan Ray's Christmas Wines guide for great for drink parties, unexpected guests and Christmas Day lunch at telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink

Bordeaux 2005

"By far the greatest Bordeaux vintage I have ever been lucky enough to taste." Jancis Robinson MW

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