

AS A RESTAURATEUR, YOU'RE ALWAYS thinking of the best wines to accommodate your customers' tastes, palettes and budgets. With the holidays in full swing, though, suddenly you're just as likely to find yourself on the consumer end of the wine-buying equation. Whether you're looking for a gift or the perfect pairing for your holiday dinner, your choices are never-ending. The key is to find a wine that will compliment the range of savory, salty and sweet flavors that come with the holiday season.

St. Helena Wine Center's wine buyer Martin Reyes suggests pinot noir as a reliable selection since it can accommodate such a wide variety of flavors. "Fiddlehead Cellars' 2004 pinot noir has all of the things you'd look for in a pinot noir. At roughly \$40, it has a moderate alcohol level and is very flexible, but it still won't be overshadowed by all of the strong flavors in a typical holiday meal," says Reyes. If you'd like to stay in the \$20 range, he suggests Tolosa's Edna Valley 2005 pinot noir or Five Vintners' 2005 zinfandel, which also works well with a range of flavors. Michael Perry, manager and wine club director at the Lodi Wine and Visitor Center also recommends zinfandel as a dependable pick. "With a nice balance of fruit, dark berry flavors, spices and sometimes a hint of black pepper, zinfandel tends to be complex but balanced, making it perfect for holiday meals."

Alex Coggiola, wine buyer at Oakville Grocery in the Napa Valley, recommends the 2006 Sangiovese Field Stone rosé if you are faced with the challenge of accom-

The perfect fit

Finding a holiday wine that's worth raising a glass to

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modating a finicky guest. "It isn't too sweet or sugary, like most rosés. The flavor is soft and smooth—something you'd want to sip and relax with." It's also a great gift pick since it appeals to most palettes and, at roughly \$12.95 a bottle, tastes more expensive than it actually is. This price point also lends itself to Lazy Creek Vineyard's 2005 pinot noir out of Anderson Valley, which Coggiola says pairs well with lamb, pork and rabbit, among other holiday fare. In the \$25 range, Coggiola recommends Etude's 2006 pinot gris as an outstanding choice that goes well with most holiday staples

such as ham and turkey.

If you're looking for some more unique picks this year, Jon Bonne, *San Francisco Chronicle* wine editor, suggests Piedmontese Dolcetto—a generally underrated wine—for under \$20 and Grower champagne in the \$20 to \$50 range. Also worth looking at in the under \$20 category are many Alsatian white wines which Bonne says are great with a holiday meal and always overlooked. At a slightly higher price point, Santa Barbara County syrah has some fantastic wines in the \$20 and above category that are well-priced for what they offer.

No matter what you choose, Reyes advises consumers to always go with a high-acid wine for holiday meals. Low-acid wines are great for pre-dinner mingling, but when it comes to finding something that will bow to the eclectic range of flavors that are bound to show up on your holiday table, high-acidity is essential to keep things balanced. **RS**

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Notes from the cellar

ALDER YARROW (AUTHOR / WWW.VINOGRAPHY.COM)

If you don't know a wine lover well enough to know *exactly* what bottle of wine to get him or her, then don't bother! The best gift in this case is a gift certificate so they can buy a bottle that they know they will enjoy.

GARTH HODGDON (FLOOR MANAGER AND CERTIFIED SOMMELIER / 58 DEGREES & HOLDING CO., SACRAMENTO)

Lucien Albrecht "Brut Rosé", Cremant d'Alsace Alsace, France (\$19). Bubbles are always a great gift. This wine is 100 percent pinot noir from France, the country where sparkling wine was invented and perfected. Bursting with flavor yet balanced and refined, this wine offers an amazing value. Truly a delight to give and receive.