



Spirited presents

Toast friends with gifts of bubbly, beer, wine

SUCCESSFUL Christmas shopping is largely a game of chance, much like poker or Russian roulette. The trick lies in evaluating the other guy's likes and dislikes while putting your own preference on ice.

Help is oftentimes limited to a list of the recipient's sizes, favorite fragrances and colors, since personal instincts might lead a giver down the path of gifts soon to be returned. After that, the shopper is on his or her own.

But with gifts of spirits, you can unbridle your own passions when choosing the perfect gift. Whether it's champagne, wine, beer or accessories, gifts of spirits are universal favorites. Your own tastes can help you choose a gift that almost everyone would enjoy. Why not give a bottle of that wine you savored on your fifth anniversary? Or the champagne that was the toast of the New Year's Eve party?

Here are some suggestions for gifts of spirits this Christmas:

WINE: The wines of Washington state's Hogue Cellars make a statement on the palate. Wine experts sing their praises, too. Last year, the 1983 Cabernet Sauvignon walked off with both Gold Medal and Best of Show at Atlanta's International Wine Competition. The 1985 Semillon recently took a gold in Washington State and the 1984 Merlot Reserve was voted tops by professionals attending a Hawaiian Merlot symposium.

But then, Hogue's whole roster consistently wins medals: the Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc and Fume Blanc; the Johannisberg Rieslings from Schwartzman Vineyard and Yakima Valley; and White Riesling Markin Vineyard and Cabernet Blush.

The four-year-old Hogue's distribution now covers most of the East and West, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Alaska and Hawaii.

CHAMPAGNE AND SPARKLING WINES: Celebratory fare at Christmas tables leads to celebratory champagne. Favorite bubbles are Krug, Bollinger, Moët-Chandon (and subsidiaries Dom Perignon and Dom Ruinart), Piper Heidsieck, Taittinger, Pommery, Mumm, Veuve Clicquot and Laurent Perrier.

A gift of champagne or sparkling

wine will make anyone's day. Or year.

Recommended sparkling wines from California include Domaine Chandon, Piper Sonoma, Schramsberg, Papagni, Gloria Ferre. From Italy are Gancia, Lungarotti, Contratto, Berlucchi, Fontanafredda, Ferrari and Freccobaldi.

With or without champagne, you'll win friends with gifts of DeKuyper Schnapps, especially original peachtree and harvest pear schnapps. Splash them into orange or grapefruit juice, champagne or better yet, try them half-and-half with brandy on the rocks.

Another good gift idea is a set of three minibottles of Petite Liqueur, Moët & Chandon's unique sparkling liqueur.

BRANDY: If your brandy is Armagnac, more specifically Armagnac Sempe, then you're among the country's leading trend-setters and you might want to pass this "status" to a friend for Christmas. Centuries old, House of Sempe's Armagnac has complexity and character due to single, continuous distillation, good climate, geography and personal loving care.

For the Scotch lover, make it Macallan's Single Highland Malt Scotch Whisky. Praised as a "Rolls Royce of Scotches," it's one of the most richly-hued and flavored, with rare winelike character, complexity and smoothness, the color intensified by aging in Oloroso Sherry casks.

ACCESSORIES: You can create an original gift with spirits plus accessories. For instance, try filling an ice bucket with lots of candles, sparkling wines like Freixenet Cordon Negro or Carta Nevada Semi Seco, and two champagne flutes. Then add imported chocolates for the sweets lover, perfumed bath oil for the romantic or confetti and streamers for the outgoing.

Or, assemble the makings for a perfect martini. A martini pitcher or mixing glass can be purchased in any good tabletop or housewares department and restaurant supply stores. Buy vodka, like Stolichnaya, and dry Vermouth.

Bar accessories from companies like International Wine Accessories of Dallas also make wonderful gifts. How about a decanter, a good champagne cork popper or a wine chiller to simplify entertaining?

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