



Spirits of season: what's best to give

CORKS POP, bubbles foam and celebrants shout "Salud!" or "Cheers!" or "Iechyd da i chi-vi!" (We added this last one so you can impress your friends. It's what they holler in Wales, and it's pronounced "yock-eed tha ee skive!").

Tis the season to raise your glasses — whether they contain champagne, Scotch or sparkling grape juice.

All you need to entertain your friends are a well-stocked bar and some munchies. If you're hosting a New Year's Eve party or a holiday dinner, include an assortment of sparkling wines.

As a courtesy to your guests, offer non-alcoholic beverages that are alcohol-free. When it's your turn to be a guest, be sure to bring a gift — a bottle of wine or spirits or an accessory for the bar.

Here's the traditional bartender's formula for setting up a simple home bar:

- Something white (vodka, gin, rum or tequila).
- Something brown (Scotch, whiskey or bourbon).
- Something sweet (a liqueur).
- Wine and/or vermouth if you want an aperitif or plan on making martinis.

For a typical party, you'll need a variety of mixers, including club soda, tonic, ginger ale and colas — in addition to orange, grapefruit and tomato juices. Keep milk and cream on hand, too. Prepared mixers, for Bloody Marys, margaritas, daiquiris and pina coladas, will make your job easier.

Check your bookstore for a bartender's guide — someone might ask you to make a Fuzzy Navel or some other exotic quaffable.

Standard garnishes include olives, cocktail onions, slices or wedges of oranges, lemons and limes. Use maraschino cherries to add a colorful touch to a Manhattan and pineapple wedges for pina coladas.

"DON'T CALL SPARKLING wine 'champagne,'" caution the makers of Domine Chandon. "It isn't really. Do dazzle your friends with the knowledge that the vineyards of Champagne are about the size of Brooklyn."

Although only wine from a certain area of France can be rightfully called "champagne," there are many excellent sparkling wines on the market.

In general, good sparkling wine is remarkably versatile when it comes to complementing food — although there are glaring exceptions, such as rare roast beef or blistering chili or maybe peanut butter.

A light- to medium-weight sparkling wine with a fairly delicate flavor (Chandon, Brut, or a blanc de blancs champagne) works better with fish than a more substantial full-flavored blanc de noirs or rosé champagne.

A sparkling wine made in a full-bodied style with lots of flavor stands up well to roast game, pâté, ham, wild mushrooms, barbecued lamb or other foods with more robust character.

If you're not certain about a sparkling wine's style, ask a good wine merchant or your waiter — or host an educational, fun tasting for friends.

It's difficult to find a good match between brut sparkling wine and sweet dessert (either the dessert makes the wine taste sour or the wine makes the dessert seem cloying). Try to postpone the toasting until after dessert, or serve a dessert that isn't very sweet.

Statistics show that the consumption of alcohol is going down. Many who have chosen to abstain are discovering that skipping the alcohol has advantages: they're spared worry about the drive home, morning-after blahs and potential health concerns (such as too many calories!).

The makers of V-8 vegetable juice have put together a recipe booklet for alcohol-free "mocktails." Here's a sample recipe:

RED ROOSTER PUNCH

4 cups vegetable juice, chilled
1 bottle (10 ounces) ginger ale, chilled
1 tablespoon lime juice
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
Generous dash hot pepper sauce

Makes 5 1/2 cups or 6 servings.

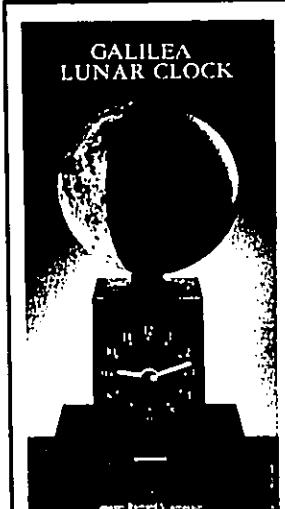
In large pitcher, stir together all ingredients. Serve immediately in chilled 10-ounce glasses.

Diminutive quarter bottles of sparkling wine have arrived on the shelf of your favorite wine merchant, just in time for the holidays. Pop one into the stocking of someone who has been very, very good.

Wrap up an exotic peach, pear- or berry-flavored liqueur, schnapps or wine cooler — or a fruity, flowery, aperitif wine such as Lillet — in a gift basket filled with spiced nuts.

Anything Russian is in, and spirits are no exception. The makers of Stolichnaya have come out with a sampler gift pack of three bottles of authentic Russian vodka — two of which are flavored.

With your gift of sparkling wine or champagne, include a set of flutes — those lovely, elegant tapered glasses found in the china section of department stores.



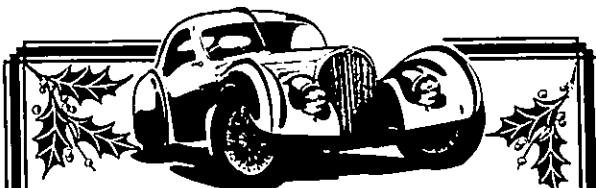
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