

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

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Happy New Year!

Given that champagne is the traditional beverage to ring in the new year, I wanted to kick off the column with [the *Tasting Panel Magazine's*](#) champagne event. The group formerly known as the Bon Appetite Tasting Panel presented 44 bottles of bubbly from around the world. The results ranged from corked to middling to downright exceptional.


Instead of going through all 44 or belaboring the misses, let me focus on the ones that I found most rewarding. Once such bottle was a 1998 [Nicolas Feuillatte](#) Blanc de Blanc (\$50), a 100% Chardonnay Cuvée. A lovely pale gold, with a bouquet of aromas both mineral and subtly fruity, this moderately priced bottle held its own against some of its more expensive brethren. Similarly matched was the [Taittinger Prelude](#) (\$75), a 50-50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blend. Intensely fruity, this Grand Cru blossomed from sharp citrus to mellower ripe fruits on the palate.

I enjoyed the demi-sec [Pol Roger](#) Rich Non-Vintage (\$45), which I thought well balanced and medium bodied. [The Comtesse Michèle Elyzabeth](#) Reserve (\$40) is a decent bottle with firm flavors which grew on me more as I appreciated the value it represented for its price. The notable [Nicolas Feuillatte](#) Cuvée Speciale 1999 (\$55) was light, delicate and very effervescent. Deeper in color and flavor than many others we tasted that day, the [Bruno Paillard](#) Brut Millesime 1996 (\$65) won me over with a long, rich finish. Its fruit was toasted, and rich caramel tones laced throughout.

Moving up a price point, the [Dom Perignon](#) Vintage 1999 (\$125) is quite a bottle. Scored 96 by Robert Parker, this vibrant wine showed tropical fruit on the nose and peppery warmth on the tongue. Whether you find it available by the glass at a special watering hole or discover it in a store, it's worth the splurge to experience this first hand!

For sheer decadence, I thought the [Perrier Jouet](#) Fleur de Champagne Blanc de Blanc a delight. Rare and therefore expensive, this complexly layered drink is full of fresh fruit, honey and vanilla. That said, unless you're planning an incredibly special occasion, it's hard to justify the \$200 price tag.

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As I may have mentioned in this column before, my extended family is filled with oenophiles – several of whom actually live in the Napa Valley region. As a result, family occasions tend to turn into wine occasions. This Christmas was no exception. Based on family traditions, we have large dinners on both Christmas Eve and Christmas night. Everyone contributed bottles of red, which meant we had an interesting selection from which to sample over the two days with a variety of foods.

Among the group was [*Del Dotto's Vineyard 887 Cabernet Sauvignon 2005*](#), a smooth, fruit-forward bottle of wine with 14% alcohol. I liked the balance of its jammy cherry and berry tones with a dry finish. This bottle should hold nicely for another five to seven years.

We tried the [*Scott Aaron Integrity 2005*](#), a pleasant blend of 80% cabernet sauvignon, 5% merlot, and 15% cabernet franc. This prize-winning wine is Bordeaux-like in terms of its smooth blend and dry back-of-mouth finish. Sadly, this wine is now being sold off. It's always sad to see a talented winemaker fade away.

Alexander Valley's [*Silver Oak*](#) reds have an outstanding reputation for a reason. We enjoyed an elegant *Silver Oak Cabernet Sauvignon 2003* that certainly lived up to its reputation. Smooth and medium-bodied, the wine burst with dark-toned fruits and herbs, paired beautifully with foods, and presented a long velvety finish

We also sipped a [*Chateau Dassault 2005*](#) from St. Emilion, which lived up to its Grand Cru designation. Supple yet firmly structured, the tannins balanced robust fruit tones nicely.

The [*Arnaldo Caprai's Sagrantino de Montefalco 2001*](#) was a downright splurge, with a price tag of approximately \$100. This spirited drink was spiked with active spices, mid-level tannins and 13% alcohol. Complex and fresh, it still managed to be complex. I've liked this bottle before, and loved it with our holiday meal.

I had to chase [*Match Wine's Cabernet Sauvignon 2002*](#) down on the 'kids' table' (the youngest child is in his early thirties). Bought in Napa after my visit with winemaker Cary Gott, at \$75 this was a good buy. Gott is the former executive vice president of **Seagram's Chateau and Estates** and a noted traveling winemaker. The wine is plush with smooth tannins, while currant and plum flavors are cut with herbal notes. This medium-bodied wine is one to have in your collection.

We also had another bottle made by another consulting winemaker – in this case the renowned Frenchman, Michel Rolland. His [*Chateau Bertineau St. Vincent Pomerol 2004*](#) was edgy and aggressive, with smoky tones and great fruit. It concluded with strong, supple tannins. This wine can easily be cellared for several more years, and is also well worth hunting down to add to your collection as well.

Between the great wines and foods, our family holiday was a truly decadent affair! My thanks to the event host, the various family wine contributors, and all the drinkers' opinions.

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Here's to a happy, healthy 2008. I'm sure everyone can raise a glass to that!

Remember to drink what you like and like what you drink.

Joel M. Fisher Ph.D writes a monthly column for the [Chefs de Cuisine Association of California](#) and has been the wine instructor these past six plus years for the Culinary Arts Department, [Art Institute of California-Los Angeles](#). Now teaching wine at the California School of Culinary Arts (Cordon Bleu) he is also Director of Public Affairs for Avalon Hollywood, and as a partner in [WineVineandDine](#) conducts wine tastings, wine dinners, and wine-and-food pairings throughout Southern California. You can also find him as the Wine Host, on CRNi Digital Radio. His email address is jmfisher@aol.com. Also find out more at <http://www.joelmfisher.com/>. This will be Sara Fisher Chapin's last column for a while, as she prepares for the welcome debut of her first vintage: a 2008 baby boy. Her father will miss her expertise, but wants to convey his deep appreciation for all of her efforts. Many thanks. And, I look forward to the next generation.