

WINE RACK ESSENTIALS

BY CICILY CORBETT

It's Friday night, and you're off to check out that trendy new club downtown. Or maybe you've scored a first date with a hot new guy. Perhaps you're planning to surprise your long-time lover with a sexy treat when he walks in the door.

Well, no matter what you've got planned, if you have any brains at all you're not running around at the last minute looking for the perfect outfit, or shoes that match your capris exactly. You're not experimenting with your hair at a salon you've never tried before.

The secret to making a great impression is planning ahead.

Planning ahead is especially important when it comes to wine. Like your shoes, your cell phone, or the pictures on your wall, the wine you serve says a lot about you. Sure, you can rush to the store at the last minute and grab whatever the clerk says goes with nachos or steak or chicken dijon, but do you really trust some random hireling to make a style statement for you? Stored properly, wine doesn't spoil, and usually only improves with age. Good wines increase in value as they age, too, making them a good investment. Here are a few classy wines you can stock, with suggestions about when to pull them out:

Beaujolais is a great all-around red wine. Fruity and fun, it's the blue jeans of wine. You can't go wrong with **Georges Duboeuf**, the largest producer of Beaujolais. His beautiful flower labels are easily recognizable in the wine shop. For ten dollars or less, you've got a great accompaniment to hamburgers, pizza, or any snack from cheese to cheez doodles.

Merlot is another must-have red: full-bodied, with flavors of berry and a hint of chocolate. Serve it with meat, pasta, stew, or hearty fish like tuna. **Marilyn Merlot**, released every year on June 1 (Marilyn's birthday), is a gorgeous example. The wine is as seductive as the label, which features a different image of the starlet every year. The 2005 vintage, released this year, goes for \$27. (1985 is selling right now for \$3800; 1989 for \$3000. A bottle every year on *your* birthday might be a better investment than an IRA.)

Cabernet is the quintessential wine for steaks and roasts, feathered game, hearty risottos, soft-ripened cheeses. **Cabernets** are huge, rich wines, with astringent tannins that will mellow with cellaring. Here are three ready to drink right now, but which will only improve with age. They'll run you \$40-70, but they're worth every penny: **1998 Wynn's "John Riddoch" (Coonawarra, South Australia); 2001 Clarendon Hills Hickinbotham Vineyard (Clarendon, South Australia); 2001 Pride Mountain Vineyards (Napa).**

Orin Swift "the Prisoner" is a very unusual blend of Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petite Sirah and Charbono from California's Napa Valley. Fruity, creamy, and silky, it's good with cheese and chocolate. The 2005 vintage costs about \$25.

Ok, so much for the reds. On to the whites. **Chardonnay** is the world's most popular white varietal: dry, bright, crisp, and citrusy. It's great with grilled poultry and seafood,

light pasta dishes, paella, risotto, and semi-soft cheeses. It so popular that some people turn their noses up at it. Surprise the hell out of your wine snob friends by serving what the world's foremost wine critic, Robert M. Parker, Jr., calls "the finest New World Chardonnay available." That would be **Cartlidge & Browne Chardonnay**, and it will only set you back about \$10.

Riesling is a sweeter white, from a grape variety historically grown in Germany. The grapes are left on the vine for varying lengths of time; evaporation or even freezing concentrates the sugars. **Riesling** is a versatile wine for pairing with food, because of its balance of sugar and acidity. It can be served with white fish or pork, and is one of the few wines that really goes with Chinese, Indian, or Thai cuisine. A good choice here is **Monchhof Riesling Spatlese Urziger Wurzgarten 2005**, for around \$21.

Ice wine is **Riesling** made from those frozen grapes. Serve it with fruit, pastry, or cheese such as cheddar, mascarpone, or brie. At \$22 a bottle, **Andrew Rich Gewurztraminer Ice Wine** is a good choice.

Red, white, dry, sweet—wine choices can get a bit confusing. Fortunately, there's one wine that goes with absolutely everything, and is fantastic all by itself. That, of course, is **champagne**. (Show your savvy by reserving that word to refer to bubbly from Champagne, the beautiful region of France. Everything else is "sparkling wine," if you please.)

You can't get hipper than **Champagne Nicholas Feuillatte**, a young brand which has rocketed to the fifth-largest seller in the world. **Feuillatte** pairs with a different young, modern artist every year and shows up at all the best places. The **Brut NV** (dry, non-vintage) is only around \$25 a bottle. Or stock up on "One Fo(u)r Fun" quarter-bottles, which come in pink and blue with wrist ties. Put one at each place setting, or take along on a picnic. Too cute!

Cava is not champagne, but it's made by the same method. This sparkling wine comes from Catalonia, Spain. At \$5-10 a bottle, you can brush your teeth with the absolutely delicious **Segura Viudas Brut Reserva Cava**. Serve it with breakfast, lunch, dinner....take it along as a hostess gift....turn anything from friends dropping over to washing windows into a special occasion.

Demand for wine is soaring worldwide. Russia, China, Romania...everyone is making wine. Jump on the moving train and learn about wines, if you haven't already. Stock up on some of the above suggestions; then, little by little, develop your own favorites. Make sure your wine says something seductive about you!