

# FESTIVE CHEER

Experts pick the best wines for each course of your festive meal



## OUR RESEARCH

We asked the seven major supermarkets to nominate wines from their ranges to go with the four courses. They could choose freely from styles, regions and grape varieties but had to nominate from two price groups: under £6 and between £6 and £12. We then chose 31 of these wines, making sure we had a fair spread of styles and prices from each supermarket.

Our seven professional tasters sampled the wines 'blind' (labels and bottles were covered) and gave each a mark. We then averaged the scores to find the winners.

## STARTER

**The food** Smoked salmon.

**The wines** Eight on test, costing from £5 to £8 and ranging widely in style from fruity Australian Chardonnay to lighter European Sauvignon Blanc and dry, unoaked Muscadet and Gavi.

**What we looked for** A wine that was full enough to stand up to the rich, fatty fish and its hint of smoke, yet with a fresh, clean acidity to leave a mouthwatering finish.

**Best Buy Felsner Grüner Veltliner 2004, Moosburgerin, Kremstal, Austria** (Waitrose, £7.99) This relatively rare Austrian white was our clear winner – it received high scores from all tasters and was the top-scoring wine out of all the 31 wines tasted: 'A very good wine and

good for fish'. Our panel typically described it as having a smoky, mineral character with 'enough depth of flavour and crisp acidity to stand up to smoked salmon'.

**Other choices Marks & Spencer St Mont 2004, Côtes de Saint Mont, France** (£5.50) Our runner-up, though coming some way behind the Grüner Veltliner, was selected for its 'full flavour and grassy acidity' and was judged to have enough bite to take on the characteristics of smoked salmon. **Sainsbury's Classic Selection Muscadet de Sèvre et Maine sur lie 2004, France** (£4.99) This good-value wine came third. It was praised for its crisp quality and slightly floral, nutty aroma with hints of lemon zest.

## MAIN COURSE

**The food** Roast turkey and all the trimmings.

**The wines** We tasted eight, priced from £4.50 to £12 – seven reds, mainly in a richer, more powerful style, and one white.

**What we looked for** A wine with the character and body to complement (but not overwhelm) the meat, and which could also cope with gravy and sauces, plus all the traditional trimmings (sausages, bacon rolls, roast potatoes, sprouts, carrots and so on).

**Best Buy Buckingham Estate Shiraz 2004, Australia** (Asda, £5.98) This wine, which came top of the group by an impressive distance, was popular with all tasters, who loved its smoothness and 'great weight, breadth and intensity' of cranberry-cherry

and cedar-spice flavours. One taster felt it had 'plenty of character to match the turkey, and all the related flavours, too!' The cheaper wines did better than the pricier, and our Best Buy is remarkably good value. **Other choices Cono Sur Pinot Noir 2004, Chile** (Morrisons, £4.99) 'Subtle and lightly perfumed, soft, velvety' with hints of raspberry. **Sainsbury's Bin 60 Australian Cabernet-Shiraz 2004** (£4.99) Rich, concentrated, upfront style, decent structure and spicy black fruit.

Our only white wine, Sainsbury's Classic Selection Chablis 2004, France (£7.99), did fairly well and was liked for its fresh, citrus style. But tasters raised doubts about its suitability here.



## VEGETARIAN

**The food** Nut roast, served with all the classic trimmings.

**The wines** We tasted seven rich, full reds, priced from £4.50 to £10. All wines had to be vegetarian-friendly – no animal products must have been used in the production (blood products, for example, are used sometimes to clarify wine).

**What we looked for** A good-quality wine with the right richness to marry well with nuts, mushrooms, herbs, pepper and the vegetables typical of the classic festive feast.

**Best Buy Marananga Dam Grenache-Shiraz-Mourvedre 2003, Barossa Valley, Australia** (Marks & Spencer, £9.99)

Though the wines in this group had some of the lowest scores across the four categories, our panel

thought highly of this wine, describing it as 'a lovely, mid-weight, character-filled' red with chocolate, spice, strawberry, vanilla and cedar flavours.

The label on the back states that it is suitable for vegetarians – which is something no other wines in the group did.

### Other choices

**Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2001, California** (Morrisons, £9.99) 'Plenty of body and character, and a very good balance for roasted nut and mushroom flavours.'

**Novas Carmenère-Cabernet Sauvignon 2002, Central Valley, Chile** (Asda, £5.98)

Admired for its rich, sumptuous flavours, this wine headed the under-£6 range. But its score was well behind our two top wines.

## DESSERT

**The food** Christmas pudding.

**The wines** Our eight wines ranged from classic European dessert wines (Sauternes from the Bordeaux region of France and Spanish Moscatel de Valencia) to 'new-wave' sweet wines from South Africa and Australia. Prices covered a wide range, too, from £3.99 for a standard (75cl) bottle to £11.99 for a half-bottle (37.5cl).

**What we looked for** Traditional Christmas pud is rich and made even richer by cream or brandy butter. Wines should be sweet (the sugar in the food will overwhelm dry wines), but with a fresh acidity to give a tang to the wine and help cut through all that richness.

**Best Buy Tesco Finest Botrytis Semillon**

**2002, Riverina, Australia** (£5.53/37.5cl) Tasters praised this wine's 'deliciously creamy, spicy butter' flavour, and its 'rich, intense marmalade character' with hints of peach, honeysuckle, apricot and caramel. Standards were high in this group, with all wines judged above average.

**Other choices** **Tesco Finest Sauternes 2002, Bordeaux** (£11.99/37.5cl) Golden and honeyed, with rich flavours and hints of vanilla and orange, this wine was the most expensive in our tasting.

**Marks & Spencer Moscatel de Valencia 2004, Spain** (£4.29/75cl) Not far behind the top two (and much cheaper); fresh, clean and aromatic, with pithy grapefruit and grapefruit flavours.