

COZY IN CALIFORNIA

ON A FRIGID WINTER NIGHT, FEW THINGS COMPARE TO A GREAT BOTTLE OF RED—AND A FIRE

BY ARI BENDERSKY



California produces some of North America's best wines—and not just in Napa Valley. Venture out and you'll find great wine throughout Sonoma, Mendocino, the Central Coast—which includes the Santa Barbara, Paso Robles and Santa Clara Valley growing regions—the Sierra Foothills (Amador County) and elsewhere. Winter is the perfect time to uncork some of these hearty wines, sit in front of a roaring fire and explore some of the coziest reds that California has to offer.

Joel Gott Zinfandel, 2005— Mohr-Fry Ranches Lodi, Central Valley

Joel Gott is unquestionably my favorite winery—anywhere—and this bottle is no exception. You're greeted by a gorgeous violet hue with a ruby center. The nose explodes with cherry, spice and, dare I say, Juicy Fruit? Absolutely. Upon tasting, you realize this is perfection in a glass. The light fruit up front glides down your tongue, producing a cool, dry finish that introduces chilled blueberries and red grapes. It was expertly paired with a perfectly cooked, slightly buttery, flaky

Chilean sea bass in a miso glaze. Available at gottwines.com; additional varietals available at Binny's Beverage Depot (3000 N. Clark, 773-935-9400); \$20.

Langtry Petite Sirah, 2004 Guenoc Valley, Lake County

This wine lives up to the legend of the winery's original owner and namesake, former British theater actress Lillie Langtry. The deep, dark ruby color gives off a bit of alcohol on the nose and is tannic yet full of fruit. Upon tasting, the wine becomes a rolling thunder of fruit, moving gently across the tongue to the back of the throat first yielding cherries, then blueberries and ultimately ripe blackberries. This wine, which benefits from food, starts off tight but loosens up and gets softer and lighter as it aerates. Available at langtryestate.com; \$40.

Estancia Meritage, 2004 Paso Robles, Central Coast

This is a great blend of Cab (61 percent), Merlot (30 percent) and Petite Verdot (9 percent), which is one of my favorite blending grapes. If you try to drink it alone, it will cause your mouth to immediately

pucker, but blended with big grapes like Cab and Merlot it allows those others to soften just a bit, making way for a delicious, jammy, quaffable wine. This produced a palate of carob, currant and dried cranberry and can be enjoyed with or without food—but definitely not without a great fire. Available at Sam's Wines & Spirits (1720 N. Marcey, 312-664-4394); \$19.99.

Stags' Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, 2004 Stags Leap District, Napa

This bottle—a blend of Cab (86 percent), Merlot (10 percent), Cab Franc (three percent) and Malbec (one percent)—is created from hand-picked grapes and aged in 100 percent French oak for 24 months. The result lives up to the Stags' Leap reputation. The wine pours with great viscosity and opacity, yielding a deep, deep dark purple color and an eye-popping nose. The palate is super dry (one of my friends said, "There was a glove of wine on my tongue") with hints of raisin, prune, rosemary, thyme, celery and leather. This is definitely a food wine that is great with lamb—or even rich, dark chocolate ganache. Available at Sam's Wine; \$45.99.