



Cheers To The New Year

From types of champagne and wine to cocktails and mocktails, Paola Westbeek recommends different drinks for your New Year's Eve party

Paola Westbeek is a food, wine and travel journalist who has tasted her way through Europe, interviewing chefs, visiting vineyards and reviewing restaurants. Her work has appeared in *FRANCE Magazine* and other publications



AFTER HOSTING THE most eagerly anticipated dinners and cocktail parties of the year, I'm certainly up for a more informal gathering with friends and family come New Year's Eve. For me, the evening of December 31 should be a casual culmination of what can sometimes be a demanding month. So, rather than striving to spoil my guests with another perfectly orchestrated feast, I find solace in the ease of the potluck and ask them to bring a favourite dish instead. The drinks are on me. My only concern is that the offerings are both varied and festive.

Unlike with a formal dinner where seamlessly pairing drinks with courses is key, the diversity and element of surprise of the food means there's no need to worry about taking on the role of sommelier. But what should you serve? And equally important, how much (for a group of eight to ten)? The following tips will take the guesswork out of keeping everyone well hydrated during a relaxed end-of-the-year soirée.

Wine

Not everyone is a connoisseur, so don't spend your money on high-end vintages that are too highbrow and complicated. Instead, opt for approachable wines with balanced flavour profiles that pair well with myriad dishes and are delightful on their own. Easy-drinking reds include light-bodied pinot noirs, which generally have softer tannins (meaning a smoother sip) or silky, fruit-forward merlots. When it comes to whites, chenin blanc is a real people-pleaser available in a wide range of styles (from dry to sweet and even sparkling). Perfect as an aperitif, it will complement light dishes, but its pleasant acidity will also cut through richer fare. Count on three bottles of red and three of white. If possible, serve the whites in a large champagne bucket filled with ice.

Champagne

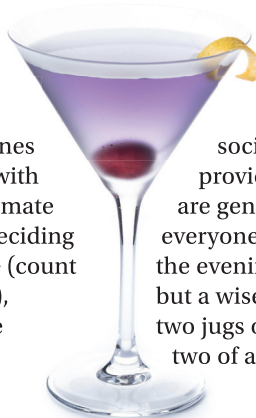
Hailing from the Champagne region in northeastern France, the most iconic of sparkling wines is, of course, synonymous with New Year's Eve and the ultimate celebratory tipples. When deciding on which bottles to splurge (count on half a bottle per person), remember that champagne wines—ranging from dry

(*brut*) to sweet (*doux*)—can be made with a blend of three main grape varieties, each one adding their own specific characteristics to the cuvée: pinot meunier provides roundness and notes of apple, pear and honey; pinot noir packs a punch adding structure and body with forest fruits and spice; and Chardonnay adds elegance and finesse with white flowers, minerality and citrusy notes. If the bottle reads *blanc des blancs*, the champagne is only made with chardonnay. *Blanc des noirs* means it's made with pinot noir and/or pinot meunier. Rosé champagnes are made with approximately 15 per cent still red wine.

Good champagne can be expensive, but bear in mind that there are equally appealing bubbles to be found in other winegrowing regions. In fact, the UK produces sparkling wines that are giving the famous French champers a run for their money!

Cocktails and mocktails

An essential part of any social gathering, cocktails provide an element of fun and are generally appreciated by everyone. Sure, you could spend the evening shaking and stirring, but a wiser choice would be to make two jugs of a signature cocktail (and two of an alcohol-free version)



so that guests can help themselves. Another idea is to set out a few ingredients along with recipe cards (plus glasses, cocktail stirrers and the like). This way, everyone can make their own temptingly aromatic mixes. Some suggestions:

- **Kir Normand** (a regional variation of one of the most popular French aperitifs). Add two tablespoons of crème de cassis and two tablespoons of Calvados to a flute and top with chilled sparkling apple cider.
- **Aviation** (a lavender-hued drink created in New York in 1916). Add three tablespoons of gin, one tablespoon of crème de violette, one tablespoon of maraschino

liqueur and one tablespoon of lemon juice to a mixing glass, top with ice and stir. Strain into a coupe and garnish with a brandied cherry, if desired.

Non-alcoholic beverages

Invest in two large glass beverage dispensers. Fill one with water infused with seasonal ingredients. Delicious combinations include sliced apple, frozen blackberries and rosemary, or sliced citrus fruits, ginger and cinnamon sticks. Fill the other with a punch made with equal parts of cranberry juice, orange juice and ginger ale. Add some lime wedges and frozen cranberries for extra colour and flavour. ■



Winged Watch

The Big Garden Birdwatch is the UK's largest garden wildlife survey, and takes place this year over the weekend of January 26-28. Spotting and counting birds in the wild is increasingly crucial, as 38 million birds have disappeared from Britain's skies over the last 50 years—due to loss of habitat and climate change. Helping to build up data about Britain's iconic birds is something that we can all do, and this citizen-led ecological project has happened every year since 1979.

The RSPB invites you to take part and count the birds in your garden. Some feathered friends to look out for include the house sparrow, the blue tit, the starling, the woodpigeon, the blackbird and the redbreasted robin

SOURCE: RSPB.ORG.UK