

US \$7.99 • £3.60

January 2006

the world's best wine magazine

Decanter

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ANDREW JEFFORD – TOP-CLASS REDS

I DON'T REALLY mind where I am for Christmas. The slow night train from Cairo to Luxor, with the palms and lush Nile fields silhouetted as the sun rose, was hard to beat; but time and rest in the darkest days of winter are always a treat. There wasn't much great red wine available during that Pharaonic Christmas in 2000, so I've been making up ever since. Here are a few suggestions.

I enjoy New Zealand Pinot Noir for its purity and charm. The 2001 La Strada Clayvin Vineyard from Fromm in Marlborough (£21.75; L&W) is light, elegant, curranty and glycerous. 'Charming' is the word I'd use about many 2000 red Burgundies, too: the sweet-fleshed, shapely 2000 Morey-St Denis Premier Cru Aux Cheseaux, Domaine Arlaud (£22.75; SVS) has a broad fireside smile, yet enough complexity and precision to satisfy the picky, too. If you feel, as my brother Mick does, that red wine has to be Italian for the big occasion, try the plungingly intense 2001 Chianti Classico

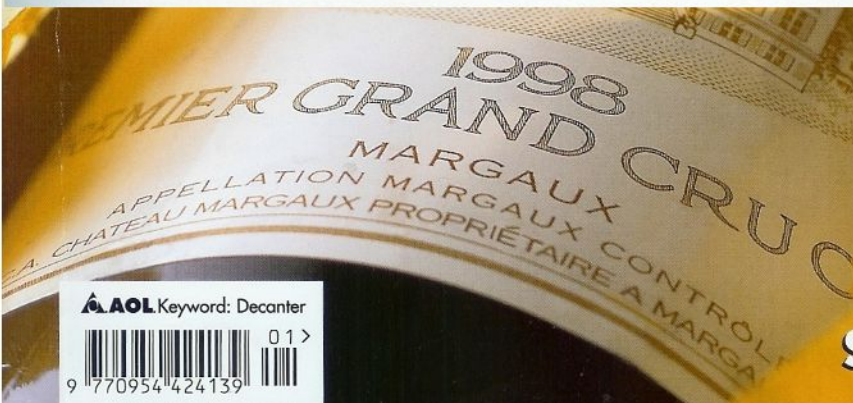
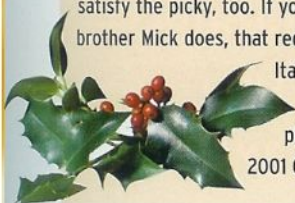


Riserva, Vigna del Sorbo from Fontodi (£28.95; Lib) or the craggy, authoritative 1999 Barolo San Rocco, Azelia (£37.10; J&B).

Are you organised? Decant the 2002 Cahors, Château du Cèdre, Le Prestige (£10.15; CdP) at least 24 hours before serving in order to prise open its black depths and peel back the tannin, allowing the pippy fruit and Malbec meatiness full rein. Another beefy French country classic is the 2001 Gigondas Le Font de Tonin from Domaine La Bouïssière (£18.25; Mnt). The fiery, rugged ferocity of this wine is part of its

pleasure: perfect after the coldest winter walk, as is the sweeter fruited, more exotic 2001 St-Chinian, Maghani, Canet Valette (£15.50; SVS). Two more years have given the 1999 Bandol les Lauves, Domaine La Suffrène (£13.35; CdP) softer textures, though the seductively herby flavours remain much in evidence.

Finally, two classics. The 2001 Côte-Rôtie les Essartilles, Vins de Vienne (£32.95; BBR) is perfumed, swish and vivid, with plenty of granitic glitter, while the 1999 Château Latour à Pomerol (£41.48; C&B) is the opposite: soft, creamy and comely, a kind of koala bear among clarets.



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