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FEBRUARY F&W

Become a Wine Expert in 28 Days

Here's how to do it: Taste a lot, read a little, check out some enlightening Web sites and *have fun*. Kick-start your education this month with our February calendar, highlighting *at least one great wine* a day.

BY MICHAEL STEINBERGER

1 Buy a small notebook to keep track of all the bottles you'll be uncorking over the next 28 days. (The small black oilcloth-covered notebooks from Moleskine, favored by Matisse and Céline, make classy journals.) The first wine for your notebook: the ethereal 1996 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne (\$140), a top Blanc de Blancs (all Chardonnay) Champagne.

2 GROUNDHOG DAY Find out if the groundhog's seen its shadow, then break out the 2004 Shadow Canyon Cellars Shadow Canyon Vineyard Syrah (\$40), a full-throttle red made with grapes from the tiny California appellation of York Mountain. You'll enjoy the wine even if the groundhog sees its shadow, foretelling six more weeks of winter.

3 Take advantage of one of the many free in-store Saturday wine tastings. At McCarthy & Schiering's two Seattle locations, great producers—such as Angelo Gaja of Gaja in Italy—can be found discussing their wines. (Check mccarthyandschiering.com.) Once home, pour a glass of Gaja's polished 2004 Promis (\$38), from his Tuscan estate, Ca'Marcanda.

4 SUPER BOWL SUNDAY Open a bottle of the 2002 Montagia Cabernet Sauvignon (\$80) in honor of the Super Bowl. It's a big, luscious Napa red crafted by Beringer winemaker Ed Sbragia in conjunction with Joe Montana, one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. Made from selected lots of wine from top Beringer vineyards such as Bancroft Ranch and Steinhauer Ranch, Montagia is aged in specially chosen oak barrels and produced in extremely limited quantities. (Buy it online at beringer.com.)

5 Compare and contrast two Chardonnays and decide for yourself if oak and Chardonnay really belong together. The 2004 Louis Michel Chablis Montée de Tonnerre (\$42), a premier cru Chablis from a good vintage, is fermented and aged in stainless steel, while the fuller, richer 2004 Concha y Toro Amelia (\$35) spends nearly 11 months in French oak barrels.

6 Taste a Bordeaux from the excellent 2003 vintage with famed wine critic (and F&W contributing editor) Robert M. Parker, Jr., at New York's Executive Wine Seminars. For \$670 a head, a limited number of people get to try 14 of the best 2003s, including Latour, Lafite, Margaux and Ausone, and hear Parker's insights into the vintage (800-404-WINE or ewswine.com).

7 Draft your 2007 wine budget. Think about how much money you'd like to spend, then

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parcel it into three categories: everyday bottles, special-occasion bottles and bottles for long-term cellaring. Hold a calculator in one hand and a glass of the fruity 2005 Guilhem Durand Syrah (\$12) from France's Languedoc in the other—proof that living frugally doesn't mean drinking poorly.

8 Check out an Internet wine discussion forum like West Coast Wine Network (westcoastwine.net). You can compare your tasting notes with those of other oenophiles. Try a bottle of the juicy 2004 Terrazas de los Andes Reserva Malbec (\$16), which prompted one voluble West Coast Wine forum member to write, "Wow. Great wine. Note to self... DRINK MORE MALBEC."

9 Visit a wine bar. Bin 8945, in West Hollywood, offers a range of terrific and unusual wines by the glass as well as older vintages by the bottle, such as a 1994 Foxen Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir for a very fair \$70. Or bring your own: Bin 8945's corkage fee is only \$15, and as its easygoing owner David Haskell says, "Bring whatever you want; no need to check to see if we have it."

10 Take a day trip to a local winery. There's bound to be one nearby, since every state has wineries (see allamericanwineries.com for listings), and in the winter, the winemaker will likely take time for a chat. Flat Creek Estate, outside Austin, has a friendly tasting room where you can sample its robust wines, including the intense 2004 Super-Texan Sangiovese (\$20).

11 Check out the podcasts of GrapeRadio (graperadio.com), one of the wine world's most popular podcasting sites. Past guests include wine critics Robert M. Parker, Jr., and Stephen Tanzer as well as French-wine importer Kermit Lynch. While you listen, drink a glass of one of Lynch's sought-after wines, such as the earthy, mellow 2005 Charles Joguet Chinon Cuvée Terroir (\$17).

12 Read (or reread) Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, about bullfighting in Spain, in which he calls wine "one of the most civilized things in the world." One of Hemingway's favorite regions in Spain, Navarra, is famously host to the running of the bulls, in Pamplona; today it's also famous for red wine, especially great bargains like the lush and velvety 2005 Bodegas Nekeas Vega Sindoa, a blend of Tempranillo and Merlot (\$7).

13 Put your wine knowledge to the test by taking a quiz on wineeducation.com. There are three levels: basic, wine lovers and wine professionals. Here's another trivia question: In which country is the grape Chenin Blanc grown most abundantly? Buy a bottle of the crisp, minerally 2005 Rudera Chenin Blanc (\$22) and you'll have the answer (South Africa) in your hands.

14 VALENTINE'S DAY Open a ripe, fleshy, sensual red for Valentine's Day instead of a more predictable choice like Champagne. The full-bodied but profoundly elegant 2003 Aalto (\$60)—made in northwestern Spain's Ribera del Duero region, by Mariano García, one of the country's most renowned winemakers—is an excellent selection.

15 Organize your wine cellar. Although the most sensible (and common) arrangement is by region and vintage, you might also consider sorting it by wines that are ready to drink now and those that are going to need more aging. Bring along a bottle of the 2004 Nalle Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$30), a juicy, intensely flavorful Zin from a top Sonoma winery.

16 Log the contents of your cellar onto CellarTracker (cellartracker.com), a Web site that allows users to maintain online inventories and compare tasting notes with other CellarTracker members. Afterward, open a bottle of the 2005 Lawson's Dry Hills Gewürztraminer (\$17), a spicy, dry Gewürz that's one of New Zealand's top bottlings.

17 Plan a wine-country weekend to Sonoma County this spring. Dining destinations should include Cyrus in Healdsburg and the Farmhouse Inn in Forestville; for wine tasting,



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FOOD & WINE EVENTS



visit top producers like Davis Bynum, Papapietro Perry and Porter Creek, where you can try its Hillside Vineyard Pinot Noir.

18 Cook a hearty Italian dish like osso buco; it's perfect for a cold, frosty Sunday evening. The Lamb Osso Buco with Tapenade from chef Suzanne Goin of Lucques and A.O.C. in Los Angeles (foodandwine.com/lambossobuco) is particularly well suited to a full-bodied Tuscan red, especially one from the acclaimed 2001 vintage. Try the 2001 Pertimali Brunello di Montalcino (\$65).

19 Try new wine-and-cheese combos. Buy three cheeses—goat, Parmesan and Brie—and three white wines, and see for yourself how well white wine works with cheese. For the goat, try the zingy 2005 Patient Cottat Sancerre (\$25); for the Parmesan, the fruity Roederer Estate NV Brut sparkling wine (\$24); and for the Brie, the generous 2005 Elk Cove Pinot Gris (\$18).

20 Overcome your fear of Teutonic wine terms such as Kabinett, Prädikat and Trockenbeerenauslese, by buying the most recent edition of *The New Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia* by Tom Stevenson. Reach for a bottle of the 2004 J.J. Prüm Wehlener Sonnenuhr Kabinett (\$25), a sublime and mineraly Riesling from a top Mosel producer.

21 Settle the great stemware debate once and for all. Pick up a Riedel Vinum Bordeaux glass and an inexpensive Pottery Barn glass and sample the same wine from both. Does the Riedel glass—designed for Cabernet-based wines—make the wine taste better than the other glass does? For this test, use the lush 2002 Beringer Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$27).

22 Check out Free the Grapes! (freethegrapes.org) for an update on the long-running interstate wine-shipping battle, which came closer to an end with the 2005 Supreme Court decision favoring the pro-shipping side. Have a glass of the ripe 2005 Lang & Reed Cabernet Franc (\$22), a boutique wine that will be easier to obtain once the grapes are truly free.

23 Open an ice wine and, while sipping it, consider this happy thought about winter: Without subzero weather, there wouldn't even be ice wine, which is made from grapes that have frozen fully on the vine. Inniskillin's 2005 Vidal Ice Wine—arguably the most famous wine made in Ontario (\$60 for a half bottle)—is rich, sweet and thoroughly delectable.

24 Make the delicate and delicious Vietnamese summer rolls created by F&W Test Kitchen Supervisor Marcia Kiesel ([Summer Rolls](#)) to experiment with Asian food-and-wine pairings. Match the rolls with the spicy 2000 Cuvée des Seigneurs de Ribeauville Gewürztraminer (\$38) from Trimbach, a top Alsace producer.

25 OSCAR SUNDAY Don't go to an Oscar party empty-handed. Bring Francis Coppola's fruity 2005 Sofia Rosé (\$15), produced by director Francis Ford Coppola for his daughter Sofia. At press time, odds looked good that Sofia's most recent film, *Marie Antoinette*, would garner a nomination or two.

26 Take an armchair trip to Provence. Hard-core Russell Crowe fans may be the only people renting the DVD of *A Good Year*, in which Crowe plays a London banker who inherits a vineyard in Provence. But even non-Crowe fans will enjoy a Provençal red like the 2004 Domaine Tempier Bandol (\$32), a robust, savory wine from the region's top producer.

27 Buy a poster featuring the world's most famous wine art: labels of Château Mouton Rothschild designed by the likes of Dalí and Picasso ([Waddesdon](#)). Then toast Baron Philippe de Rothschild with a glass of his 2003 Château d'Armailhac—a softer, more affordable wine than his Mouton (\$35 versus \$260).

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28 Attend a wine auction. The Chicago Wine Company, one of America's premier sellers of rare wines, holds a live auction today (details at tcwc.com). Even if you can't attend, open an auction-worthy wine: The 1996 Château Léoville-Barton, a mature Bordeaux from a superb vintage, is still available for about \$90 (check wine-searcher.com for stores).

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