

Winter Glow

Keeping the love alive

Outside the grimy 18th-floor window, a blustery day, the last of '04, sent thick fogbanks and low clouds scudding across the gritty cityscape of Eugene.

Behind me, I could hear Mole shuffling around the lab, rattling glasses, bottles and bleakers, still singing a Mole-twisted version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas": "... five bagsa bliiing ..."

I sat at my battle-scarred desk, elbows planted, both hands gripping my head, trying to keep the top from coming off — and no, but thank you Emily Dickinson, it wasn't Mole-ish lyrics blowing off my skull cap. Christmas had been beautifully pagan and utterly absurd, a babbling gaggle of feasting friends and family, luscious food, yummy wines, a grand effusion of love and generosity that would've made Jesus smile and Sadducees cringe. Somehow the season always works its magic on me, despite all the inane pietism and insane retailing, despite even the barrage of logic-torturing blather from Bill O'Reilley and other beetleheaded clodpates and closet racists of right-wing Grinchery. Savage warfare, ravaging disease, mendacious politics, rapacious corporations, poisonous polluters and their servile apologists, all these and more merit a brief gloss in the deep-winter glow of giving abundant love.

Then the news of the Asian tsunami, more than 100,000 swept away in mere minutes, so many of them children. Mind-crushing grief, paralyzing devastation with yet more to come, and all illustrated by the loutish response of Time's Mammal of the Year: "... twelve gourds a-leaking ..." I felt fairly sure that some malevolent mullah had planted an IED (improvised explosive device) near my medulla oblongata. Holding my head seemed like the thing to do.

"Hey, Sleut', we gots lotsa wines, neat ones, f' da readers." Mole, wearing a threadbare elf cap, held up a double-grip of bottles, grinned at me, all crinkly-eyes through his Coke-bottle lenses. I squeezed parietal toward occipital, moaned, went to work.

I've been accused of being phobic about chardonnay: nuh-uh. I just grew tired of versions that were so oak-soaked that they lost fruit character; marketeers had swamped the shelves with labels from California, Australia, Chile, all tasting about the same — oily, clunky, woody, dull. And I flat couldn't afford the finest of French white Burgundies (chardonnay), the great Montrachets or Chablis. Lately, though, luck let me find little beauties like **Philippe Tranchand 02 Pouilly-Fuissé**; marked down from \$17 to \$10, this dry white is just pretty, with scents of white flowers and flavors of melon-peach fruit and enough acidity to complement white fish and light pastas. In Mole's judgment,

"It's sweet as my little niece."

If that Pouilly is a bargain — and it is — then **Marsanne 02 Cave de Tain l'Hermitage** (\$8) is a steal. From the north end of the Rhone Valley where the great Hermitage reds are made, this white is terrific, bright, fresh with citrus and mineral notes, ready to cuddle up to some crab or mussels; probably near-perfect with fresh raw oysters, oh my.

I'm a confessed fiend for Asian food, all kinds, especially spicy fish dishes with plenty of ginger, lemongrass, garlic. Eggplant, yams, salt-and-pepper green beans — gimmesum. Wok'emup, pour **Bonny Doone Pacific Rim Dry Riesling** (\$9), match that crisp, clean pear/apple/melon fruit with sushi or sauté, be very happy. Oh, and it's a screwtop; owner Randall Graham is one of my favorite people in winebiz, so witty and smart he can turn his fine wines away from cork and just say, "Screw it."

Mole just rolled up on me, saying, "You not gonna ferget Orygun, are ya? 'Member dis?" He thrust toward me **Elk Cove 03 Pinot Gris** (\$14). Oh yeah: pinot gris can be austere, but this one fills the mouth with juicy flavors of ripe pears and melons. Sip it or serve with grub, but do not freeze it (best cool, not cold).

Mole-words: "It's rainin', wind howlin'. Lez get red."

Santa brought **Amity Vineyards 02 Oregon Gamay Noir**, and it was good. Gamay noir is the grape for fine Beaujolais, the serious stuff, soft, ripe, easy-drinking, friendly wine for rich stews and winter soups. Aromas are generous; flavors of black cherries and white pepper play rowdy music on the palate. Amity has the added virtue of being among the most ecology-conscious of Oregon growers, fine folks.

Our pals Kathy and Jeff Larkin moved here from Minnesota couple years ago, tell tales of ice fishing in 40 below, snows flying, eyelashes freezing, frost-bitten vitals, stuff like dat. When I express envy, they show pity, the kind usually reserved for Bushites. I try to explain: I wouldn't go out in that stuff, just wanna watch through an icy window — and open a whup-ass zinfandel, like **Cline 02 Ancient Vines** (\$15), huge wine, deep, dark, brambly, dense with flavors of blackberries, blueberries, pepper, allspice, sandalwood and cedar. This is old-style cowboy zin, will spin your spurs, stoke yer cockles.

"Feel betta?" Mole solicited.

Yeah, I feel better. I know it's a nasty world where terrible stuff happens all the time, usually to sweet people who don't deserve the pain. But I'm begging all of you: Find a way to send help to Southeast Asia. Share what you can spare, just for the love. Make some fellow beings' new year a little brighter; yours, too.

EW



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