



What more mind- and body-thawing pleasure is there in the depths of a New England winter than sipping a glass of fine wine in front of a crackling log fire? The early settlers resorted to rum to chase away the chill of winter. Today, wine is a more soothing solution, and our choice of winter warmers is practically unlimited.

Red is the predominant color, because reds usually pack more punch than whites when the temperature starts to tumble.

If cabernet sauvignon is your preferred red tippie, New World iterations from California, Australia and South America are your best bet for restoring warmth. That's because they have a degree or two more alcohol and exhibit more pronounced fruit flavors compared to their French counterparts, which are usually vinted in a more subtle, food-friendly style.

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Chillbusters

BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG

France has plenty of robust reds, but you have to head south to the Côtes du Rhône region for wines such as Châteauneuf du Pape with deep, concentrated black currant, plum and tobacco flavors, or to the Midi, where wines such as inky-hued Fitou and Corbières can revive you with their muscular tannins and tarry, dark berry notes.

Australian shiraz — or syrah as the California version of this grape is sometimes known — will also warm you with its rich, dark fruit components. Prime examples are d'Arenberg "The Footbolt" shiraz (\$18) or Marquis "Philips" shiraz (\$13). But Yellowtail Reserve shiraz at \$10 will get you in the comfort zone, too.

If you can afford to splurge, pamper yourself with Jim Barrie "Macrae Wood" or Penfolds "Bin 128 Coonawarra" shiraz, both about \$25.

Red zinfandel can be really rewarding when there's a nor'easter out there, especially the cuvées crafted by Ridge Vineyards. Look for Ridge "Paso Robles" zinfandel (\$35) or savor its signature "Lytton Springs" zinfandel (\$40). Rosenblum Cellars has some great single vineyard gems, such as "Carla's Vineyard" zinfandel (\$30) and "Aparicio Vineyard" zinfandel (\$30).

But the daddy of them all in the blackstrap bracket is petite sirah from the West Coast. "Gutsy, big, bold and black" is how West Coast winemakers describe the wine they create from this grape. While petite accurately describes the size of PS's vine leaf, it significantly understates the taste bomb delivered by the wine itself. Michael and David's "Earthquake" petite sirah for \$30 or Concannon's more modestly priced "Central Coast" petite sirah at \$14 make their point in a tasteful fashion.

Fortified wines are also rich, succulent antidotes to

the big chill. Port, the most noble and distinguished of these, begins its existence humbly enough in the sunbaked heights of the upper Douro Valley in Portugal. Centuries ago, man carved out vine terraces there from the slate-filled, inhospitable terrain to accommodate a layer of soil for hardy vines such as Touriga Nacional, Tinta Barroca and Tinta Roriz. In the 18th century, English entrepreneurs in Portugal, seeking to capitalize on the insatiable demand of their countrymen back home for bottled sunshine, resorted to "fortifying" the wines with grape brandy to give their consumers winter warmth.

Today, tawny ports aged 10- to 40-years and vintage ports dating back decades deliver complex taste sensations reminiscent of hazelnuts, muscats, black cherries and chocolate. Late-bottled vintage port at about \$20 from producers such as Fonseca, Dow and Taylor Fladgate is a very nourishing and palate-pleasing substitute for the pricier, full-blown vintage ports. If you see "traditional" on the LBV label, you'll pay a few dollars more, but it's as near as you'll get to authentic vintage port without paying an arm and a leg.

Prestigious as port may be, it's not the only fortified wine to soothe and sustain when the thermometer reading goes south. Madeira, a toasty, flavorful wine from a small, volcanic island 400 miles north of Morocco, comes in four styles. There's sercial, a light, dry amber wine. Verdelho has a golden hue with a rich palate but dry finish. Bual is sweet though not cloying. Dark, ripe and luscious yet tangy, malmsey is considered by aficionados to be the marquee madeira. Madeiras dating back to the mid-1800s are still drinking well for those who have the means. Barbeito 1863 "Bual," for example, will set you back a hefty \$500. More affordable for most of us is Blandy's 5-Year Malmsey at \$21, which generates the rich, satisfying glow to be expected from the authentic ambrosia.

Most of us think of sherry as an aperitif, and there is no better natural stimulant to the gastric juices than a bone-dry fino or salty manzanilla. But there are other fuller and sweeter styles such as oloroso, which are effective chill-relievers. The ultimate of these is "Pedro Ximenez" — a lush, post-prandial libation suffused with dark berry, fig, date and molasses flavorings. Ivison's "Matusalen PX" at



Two choices to take away the chill are Châteauneuf du Pape from the Côtes du Rhône region of France and Dow's Tawny Porto.

\$25 is one of the best values.

We don't usually associate New World wines with winter warmers, but Australian fortified wines, or stickies as they are called Down Under, are the exception. There's an elite community of winemakers at Rutherglen, close to the border of New South Wales and the Murray River, who specialize in Australia's most succulent stickies — liqueur muscats and tokays. R.L. Buller NV Premium Fine Tokay has sumptuous notes of spice box, Christmas pudding, figs, brown sugar and molasses for \$15 (375ml).

If Santa is feeling exceptionally generous this year, ask him for their N.V. Calliope Rare Muscat at \$80 (375ml). You will be rewarded with intoxicating fragrances conjuring up flavors of prunes, figs, maple syrup and gobs of fruit followed by a long, satisfying, soul-warming finish.

Still not convinced that fortified wines will titillate your winterized taste buds? Try drizzling any of the fortified wines mentioned over vanilla ice cream and savor that before you take the plunge with a full measure in front of that blazing hearth. Now there's a chill-busting challenge. **W**

Real warmers

"This (Warm Chocolate Milk) is only for adult 'kids' at bedtime," says Michael Covino, proprietor and general manager of Block Five, 139 Green St., Worcester.

Warm Chocolate Milk

2 ounces Godiva Chocolate or White Chocolate liqueur

3 ounces warm whole milk

½ teaspoon dark chocolate shavings

Pour the liqueur into a large brandy snifter or wine glass. Add 2 ounces of the warm milk to the liqueur. Froth the rest of the warm milk with a small whisk, and then pour it onto the mixture. Finish by sprinkling the chocolate shavings on top.

"It was a foggy, winter day in Venice, and I was fighting a cold," says Lorenz Savona, partner and wine director of Tomasso Trattoria, 154 Turnpike Road, Route 9, Southboro. "The bartender prescribed China Calda, (pronounced keena kalda), and it worked perfectly."

China Calda

2 ounces Amaro Naturale liqueur

Freshly squeezed juice of ½ lemon

7 ounces hot water

Pour the liqueur into a 10-ounce glass. Add hot water. Pour the lemon juice into the mixture and stir.



Warm Chocolate Milk