



slocity taste

I'm Dreaming of a Wine Christmas

By Michael Cervin

It happens every year without fail: The days to Christmas count down, and you're left scratching your head as to what to give the wine lover in your life. There are the standard wine gifts—cute cork stoppers, kitschy carafes, hemp tote bags for hauling around your cache of liquid refreshment, and plenty of other paraphernalia. But it's all been done before. Yes, a bottle of wine is always perfect. No, the kitchen towels with the cartoonish fat chef on them aren't. Here, then, are a few ideas for something decidedly different.

Personalize it by creating a custom wine tour for the wine fiend in your life. Chances are he or she hasn't hit up every winery in the county. Plan out a day with a visit to a few new wineries, aided by a picnic lunch or dinner, and chauffeur your friend. Pick up all the tasting fees at each winery (fees range from free to \$10), and bring along your friend's favorite music for the ride and a few snacks. It's easy, and a little planning with the help of the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance Web site (www.pasowine.com) will make you look like a professional guide.

If planning isn't your thing, buy a gift certificate on a tour van. The Wine Wrangler offers public wine tours. Prices for a visit to four to six wineries start at \$92 per person, which includes tasting fees and a picnic lunch—and no driving whatsoever. Private tours can be arranged at a higher rate. Other areas, such as Templeton and Edna Valley, can be included. Call 238-5700 or visit www.thewinewrangler.com.

A good read should do the trick. But wine books are a dime a dozen. Well, *The Sipping Point*, by Laurie Forster, is different. This compact book looks at wine in the most practical of ways, from reading a wine list to varietals to getting out a stuck cork. Plus, it's written in an easygoing style that doesn't preach or get boring. Tips include wine storage, pairing suggestions, decanting and more. At only \$16.95, it will last longer than any bottle. Visit www.thesippingpoint.com.

Are your friends full of hot air? Then let them cruise above the vineyards of Paso Robles on a balloon ride. Let's Go Ballooning owner John Warren will guide and glide you through wine country. Each balloon ride can hold one to four people, and the sunrise flights are offered seven days a week, "weather permitting," Warren says. Half the year, he launches

on the east side of Highway 101, and the other half he launches on the west side. "It's a unique experience," he says. "Most people have never seen a balloon, let alone been in one." The cost is \$189 per person. Call 458-1530 or visit www.sloballoon.com.

Perhaps you prefer to stretch your legs between winery visits. Central Coast Outdoors offers a series of winery bike tours where you can pedal to the next pinot noir. John Flaherty offers full and half-day biking tours. Edna Valley is his most popular route, and both half- and full-day tours offer a gourmet picnic lunch. "All our tours are exclusive, private affairs," Flaherty says.

Guests can even decide what wineries they want to visit. With a minimum of two people, the half day is \$129 per person and the full-day tour with guide is \$159. Why Edna Valley? Not only are there great wines in the area, but, as Flaherty notes, "it's compact and not very hilly," which is ideal for a novice rider. For hard-core riders, Flaherty offers more challenging courses. Call 528-1080 or visit www.centralcoastoutdoors.com. ❖



Happy Holidays

Salon
544

544 Higuera St • 544-1717

The Staff at Salon 544
Wishes You Happy
Holidays and a Merry
New Year.

