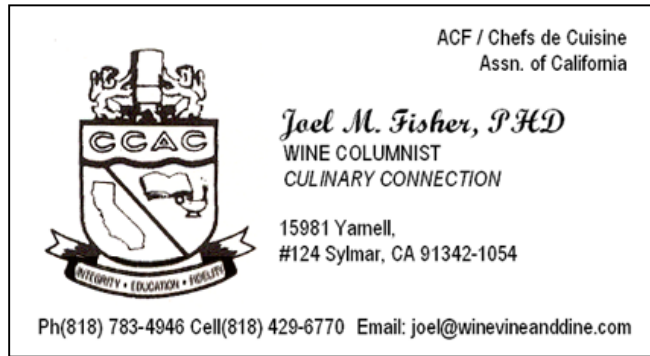


FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#)



The holiday parties may be over for now, but that doesn't mean that self-indulgence must end as well. I recently attended a champagne and caviar night, co-sponsored by [Petrossian Paris](#) and [Victor's Liquor & Delicatessen](#). The focus of the evening was on superlative champagnes with (er, upscale) beer-budget price tags.

We started with a **Marie Stuart 2001 Premier Cru** (\$33). This wine was young, fresh and had a delightful nose, yet in the end left an inexplicably off-kilter impression. Bertrand Brzezinski of Petrossian Paris paired this with a Royal Sevruga caviar, the least expensive of the caviar sequence (sevruga, ossetra and beluga). The small-sized, delicate gray roe had a nice, robust flavor.

Next, we enjoyed a **Joseph Perrier Brut Cuvee N.V.** (\$36). This very bubbly bubbly possessed both depth and a balanced finish. Its fruity tones played nicely off the hazelnut flavors and intense finish of the paired Royal Ossetra caviar. This roe had a firm grain and ranged in color from warm brown to lustrous gray-green.

We jumped from the Caspian to Montana with our next caviar, Aristoff Paddlefish Roe. This petite roe proved better than its partnered champagne: the **Joseph Perrier Brut Rose N.V.** (\$45) initially showed a vibrant flavor, but turned edgy on the finish. This bottle was my least favorite of the flight.

In contrast, the **Joseph Perrier 1966 Brut Royal** (\$48) was my favorite of the night. This 50-50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blend was a stronger wine than the others we tasted, showing good energy and an energetic backbone. The sparkling wine went wonderfully with my favorite caviar of the event, the larger-egg, stronger-textured Tsar Imperial Ossetra. This Ossetra is properly famous for its delightful nutty essence and subtle hints of sweetness.

We ducked out of the two-digit price range with the **Joseph Perrier 1990 Josephine** (\$110), with which we wrapped up the evening. This was an unusual if very drinkable bottle, transitioning from earthy mushroom tones into an almost sweet flavor. The price tag shouldn't stop you from exploring this sparkling wine – comparable bottles from a larger winery would go for substantially more. We paired this final bottle with the wonderful Czar Imperial Beluga, which was rated "triple O" (meaning best in grade). Translucent gray and wonderful buttery, this Beluga cannot be beat for sheer decadence.

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On another sparkling note, I recently discovered a delightful sparkling Italian wine whose quality far outstripped its cost. The very dry, extremely pleasant **Ruggeri & Co. Gold Label Prosecco Extra Dry DOC** is an absolute steal at \$10. My thanks go to Alan Stark of **Maddalena Vineyard**, who brought this notable bottle to my attention.

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Windsor Vineyards – founded by legendary Sonoma County winemaker Rodney Strong in 1959 and purchased by **Beringer Blass Wine Estates** a few years ago –has been improving so markedly that it has been turning heads and winning prizes. Australian winemaker Toni Stockhausen is a key figure behind this dramatic improvement. The daughter of Lindemans’ great winemaker Karl Stockhausen, Toni has been at Windsor since 2000. Her *Sauvignon Blanc 2002* (\$17) shows almond and oak aromas on the nose and honeyed apricot and peach flavors on the palate. These rich tones fade to a smoky, spicy finish, which I found interesting, although it isn’t my personal favorite disappearing trick. The smooth *Carignan 2002 Alexander Valley Private Reserve* (\$18) is a grapey drink, with light fruit and oak on the nose. It’s certainly worth trying. Through a happy accident, I discovered that it blends wonderfully with a Cabernet Sauvignon. I look forward to seeing what notable bottles Windsor and Stockhausen continue to bring us.

I hope 2005 proves to be a happy, healthy year filled with good wines for us all!

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