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Picking a Merry Mix of Syrahs

For a special gift, give a case based on one of the world's great grapes

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Every year around this time, we recommend one special gift that will require some effort (which is why we're writing about it now) and some money (but not nearly as much as a few years ago). Last year, we suggested a mixed case of Beaujolais. We heard from quite a few people who loved that suggestion, but none more than Amy Wilson Grace of Wellesley, Mass., who wrote us just before Christmas to say: "I always have a hard time finding something interesting for my husband for Christmas and this seemed to be something fun that the two of us could share. What I didn't expect is how much fun I've had putting together the gift." Along with the wine, she prepared a booklet on the Beaujolais region and winemakers' notes for each of the bottles in the gift case.

If you think you might be interested in the case of Beaujolais—no, we're not talking about Nouveau—drop us a note at wine@wsj.com and we will send along that column. But if you are looking for something new, here it is:

A mixed case of Syrah from all over the world. You really couldn't find a more delicious and fashionable present than this.

Syrah is hardly a new thing. It has been one of the world's great grapes for a very long time, especially prominent in the Rhône Valley of France. But Australia's success with Shiraz, its name for Syrah, has given the grape a boost. Now it seems it is grown everywhere—and grown well, too. There is not a more exciting wine on shelves right now, for instance, than Syrah from Washington. Consumption of U.S. Syrah has soared over the past few years and plantings in California have almost tripled in a decade. Even in the Santa Barbara area, made famous for Pinot Noir by "Sideways," we're amazed how many winemakers and other local experts have whispered to us that they're really more excited about their Syrah right now.

Syrah generally has a meaty, peppery, sometimes lusty taste, but it can be made in so many different styles that it's impossible to give one description, which is exactly why this case is so much fun. Experts and novices alike would enjoy seeing how different visions and different terroirs make for Syrahs that are distinctive yet inevitably have much in common.

So here is an idea for a tour of the world entirely based on the Syrah grape. This can cost anywhere from about \$150 up if you get 12 bottles, but a half-case would be a fine present, too. You will have to work with at least a couple of good merchants to make this happen because few will have all 12. This is also easier to do than ever because of some excellent wine Web sites. If you go to many good sites—for example, calvertwoodley.com, klwines.com and wine.com—you can sort their available stock by grape type (you might have to look separately under Syrah and Shiraz) and then see a list of all of the various countries where the wines are from. If you do shop that way, though, be careful. Sometimes that type of sorting also includes wines that just have small amounts of Syrah or that say somewhere in the description that "this tastes like Syrah." Make sure you are really buying a wine that's made primarily from Syrah.

Ready? Here's one possible case. The prices are very, very approximate.

1) Other. We know it's odd to begin with "other," but it's important to keep your eyes open for this category, because it's one of the most important parts of the case. Syrah is being made well so widely these days that you might find one from just about anywhere, and the more surprising, the better. While we were shopping ourselves over the past few weeks, we found one from Morocco and one from Uruguay, and we really enjoyed them. Figure about \$15, but you might do better. The wine from Uruguay (Domaine Monte de Luz 2007), for instance, was \$8.

2) Sparkling Shiraz. Sparkling red wine might make you think about Cold Duck, which may not be a pleasant memory, but sparkling Shiraz from Australia really can be quite charming—drier than you think, with a core of black-cherry tastes. This can be hard to find in stores, which don't know whether to stock it with the bubbly or with the Australians, but look closely. This will likely be \$15 to \$20.

3) Rosé Syrah. These will probably be in the rosé aisle and be sure to get a young one. In our most recent broad tasting of American rosé, one of our favorites was Lewis "Vin Gris" Syrah (about \$25), and there are others out there if you look around. Not long ago we picked one up from Sicily (Planeta, \$15). Syrah rosé can be full-bodied, good with all sorts of food.

4 and 5) Two Shirazes from Australia, at different price points. Pick up one of the very common examples that cost \$10 or so, such as Penfolds "Koonunga Hill," and also a less-common name, such as Pirramimma, that costs around \$20. It'll be fun to discover in what ways they taste different.

6) A Syrah/Shiraz from South Africa. We think there's a chance that South African Syrah (often called Shiraz) might be a pretty big thing in the next couple of years. We are seeing more of them on shelves these days and their average quality is excellent, especially considering the very reasonable prices. Indaba and Brampton are two names you might see (\$10 to \$14) and they are quite reliable. If you see more than one, we'd suggest getting two of these and then perhaps only one of Nos. 10 and 11 below.

7) Syrah from France. If you are lucky, you can find a wine simply labeled "Syrah" from somewhere in France, probably the Languedoc. This is likely to be an easy-drinking carafe wine that will cost somewhere less than \$15. If you can't find one, you might have to break the bank a bit to get a Crozes-Hermitage, which is made from Syrah in the Rhône. It will likely cost \$20 to \$35. St. Joseph is also made from Syrah, but we haven't had great luck with it recently. Of course, for a splurge, go with Côte-Rotie, which will be a marvelous surprise, but likely cost \$60 or more. In any event, if you include a Crozes-Hermitage, it will be a very interesting addition to the case—more challenging, brawnier, than any wine in the case and quite a contrast to the more-gulpable wines.

8) Syrah from Chile or Argentina. As with so many wines from Chile and Argentina today, these are well-made and surprisingly affordable. Concha y Toro makes good ones that start at \$9.99 for a 1.5-liter bottle. They're great tailgate wines.

9) A Syrah from California. Heaven knows there are a million of them, at all price points, from classics like Qupé to more-obscure labels like Donkey & Goat. Plan to spend about \$20, though you can sometimes find winners like Cline for less than \$10.

10 and 11) Two Shirazes from California. The point you are making here is that California has both Syrah and Shiraz and they're the same grape—but can taste different. In general—and, of course, there are many exceptions—Shiraz is less expensive and less serious. In fact, the reason we're suggesting two of these is to keep the cost down. Barefoot Cellars Shiraz, for instance, is delightful, almost like Beaujolais, and just about \$5.99; it's best with a chill.

12) Washington Syrah. To us, this is the big daddy of the case because we are so pumped about these wines right now. Some of these can be expensive—\$50 or so—but there are also quite a few around for less than \$20. There is a very special depth, vibrancy and excitement in these wines at the moment and everyone should try them. To be able to sample one against all of the other examples in this case would be a very special treat.

We understand this will take some time and trouble, not to mention money. Is it worth it? We asked Amy's husband, Evan Grace, how he enjoyed last year's mixed case of Beaujolais, which ultimately grew to 16 bottles. He replied: "Both the wines and the concept were terrific. Like many, I knew little about Beaujolais wines, having sampled exactly one non-Nouveau over the years. The tasting remedied that quickly, thanks to your idea and Amy's execution. Amy learned a ton doing the research and creating the notes, and I learned a ton doing the tasting and reading her notes. Win-win.

"It also created two wonderful social situations. Even at our best, Amy and I would find sampling 16 wines side-by-side a tad challenging, so we brought in reinforcements. We had some friends over for New Year's Eve and opened eight of the bottles, which was just about right for the size of the crowd. It went over so well that we invited the same group back, plus a few more hangers-on, for the remaining eight bottles. If there's a better excuse for inviting a bunch of people over to drink wine in February, I don't know what it is.

"All in all, a very inventive and fun gift that kept on giving until the snow melted."

Write to Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher at wine@wsj.com

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