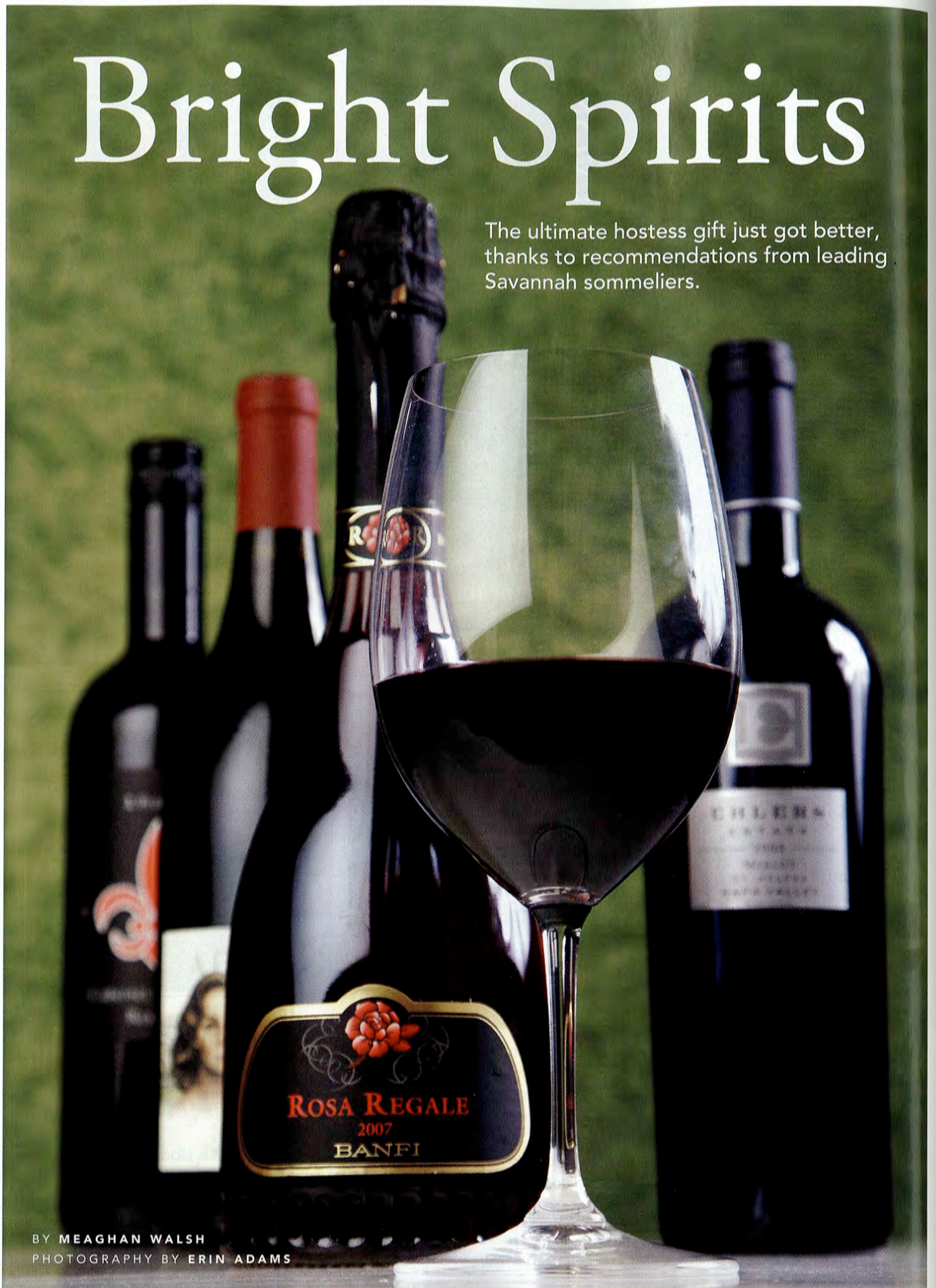


Bright Spirits

The ultimate hostess gift just got better, thanks to recommendations from leading Savannah sommeliers.



BY MEAGHAN WALSH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIN ADAMS

The Gift Rap

IT'S AN UNPLANNED holiday tradition. Sooner or later we all lose ourselves among the racks of smooth bottles with foreign-looking labels, trying to magically divine the ideal wine for a dinner party whose menu we do not know.

Wine is the invisible killer of the holiday budget. We forget to include hostess gifts on our shopping lists, and then find ourselves ashamed to attend parties empty-handed. Still worse is the idea of watching other guests stomach our undrinkable bargain bottles. The result is a stringent set of criteria for the perfect wine gift: It has to be affordable and amazing.

To satisfy these requirements, we asked wine experts from some of the top restaurants in town for their favorite bottles and where to find them.

A Gift that Gives Twice

Gary Butch, the owner of Elizabeth on 37th, cites the **Cabernet Sauvignon Reserva by 2 Brothers** as his favorite take-along. This particular bottle "has a nice earthy tone," Butch said. "Some mineral too. It's European in context with some fairly heavy tones."

Created by the Bartholomaeus brothers after they lost their mother to breast cancer, this wine generates 50 cents on the bottle for breast cancer research and prevention centers in the area where the bottle is sold.

\$11.99 @ Johnnie Ganem

Charming with Chocolate

Brian Hansen, Il Pasticcio's wine director, sees **Banfi's Rose Regale Brachetto** as a great gift. Hailing from the Piedmont Acqui region of Italy, this sparkling red import is "a perfect accompaniment to chocolate," he said. "The strawberry flavors and the effervescence clean the palate."

\$23.99 @ Johnnie Ganem

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A Noir Christmas

When he doesn't know what's on the menu at a party he's attending, Gary Sonnenburg of The Olde Pink House opts for an adaptable pinot noir.

"It's good with various types of food — anything from smoked meats to seafood," he said, citing Adlesheim **Pinot Noir from Oregon's Willamette Valley** as one of his favorites. "It has a great old world and new world flavor."

\$25.99 @ Johnnie Ganem

California Dreamin'

Sapphire Grill's wine director, Stephen Paynter, has been known to bring along the **Cabernet Sauvignon by Vina Robles**, a label from the central California coast.

"It's very fruit forward, very drinkable," Paynter said. "And it doesn't need time to breathe, which is great for a party."

Under \$20 @ Habersham Beverage

Green Grapes

True to the sustainable spirit of Local 11 Ten, wine buyer Heather Moore favors the **Ehlere Estate Merlot**. This Napa Valley gem is pricier than the other selections for a reason: It's made by a nonprofit that's 100 percent organic.

"This one," Moore said, "is a full-bodied, rich merlot that's perfect for cooler weather."

\$47.99 @ Johnnie Ganem

A Hearty Harvest

Chris Zinaich, the wine director at Garibaldi's, often picks up the **Nero d'Avola by Cusumano** on his way to a soiree. This Sicilian red is made from hand-harvested grapes grown on south-facing vines. It tastes "of baked cherry and a touch of tobacco," Zinaich noted. "It goes well with anything, especially pasta."

Approx. \$15 @ Fresh Market ■