



Quality, discovery and authenticity set to define Christmas drinking in 2026

The festive season gives hospitality businesses a valuable opportunity to encourage guests to trade up, explore unfamiliar drinks, and consider more adventurous pairings. But with diners becoming increasingly selective about what they order, a premium price or familiar name may no longer be enough to secure the sale.

Quality, provenance, and a strong sense of place are expected to influence festive drinking choices in 2026, alongside a growing appetite for discovery. For operators, a carefully edited drinks list, clear food-pairing suggestions and confident recommendations from front-of-house teams can help demonstrate value and make wines, beers and spirits an integral part of the Christmas dining experience.

Experts from the EU's 'More Than Only Food & Drink' campaign share the drinks trends hospitality operators can use to increase interest and encourage guests to try something new this Christmas.

Wine: authenticity, discovery and premium sparkling take centre stage

Christmas remains the biggest occasion of the year for premium wine, but guests are approaching the category with a different mindset. Neil McAndrew, wine expert and advisor to the EU's 'More Than Only Food & Drink' campaign, believes drinkers are becoming much more discerning, with authenticity, provenance and quality at the heart of their decision making.

"People are looking for authenticity, a clear sense of place and quality that genuinely enhances the occasion, whether that's through the region, grape variety, style or the producer behind the bottle.

"We're seeing that most clearly in sparkling wine. **Champagne PDO** from France will always have an important place at Christmas, but people are increasingly recognising the exceptional quality available through other sparkling wines, such as **Crémant de Loire PDO** from France and **Cava PDO** from Spain. They offer traditional production methods, real heritage and outstanding value, making them increasingly attractive choices for festive celebrations.

“Rosé sparkling wines continue to gain in popularity and are now seen as a year-round occasion drink, rather than just for summer. Larger-format bottles are also becoming more common because they create theatre around the table and represent excellent value for family gatherings. Magnums offer real wow factor and are becoming renowned for their quality.”

Hospitality teams can capitalise on these trends by offering a small selection of sparkling wines and giving each one a clear point of difference. Magnums can be promoted to larger parties at the point of booking, while an appealing sparkling wine by the glass gives staff a natural opening recommendation as guests sit down.

“Inclusivity is another trend that will define Christmas as low- and no-alcohol wines, beers and spirits gain a place at the table,” McAndrew adds. “The quality of low- and no-alcohol sparkling wines has improved enormously over recent years, and they’re now becoming genuine celebration drinks rather than compromises. They’re increasingly being served as aperitifs because everyone around the table can enjoy them.”

These choices should be presented with the same care as alcoholic drinks, using attractive glassware and festive garnishes where appropriate, rather than being treated as secondary alternatives.

McAndrew would also like to see more people rediscover Europe’s dessert wines. **Sauternes PDO** from France, with its honeyed richness and notes of apricot and citrus, can complement the dried fruit and warming spices of Christmas pudding. Sweet **Tokaji PDO** from Hungary offers vibrant acidity alongside flavours of candied citrus, apricot and honey, while Italy’s **Vin Santo del Chianti PDO** is known for its nutty, dried-fruit character. **Madeira PDO** from Portugal, with its distinctive richness, refreshing acidity and notes of caramel, nuts and dried fruit, can also provide a memorable accompaniment to festive cheeseboards. Together, these wines show the diversity of Europe’s dessert wine traditions, from luscious and honeyed to nutty, oxidative and refreshingly acidic style.

Offering these wines in smaller measures and suggesting them when the dessert order is taken can help operators turn them into part of the course, rather than leaving guests to discover them at the end of the wine list.

Beer: heritage, flavour and food pairing put beer at the heart of Christmas

Beer is set to enjoy a festive renaissance as guests look beyond everyday lagers towards more premium styles with genuine heritage, rich seasonal flavours and a stronger sense of occasion.

According to Mark Dredge, beer expert and advisor to the EU’s ‘More Than Only Food & Drink’ campaign, Europe’s brewing traditions are well placed to meet the growing demand for authenticity, quality and discovery.

“One of the biggest stories every Christmas is still the popularity of Belgian Christmas beers. They’re one of Europe’s great festive traditions and something beer lovers genuinely look forward to every year. Unlike many modern seasonal releases, these beers weren’t created to follow a trend; they’ve been brewed for generations and have earned their place on the Christmas table through quality and craftsmanship.

“What makes them so special is that they’re naturally festive. Belgian brewing yeasts create wonderful flavours of dried fruit, figs, raisins, chocolate, caramel and warming spice that mirror so many of the flavours we associate with Christmas.”

Belgium is not the only country with a festive brewing heritage. **Bayerisches Bier PGI** from Germany includes rich winter bocks, while northern Europe has the tradition of Juleøl, or Christmas beer, with breweries releasing special seasonal brews to be enjoyed throughout December.

Hospitality operators can bring these stories to life through a dedicated festive beer selection, concise menu descriptions, or recommendations alongside individual dishes. EU breweries have also long embraced 750ml sharing bottles and even magnums, creating the same tableside theatre as opening a special bottle of wine.

“Food pairing is another area where beer deserves much greater attention,” says Dredge. “There’s genuinely a beer for almost every Christmas dish. Rich Belgian dubbels and quadrupels work beautifully with roast turkey, goose and glazed ham, while darker ales pair brilliantly with mature cheeses. Belgian fruit beers such as Kriek are fantastic alongside chocolate desserts because their bright acidity balances the richness perfectly.”

Including one or two beer matches on the festive menu, or offering a short tasting flight, can help staff present beer as a considered accompaniment to food rather than simply a standalone drink.

Spirits: versatility, theatre and regional traditions redefine festive entertaining

While Christmas remains a time for indulgence, the way people enjoy spirits is evolving. Guests are increasingly choosing lighter serves, premium cocktails and drinks suited to different stages of the dining experience.

Kristiane Sherry, spirits expert and advisor to the EU’s ‘More Than Only Food & Drink’ campaign, says: “Christmas is still about treating ourselves, but people are becoming much more considered. They still want something that feels special, but they’re increasingly looking for bottles that deliver value through versatility, quality and experience.”

One of the biggest opportunities is Europe’s aperitif culture. Vermouths, bitters and aperitifs are not just for summer. A vermouth and tonic or an aperitivo spritz can provide a lighter start to a festive meal and be made seasonal with garnishes such as rosemary, cranberries or orange.

“We’re also seeing people moderate in different ways,” Sherry adds. “It’s not just about no- and low-alcohol drinks anymore. Smaller cocktails, highballs and lighter serves allow people to enjoy premium spirits across several occasions without feeling every drink has to be a large one. Tiny cocktails are becoming particularly popular because they let people try more flavours while still feeling indulgent.”

For hospitality venues, smaller serves could work particularly well as aperitifs, alongside tasting menus or as part of a flight. They give guests the opportunity to try something special while providing operators with an additional sales opportunity.

Classic cocktails are also being reimaged rather than reinvented. A Negroni with festive spices, a beautifully garnished Martini or a smoky whisky cocktail can feel different with thoughtful seasonal

touches. Beautiful glassware, distinctive ice and food-inspired garnishes can transform a familiar drink into something memorable and shareable.

European whiskies are another category to watch. Producers across France, Denmark, Sweden and Germany are creating whiskies that offer quality and value while bringing a fresh perspective to the category. **Swedish Aquavit PGI** from Sweden, with its Nordic heritage, savoury botanical flavours and versatility, could also offer an interesting addition to festive cocktail and food-pairing menus.

Ultimately, hospitality operators do not need to overwhelm guests with choice. A carefully edited list, supported by simple stories, confident staff recommendations and relevant food pairings, can make festive drinks feel like an integral part of the meal. The most effective way to encourage guests to trade up or try something different is to explain what makes the drink special and how it will enhance their Christmas dining experience.

For more information please [visit our website](#) or contact: morethanfood_UK@agripromotion.eu

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Notes to editors:

In 2024, the European Union launched the 'More Than Only Food and Drink' campaign to promote the EU's incredible range of food & beverages across the UK market.

The campaign aims to promote European food & beverage products to food and drink professionals in the UK, highlighting the key characteristics of the products (safety, quality, authenticity, and sustainability), with a focus on EU quality schemes - Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) - as well as the EU organic label.

