

# RL

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### A LITTLE THOUGHTFULNESS GOES A LONG WAY WHEN IT COMES TO HOLIDAY PRESENTS

In his memoir *Minding the Store*, Stanley Marcus, the former president of the luxury retailer Neiman Marcus, recounts some exorbitant tales of Christmas-shopping past. In one, a fine-jewelry sales associate charters a private jet to deliver a diamond necklace to a South Texas ranch. In another, a customer in Buffalo telephones, wondering how to share the Yuletide cheer with his pet lion. (A Steuben feeding bowl, perhaps? No, he opts for an electric blanket; Buffalo winters, remember, are brutal, even for fur-covered beasts.) Even if a pet lion isn't on your list, none of us seems immune to the stumper gift—what to get for that hard-to-please relative, or for the nanny, the doorman, the hair stylist, or the host who has everything. But with a little common sense, gifting can be a source of pleasure and cheer during the holiday season.

Especially at the holidays, we feel compelled to hit a certain mark (at least fifty dollars!), or not to go over another (no more than two hundred!). But sometimes the best gift is the simplest, or the closest at hand. Instead of racing through stores to find inspiration, sit down and write a list of the things your recipient likes; you'll find that thinking about what you talk about together, where you've been, what meals you've enjoyed, and what fantasies you share aloud will help guide you to a perfect gift.

#### Spirits for the Season

As Sandy Hill, a generous host and author of the how-to entertaining book *Fandango*, insists, "The single best universal gift is always wine. There are so many ways to personalize it." For instance, you can buy a wine with a meaningful vintage year, to remember a birthday, an anniversary, or another meaningful date. Or give a wine that you "discovered" and enjoy yourself. Big spenders may want to give two bottles of a high-end wine, while others may want to give a case of an inexpensive "find" of a wine, setting up the recipient for months to come.

#### Food for Thought

Any food staple makes a perfect gift that is sure to be used, and needn't be generic or overly pricey. With a little thought, you can delight your recipient with an artisanal micro-roaster coffee blend. Order a special brand from a different city to show that you haven't just picked something up at your local grocer. I like La Colombe coffees, from Philadelphia, and West Coast favorites Blue Bottle Coffee Company and Ritual Coffee Roasters. Whenever I'm in Paris, I like to stop by Le Palais des Thés, the candy shop of teas, in the Marais, and sample different varieties for gifts later on. In addition to the selection of black, green, white, and smoked teas, you can choose tins of varying colors and designs for display in pantries and kitchens. (If the plane fare to Paris isn't in your budget, Le Palais des Thés ships worldwide.)

Cheeses and marmalades are also good standbys, especially during high-entertaining season. A host will always appreciate a gift that she can offer as if she had chosen it herself. Put some effort into finding unique and forgotten tastes, like olallieberry-and-lemon-verbena conserves, from June Taylor's collection of heirloom-fruit marmalades, butters, and syrups. I also like the idea of ordering seasonal or organic cheeses. Try Cowgirl Creamery's Pierce PT; produced only in fall and winter, this semi-firm cheese is washed in muscato wine and rolled in dried herbs.

#### Gift of Light

Though scents can be dangerous territory (what if your aunt can't tolerate the smell of cardamom-laced citrus?), if you know someone is fond of a certain scent, why not spoil them with fragrant candles? You can help your host set the atmosphere for winter gatherings with festive scents: orange spices, woody greens, and musks. Around the holidays, one of my favorites to give—and to receive—is Diptyque's Feu de Bois: it smells like smoldering embers, evoking the smoky comfort of wood burning in the fireplace.

#### What's in a Name?

Personalized gifts always make a big impression and show that you care enough to take the time to order something well in advance. Specialty stationers often offer a variety of chic, inexpensive monogrammed items that go far for a host—napkins, coasters, matchboxes, and even guest soaps. Knowing your host's tastes will help you select a design. If she's traditional, go with neutral tones and stick to traditional lettering; if he's avant-garde, think of funky fonts and an irreverent color. Slightly more expensive but still reasonable options include monogrammed barware and decanters. If you're an overnight guest, consider monogrammed towel sets.

#### Through the Years

One of the most significant gifts you can give is one that builds into a collection over time. For a recently married couple, think about starting an elegant line of Christmas tree ornaments. Each year, add a few more, and eventually you'll have provided a sizable set. Silver julep cups are infinitely collectible; I like to buy an elegant but inexpensive one and use it to present a bouquet of fresh flowers. For those with truly eclectic tastes, you can build a mismatched dinner-plate collection. Pick up a sunflower plate from the Museum of Metropolitan Art's gift shop one year, then a fine-china Herend dinner plate the next.

#### Finer Points

No matter what your budget, the most important thing is to be sure that a gift is from the heart and well thought-out. This alone should be your guide. Don't agonize over price tags; the only way a gift looks cheap is if it shows a lack of care. The only gift that's not worth the price is the one that takes the easy way out.

And although gifting often goes both ways, it doesn't have to: if someone surprises you by offering a gift when you weren't ready to reciprocate, don't feel obliged to have to give a gift in return—the joy of giving gifts is expecting nothing in return. Be appreciative, show your delight, and always express your thanks in a handwritten letter.

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