

# Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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## Pairing Wine and Food

As the season of holiday cooking, entertaining and celebration draws near, we often focus the November edition of Jim Hiller's Wine Club on the subject of food and wine pairing. Surfing on-line for some ideas the other day, I came across a video on the subject on *The Wine Spectator's* web site. In this vidy, Chef Daniel Boulard prepared a dish of Kataifi crusted sea scallops with porcini coulis and porcini marmalade, served alongside caramelized salsify. Now I consider myself a fairly advanced 'foodie,' but that recipe is considerably more arcane than anything I'm likely to include in my weekly meal planning and the insights conveyed on wine pairing did not seem to require quite so much of a wallow in exotica, much as I vicariously enjoyed the presentation. When we read articles on food and wine, there often seems to be an implication that wine must be reserved for the extra-special, super-sophisticated, and ever so hoity-toity occasion. But, in fact, wine improves any meal and our everyday fare can be just as exciting an opportunity to try a new food/wine combination as is the fanciest restaurant meal.

So for this release of the Wine Club, we'll take a decidedly more proletarian view of the topic and narrow the discussion to pairing wines with some tried and true standbys of the American diet. What wines might match up with the things we actually eat on a day to day basis? What goes great with some of the classics of American comfort food? For that matter, since the holidays are upon us and it's been a while since we've addressed it, we'll also attack the questions of what wines you might serve for Thanksgiving dinner, with the Christmas ham, the Chanukkah brisket, or on Super Bowl Sunday to go with salty snacks and spicy wings.

The most basic and useful guideline for successfully matching wine and food is

to first consider the weight of both the wine and the food. A light salad with a big heavy Zinfandel is going to make the wine taste like an astringent monster and the food taste sour at best. Prime rib with a Sauvignon Blanc will make the wine taste insipid and do nothing whatsoever for the meat. Light foods need light wines, heavy needs heavy.

Next, think about tannins and sweetness. The former are particular good at cutting through the fattiness of foods, the latter is particularly good at taming spiciness and heat. Finally, think about the dominant flavors in the food. White and red wines share many common flavors; both can be spicy, buttery, leathery, earthy or floral. But the apple, pear and citrus flavors in many white wines seldom show up in reds, and the currant, cherry and dark fruit flavors of red grapes usually do not appear in whites. Hopefully these core concepts will be clearer as we talk about the particular types of wine that we've selected this time and the foods that you can try with them that will make both the foods and the wine taste better than they would on their own.

The Rieslings that we've chosen, Columbia Winery's Cellarmaster's Riesling from Washington state in the Taster's Table and the Helfrich Grand Cru from Alsace in the Collector's Club, are the two lightest-bodied wines and the two sweetest of the twenty-four wines in this release, although it should be pointed out that Riesling is often made in a considerably sweeter style than these. When well-made, even the sweetest Rieslings, however, show a prominent acidity that balances the sugars and keeps the wines from being cloying and makes them my choice for the spicy chicken wings at your Super Bowl party. Acidity in wine provokes salivation, which cleanses the palate between bites of food, so the combination of sweet to ameliorate the heat and acidity to refresh the palate makes this match perfect. For the same reasons, off-dry to sweet Rieslings are an outstanding match for spicy take-out Thai

food or any other dish with a lot of heat in the spice. An added benefit is that Riesling (especially German Riesling) tends to be relatively low in alcohol content.

It is a great pity that Champagnes and other dry sparkling wines are almost always relegated and limited to the special occasion because bubbly work incredibly well with fried foods and are a spectacular pairing with fried chicken and with potato chips and other salty, crunchy snacks. The wine's acidity and effervescence cut through the richness of the chicken and the oil of the chips and it stands right up to the crisp textures of both. These are the same reasons why Champagne goes so well with caviar, if you think about it - the fish roe is salty, oily, crunchy too. If iced tea is your usual choice for fried chicken and beer your choice with chips, give sparkling wine a try instead.

Pinot Grigio has become very popular in recent years, to the point that it is close to supplanting Chardonnay as the generic wine-by-the glass white wine pour. For good reasons, too. It is light, dry, refreshing, and typically shows pretty, understated aromas of citrus, flowers and minerals, which is a very nice profile for the lighter cuisine that is very much in favor these days. A lightly dressed salad with some grilled chicken or fish and a glass of Pinot Grigio is a fine meal and a lovely food/wine pairing by anyone's standards. What's more, the grape lends itself to a range of interpretations. We included here an Alsatian and an Oregon Pinot Gris, both of which show a richer, more unctuous mouthfeel and greater depth of flavor than what one typically associates with Italian or Californian Pinot Grigio. That greater body makes these wines natural for any but the most heavily sauced fish dishes and any lighter poultry dishes.

We have included two dry rosés, an Italian and an Australian, but we could well have chosen from the south of France, from California, or even from Michigan to find excellent examples of this most versatile of food-friendly wine types. Oceans of over sweet and indistinguishable White Zinfandels have unfortunately given blush wines a bad name but dry rosé can be light to medium

bodied and perfectly refreshing with herbal or floral nuances that highlight the dominating aromas and flavors of bright red fruits: strawberries, raspberries, and even watermelon. Those fruit characteristics are what makes rosé such a great match for smoked meats, from baked ham, to cold cuts, or even hot dogs. Think of how many baked ham dishes feature a pineapple, cherry, or orange glaze and how well those fruit flavors elevate and enhance the smoky richness of the meat. Your wine will do the same thing. Many wine lovers also argue for dry rosé as the perfect Thanksgiving wine, maintaining that the fruit and acidity sing a counterpoint to the richness of the turkey and stuffing, much as the tartness of the cranberry sauce does.

If you favor the white meat of your turkey feast, Gewurztraminer is my top choice for you, while Pinot Noir is my pick for the dark meat lovers at the table. Gewurz is not only quite full-bodied for a white, it has a characteristic spiciness that makes it a perfect match for the cacophony of flavors, herbs, and textures in the traditional Thanksgiving meal. The variety has a high natural sugar and the wines are often off-dry (the Helfrich in our Collector's Club more so than the Hogue) and Gewurz almost invariably shows flamboyant aromas of lychee nut, which also adds to its turkey day appeal if you consider how many stuffing recipes incorporate nut flavors of one sort or another. Gewurz also pairs beautifully with Asian food – pick a sweeter one to go with Szechuan or Hunan style hot dishes or a drier one for Mandarin style foods lacking the heat. Off-dry Gewurz is also terrific with smoked salmon.

What says classic American comfort food more than Mac 'n cheese? Sinfully sensuous and laden with fat, guilt and calories, the silky texture and rich flavors of its cheesy goodness screams for a wine of comparable weight with a creamy, generous texture of its own and nothing can do that like the prototypical big, buttery California chardonnay. Both our picks, the Montoya from Arroyo Seco and the Cuvaision from the Carneros are barrel-aged with good acidity, gobs of bright fruit and spicy oak characters that will liven up any version of this dish.

(BTW if you have no worries about your cholesterol level, google "Patty Labelle Macaroni and cheese" and try that recipe.) Cream or butter sauced fish and pasta dishes would also be fantastic with either of these chardonnays.

We've already mentioned that Pinot Noir, the lightest of our red wines, would be an excellent choice for Thanksgiving dinner. Its acidity and tannins are especially good with the richness of the dark meat and skin on the bird, or for that matter, with almost any game bird. Pinot also tends to show earthy, rich complexities that particularly enliven the flavors of mushroom dishes or stews and ragouts with mushroom and/or root vegetable ingredients. Another great match for Pinot Noir is salmon in almost any preparation, again because the rich fatty texture of the fish calls for both acidity and some tannin to cut through the oiliness and more weight than your typical white can offer. For a real surprise of a match, try aged pinot with dark chocolate and ripe strawberries.

Relatively light bodied, Sangiovese-based Italian wines as well as their Cal-Ital counterparts are the perfect match for pizza, pasta, lasagna or just about any tomato sauced or pesto sauced dish. These foods can also pair successfully with other reds, but the softer tannins and rich mid-palate of Sangiovese with a slice of pizza is a perfect example of how the weight of the food and the weight of the wine match each other like a hand in a glove. Sangiovese captures the rustic and savory flavors of the earth. It's aroma profile is an amalgamation of herbs, baked clay and dried fruit. The tannins are dusty and gravelly and the acidity is pronounced – just perfect for the rustic but varied flavors with which we love to adorn our pizza. We have two lovely examples here in the Fiore and the Morris Farms, one more complex than the other, but both straightforward, refreshing, honest, clean and eminently quaffable.

Known for its deep color, supple tannins, and dark fruit aromas, Malbec has long played a supporting actor role to Cabernet Sauvignon in France's Bordeaux region. But on the sunny slopes of the Andes Mountains in Argentina, Malbec finds its star potential.

Argentinean Malbec is bright and zesty, fruitier and less tannic than Cabernet Sauvignon, more complex than Merlot. Spicy notes of clove, nutmeg, and black pepper give it Syrah-like intensity. As Argentina is also famous for its beef, if you surmised that Malbec and beef might pair up well, you would be right on the money. All roasted and especially grilled beef dishes go wonderfully with Malbec because the spice edge of the wine highlights and enhances the caramelized richness and smoke notes of the grilled meat's outer crust. The tannins slice right through the meat's fattiness, and the exuberant fruit provides the ideal complement to the rich meaty flavors. Whenever you throw beef on the grill, think Malbec.

Cabernet Sauvignon is a powerful wine - one of the most tannic of all reds. Old world/cool climate Cab (i.e., Bordeaux) can be quite reserved and astringent when young while new world/warm climate Cabernet tends to be more supple and approachable in its youth. The grape is highly pigmented, high in acid, and high in phenolic compounds too. It needs big foods to go with its big profile. The hands down choice for brisket, Cab goes beautifully with all beef dishes, but especially braised or stewed presentations. Any of the big reds we're discussing here will be match nicely with burgers, by the way, but young Cab is perhaps the best match of all because the tea-like, slightly green and herbal nuances that are typical of the grape's aroma profile seem to harmonize with the meat just as the lettuce, tomato and pickle do.

Syrah/Shiraz can be quite fruit-driven, exhibiting blackberries, mulberries, loganberries and the like. Better examples have also notes of spice, herb, and musky wood smoke. It is a supple, high-impact wine that gratifies immediately in its youth and can develop with some bottle age rich, earthy, aromas that hint of forest floor, autumn leaves, dried fruits and braised meats slow-simmered in an amalgamation of spices. Syrah is fantastic with lamb in any and all preparations and stews of any kind, the richer and spicier, the better. It is terrific with chile.

Zinfandel is a heady, full-bodied red with ripe raspberry fruit accented by pepper and spice often complemented by a dusky, briary, brambly undercurrent that hints of bay leaves, sweet thyme, and basil. The grape's ability to produce prodigious amounts of alcohol is legendary, most modern styles of Zinfandel reaching at least 14% alcohol and sometimes more which can create wines whose flavor profile takes on a brandied character. Big spicy Zin needs big, spicy food. The best match of all for this bad boy of a wine is with barbecued meats, especially spare ribs. Another excellent match is with meat loaf, which is a natural with almost any red wine but is particularly improved by Zin where the vegetal and herb notes of the wine play off the peppers and onions that most meat loaves feature.

## Tasting Notes

### Taster's Table Whites

#### **Domaine Ste Michelle Blanc de Blanc**

This brand is year after year one of the fine bargains in sparkling wine, always clean, with crisp, zesty fruit, good effervescence, and light-bodied, fruity finishes. "Light and elegant, with a trace of citrus and peach flavor. Extremely dry and tart, but with finesse and elegance. A wonderful everyday sparkler." 87 points and a "Best Buy" from *The Wine Enthusiast*. "Distinctively spicy, jazzy on the palate, delivering pear, black pepper and yeast notes that persist on the creamy finish." 89 points in *The Wine Spectator*.

#### **2007 Montoya Arroyo Seco Chardonnay**

Barrel Fermented and aged sur lie (on the must), the Montoya Chardonnay has a golden straw color with fresh fruit aromas of ripe pear, melon and apple with butter and toasty vanilla from the oak barrel aging.

#### **2007 Colombia Winery Cellarmaster's Riesling**

"This is the winery's mass-production, off-dry bottling, reliable and versatile. Flavors mix peach, nectarine, honeycomb and lemon tea, with a nice fullness through the finish." 87 points from *The Wine Enthusiast*.

#### **2008 Hogue Columbia Valley Gewurztraminer**

Aromas of lychee, rose petal and orange blossom. The rich palate is medium-bodied, with lychee, citrus, and the spiciness characteristic of Gewurztraminer.

#### **2007 Doga della Clavule Rosato Toscana**

A blend of 60% Sangiovese and 40% Syrah, the wine shows brilliant pink color, notes of intense and delicate raspberry and wild strawberry in the nose and a light-bodied, smooth palate with good structure and a clean vibrant finish.

#### **2008 A to Z Oregon Pinot Gris**

"A to Z puts out a lot of Pinot Gris—more than 32,000 cases of this 2008—but the quality is consistently fine. Lovely spices wrap around fresh citrus and pear, then move into a smooth midpalate that lingers gracefully through a clean and very refreshing finish." 89 points from *The Wine Enthusiast*.

### Taster's Table Reds

#### **2007 Mutt Lynch Portrait of a Mutt Sonoma County Zinfandel**

Carignan is blended with the Zin here - thus a "mutt." Modeled after California's early history - fruit forward wines made by Italian immigrants that used a field blend of various grapes from their vineyard, with Zinfandel at the core. On its own Carignane produces full-bodied, if somewhat rustic wine. When combined with Zinfandel, it can accentuate the sweet berry qualities of Zin with spicy, red cherry fruit components and more firm structure in the mouth.

#### **2007 Nine Stones Barossa Shiraz**

Dark berry color with purple hues. Aromas of blackberries, dark cherries and chocolate, with cedar and a hint of clove. Multi-layered palate with very sweet fruit flavors and powerful yet supple tannins; excellent fleshy middle palate and a long satisfying finish.

#### **2007 Guenoc North Coast Victorian Claret**

A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Petite Sirah made in a

style to mimic a classic red Bordeaux, which the Brits often refer to as Claret.

"This red blend is a crowd pleaser! Powerful up front dark fruit hits the palate immediately followed by a rich chocolate middle and a silky smooth long finish. This wine is ready to enjoy today!" - *Wine Buyer* 91 Points

**2008 Fiore Rosso Toscana**

70% Sangiovese, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon. Shows a bright ruby red color and a highly scented and fragrant bouquet with cherry and strawberry notes. Medium-bodied, well-balanced, soft and velvety.

**2007 Vina Dona Paula Luján de Cuyo Los Cardos Malbec**

"Offers a good, juicy beam of raspberry and black cherry fruit, with spice and vanilla hints on the finish." 85 points in *The Wine Spectator*.

**2008 Castle Rock California Pinot Noir**

The wine is elegant and medium-bodied, offering aromas of cherry, tea and herbal spice. On the palate it is smooth with a silky texture and mild tannins, giving flavors of black cherry, plum and spice, finishing long and harmoniously.

**Collector's Club Whites**

**NV Paul Zinck Cremant d'Alsace Brut**

A blend of Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay, this Cremant (crafted by the same *methode champenoise*, but from Alsace, not Champagne) is both light in body and full in flavor with a biscuity bouquet of exotic fruit and apricots.

**2007 Cuvaison Carneros Chardonnay**

"A beautiful Chardonnay with so much class and elegance, it's a bargain at this price. Shows lush flavors of pineapple crème brûlée, Meyer lemon custard and vanilla sorbet, balanced with crisp acidity and a fine touch of smoky oak. Perfect with shellfish." 92 points and an "Editor's Choice" in *The Wine Enthusiast*.

**2005 Helfrich Riesling Grand Cru Steinklotz**

"This open-knit and balanced white displays white peach, cardamom and kumquat flavors, with a hint of slate

lingering on the finish" 88 points in *The Wine Spectator*

**2001 Helfrich Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Steinklotz**

"A pronounced petrol note plays through this open-knit white. It's off-dry, with honeyed flavors of fruitcake, lemon curd and spice." 87 points in *The Wine Spectator*.

**2007 Turkey Flat Barossa Rosé**

"The Provencal-styled 2007 Rose is medium pink with bright aromas of strawberry and raspberry. It has a velvety texture, intense flavors, excellent concentration and a lengthy finish. It would do very well on a Thanksgiving table." 90 points from *The Wine Advocate*.

**2004 Trimbach Alsace Pinot Gris**

"An intriguing blend of smoke, stargazer lily and forest floor in this subtle white, accenting hints of candied orange peel and lanolin. The clean acidity is integrated, but still firm, hinting at more to come from this elegant white." 90 points from *The Wine Spectator*.

**Collector's Club Reds**

**2005 Black Goose Mendocino Zinfandel 'Bartolomei'**

The fruit comes from 100-year old vineyards in the heart of Mendocino County. These old, head-pruned vines produce less than two tons per acre, giving the wine its rich, fruity quality with raspberry and cherry-like flavors and a smooth aftertaste. It is aged 22 months in French oak.

**2007 Wirra Wirra 'Catapult' McLaren Vale Shiraz**

Shiraz 95% Viognier 5%. Deep plum color with a bright red rim. Fragrant and aromatic bouquet in which the perfume of the Viognier accents the vibrant black berry and cherry aromas of the Shiraz with underlying dark chocolate and mocha notes. Lush blackberry fruits on the palate are well balanced with fine silky tannins and a velvety texture and mouth feel.

**2005 B Side Napa Valley Cabernet**

"Holds its own in a tasting of Napa Cabs that cost, three, four, even five times as much. Made with a drop of Petite Sirah, it's dry, firmly tannic and complex, with black currant, beef jerky, miso, pepper spice and smoky oak flavors." 91 points from *The Wine Enthusiast*.

**2005 Morris Farms Montereio di Massa Marittima**

100% Sangiovese, the bouquet is fruity and spicy with a color of intense ruby red. Its taste is soft, elegant and notably persistent.

**2007 Fabre Montmayou Lujan de Cuyo Gran Reserva Malbec**

"The 2007 Malbec Gran Reserva was sourced from 60+-year-old vineyards in Vistalba. It was aged in French oak for 10 months. Opaque purple-colored, it delivers an expressive perfume of pain grille, mineral, scorched earth, violets, and black cherry. On the palate it is medium to full-bodied with layers of savory dark fruit, ripe tannin, excellent balance, and an elegant personality. Give this outstanding effort 2-3 years in the cellar and enjoy it from 2011 to 2023." 92 points from *The Wine Advocate*.

**2005 Latour Santenay**

Pale in color, this rich, rangy Burgundy goes for shades of flavor. Infused with a red cherry aromas, the initial tannins merge into softer raspberry flavors that in turn become fresh red currants and a finish of bright acidity. Picks up earth and mineral in the aftertaste.

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