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The Annual Puzzle of What to Pour

By Dave McIntyre

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Every November, wine columnists wail about the difficulty of pairing wine with the traditional Thanksgiving meal. So many flavors on the table! Nothing matches sweet potatoes and mini marshmallows or lumpy turkey gravy! Cranberry sauce from a can? *Sacre bleu!* You can hear their hands wringing louder than church bells.

The typical solution is to come up with a single wine that might not match everything on the table but will at least minimize the horror. So you'll read that the ideal Thanksgiving wine is zinfandel for its power, pinot noir for its food-friendly delicacy or Gewuerztraminer for its sweetness.

My usual response is: Open one of everything. The only challenge with Thanksgiving is that there is so much food on the table at once instead of an orderly progression of courses in the classic manner. Any wine should match some flavor in the feast; just take note of what you eat before you sip. I also suggest a bottle of Beaujolais nouveau (available in wine stores every year on the Thursday before Thanksgiving) as a celebration of the harvest just passed.

Thanksgiving should be viewed as an opportunity to experiment with food-and-wine pairings, not as a challenge. I asked several local sommeliers -- professionals at pairing food and wine -- for their perceptions on the Thanksgiving conundrum and what they are planning to open this year.

"The general tendency toward off-dry wines is a reaction to the amount of sugar in the meal -- either naturally or by someone's hand -- and the ubiquitous pie spice in everything," said John Wabeck, the former chef of Firefly and New Heights who is transitioning to be sommelier at the forthcoming Inox in Tysons Corner. "Having a touch of residual sugar can help with a dry bird, too; hence the Rieslings and Gewuerztraminers."

Wabeck spends Thanksgiving with a group of chefs and wine pros who each contribute "a bottle or four," primarily Burgundy, both white (chardonnay) and red (pinot noir). He said he enjoys playing the contrarian with other wines, such as Beaujolais: not nouveau, but various cru Beaujolais such as Regnie and Moulin-a-Vent.

Jill Zimorski, sommelier at Cafe Atlantico in Penn Quarter, regularly faces what could be the city's most daunting wine-pairing dilemmas for patrons of Minibar, José Andrés's avant-garde restaurant-within-a-restaurant. For her family's Thanksgiving feast,

Zimorski borrows a page from her Minibar playbook by opening the meal with something foamy.

"I like to start everything with bubbles, and I think a rosé sparkling wine is the best food wine ever," Zimorski said. She recommended a Lucien Albrecht Cremant d'Alsace Brut Rosé, made entirely from pinot noir. For the main course, she stays with Alsace for a rich pinot gris, a style of wine that typically has enough complexity to match the sugar and spice in a Thanksgiving meal, "even with my mom's pumpkin pie," Zimorski said. Oregon pinot gris offers a domestic (and typically less-expensive) alternative.

"Drink local" is a theme advocated by state agriculture commissioners across the nation this Thanksgiving. Local is also the choice of Daniel Mahdavian of Refuel Consultants, a sommelier who advises start-up restaurants on their drinks programs. "If it is a traditional turkey dinner, I like an exotic, fruity Virginia viognier or pinot gris for a white, and then an American zinfandel or Virginia cabernet franc or petit verdot," Mahdavian said. He mentioned White Hall Vineyards near Charlottesville as one of his favorites.

Not everyone I spoke with agreed that American wines are well suited for this most American of meals. "American wines tend to be fruit bombs that can overwhelm more subtle foods," said Brent Kroll, the barely-old-enough-to-drink sommelier who is reshaping the wine lists at Ardeo and Bardeo in Cleveland Park. I, for one, have never thought of Thanksgiving dinner as subtle, but Kroll noted "a certain gaminess and earthy quality to many of the dishes," such as heirloom turkey and mushroom or chestnut stuffing. Those characteristics can be tough to match with fruit-forward American wines, he said.

Kroll, like Wabeck, said he favors crus Beaujolais for their combination of fruit and earth. And though he may be too new to the area to think of Virginia cabernet franc, he does recommend the cabernet franc-based reds from France's Loire Valley for their versatility with a variety of foods.

So are there any hard-and-fast Thanksgiving wine rules? "As long as you follow the basic tenet of pairing -- to match the weight of the wine to the weight of the food -- you can't go wrong," Wabeck said. "Especially if it's a wine you like."

Which brings us back to my idea: Open one of everything.

Recommendations

Here are suggestions for red, white and sparkling wines with Thanksgiving dinner. In each category is a splurge, a moderately priced selection and a local option.

RED

Paraiso Pinot Noir 2006

**

California, \$25

This is a nicely balanced pinot noir from the Santa Lucia Highlands, with cherry and plum flavors accented by smoke from wood aging. It tastes a tad sweet, which should make it ideal for Thanksgiving.

Country Vintner: available at Rodman's, Calvert Woodley and Morris Miller in the District; at Evo Bistro in McLean.

Produttori di Govone Barbera d'Alba Superiore 2005

**

Italy, \$14
(Good Value)

Barbera is an exceptionally food-friendly and versatile grape, and this classically styled Piedmont wine offers earthy, mushroom and soy flavors and a slightly tannic finish. Fine now, and should age well for at least two or three years.

Dionysus: available at all area Balducci's locations, Whole Foods in the District and Virginia, Iron Bridge Wine in Columbia and Warrenton, Va., and Unwined in Alexandria.

Barboursville Cabernet Franc Reserve 2006

**

Virginia, \$23

Consistently one of Virginia's best reds, this wine loves to play hard to get. To coax it into revealing its potential, decant two hours before mealtime, then after an hour pour it into another decanter.

Country Vintner in the District: available at Calvert Woodley, Wine Specialist and Paul's of Chevy Chase. Republic National in Virginia: available at Arrowine in Arlington, Unwined in Alexandria and various Whole Foods Markets.

WHITE

Vision Cellars Blanc Gris 2007

**

California, \$20

A blend of sauvignon blanc and pinot gris, this almost masquerades as Riesling. It smells of fresh peaches, canned peaches and peach compote; its full mouth feel and touch of residual sugar pairs well with fruit and spice flavors in Thanksgiving fare.

Nice Legs: available at Chat's Liquors and Modern Liquors in the District; at Cork & Fork in Bethesda; at Maison du Vin in Great Falls, Rick's Wine & Gourmet in Alexandria, Vienna Vintner in Vienna, Vineyard of Virginia in McLean and the Wine Seller in Herndon.

Winzer von Erbach, Erbacher Honigberg Riesling 2007 (1 liter)

* 1/2

Germany, \$14

(Good Value)

This selection from Rheingau offers an extra one-third of a bottle for your guzzlin' cousin, but the moderate 10 percent alcohol level should keep him in check. The wine wins on its own merits, with Granny Smith apple flavors and a hint of sweetness. Delightful and thirst quenching.

Kysel: available at Calvert Woodley, Cleveland Park Wine and Spirits and Whole Foods Market (P Street) in the District; at Finewine.com in Gaithersburg; at Arrowine in Arlington and Cecile's Finewine.com in McLean.

White Hall Pinot Gris 2006

*

Virginia, \$17

From one of Virginia's most reliable and moderately priced producers, this pinot gris aims for Alsace in style rather than a crisp Italianate pinot grigio (the grape is the same), meaning the mouth feel is rich and the flavors complex enough for the turkey dinner.

Country Vintner: available at Cleveland Park Wine & Spirits in the District.

SPARKLING

Le Brun Servenay Brut Selection Grand Cru

Champagne, \$45

A beam of red currant and berry fruit shines through and reminds us that champagne is, first and foremost, wine. Great complexity with a minerally finish. A Becky Wasserman selection.

C'est Vin in the District: available at Paul's of Chevy Chase and Zola Wine & Kitchen; on the list at CityZen, Proof, Vidalia and Corduroy.

Lucien Albrecht Cremant d'Alsace Brut Rosé

* 1/2

France, \$21

This crisp and refreshing Alsatian has strawberry fruit and palate-cleansing acidity.

Country Vintner in the District: available at Bacchus Wine Cellar, Bell Wine & Spirits, Calvert Woodley and Pearson's; on the list at Zengo, Zaytinya and Rasika. Select Wines in Virginia: available at various Total Wine & More locations.

Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay

**

Virginia, \$28

Here's more evidence that Virginia can produce top-notch fizz. Elegant and stylish, with palate-refreshing acidity and subtle fruit that emerges about an hour after opening.

Margaux & Co. Imports: available at Cleveland Park Wine and Spirits and Potomac Wine & Spirits in the District; at Cecile's Finewine.com in McLean, Domasoteca in Rosslyn, and Fern Street Gourmet, Planet Wine & Gourmet and Rick's Wine & Gourmet, all in Alexandria.

KEY

*** Exceptional

** Excellent

* Very good

Prices are approximate. Check Winesearcher.com to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through the distributor.