

Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

Vol.23 November 2020

WINE PAIRINGS FOR THANKSGIVING DINNER

I think that Thanksgiving dinner preparations usually fall into one of two categories: 1. you make all the food and invite all the people and are in charge of everything (you might have helpers but you are the boss; the French word for boss is *chef*) or 2. everyone is assigned to bring a dish/contribution to the meal. Either way I think you'll either be selecting the wine or giving the orders for the wine. I imagine that this year the most overheard order will be simply, "Open the wine!" Here is how to pair wine with Thanksgiving Dinner.

Thanksgiving dinner is a minefield of competing tastes and flavors. Let's eliminate the biggest one - the turkey. Turkey is neutral in flavor. So let's forget about pairing the wine with the bird because the bird will pair nicely with a lot of different wines. Our real struggle is with the side dishes and Thanksgiving dinner is more about the sides than it is about the main.

So pick one. Pick one side dish that has intensity. Pick one that's bold enough, spicy enough, and rich enough to command seconds. You can choose to pair the wine with the candied yams, or the cranberry salad, or the garlic potatoes, or the

stuffing. What we are looking for here is distinction and intensity. Which dish/side has the most distinct flavor? Choose that, because it will influence the rest of the food on the plate.

Here it is, the best pairing concept in one sentence: Match the intensity of the food with the intensity of the wine. Simple.

What the heck does that mean? Wine is made up of specific components. They are: aroma, sweetness, acidity, alcohol and in red wines, tannin. Each of these combine to make a wine taste a specific way.

Aroma is the smell of a wine – fruity, earthy, vegetal, herbal, etc.

Sweetness is just that – sweet or the lack of sweet taste (also known as dry).

Acidity is the tartness or the lack of tartness in a wine.

Alcohol can be sensed in three distinct ways: as an aroma, as a sweetness or as a heat sensation.

Tannin is the drying effect a wine has on your tongue. It isn't dry because of the absence of

sweetness, it's dry because the tannin molecules are attaching to your saliva molecules and your tongue loses its slippery. Tannin in wine has the same mouth drying effect as tannin in black tea or in a green banana.

When choosing a wine to pair you need to know something about the wine and something about the food being served. A licorice, tobacco aroma-ed, high alcohol, and tannic, Cabernet Sauvignon would not pair well with marshmallow sweet potatoes but a German Riesling would pair nicely because we've matched sweet with sweet. To be truly great at pairing wine and food you'll want to match the food and wine in all components, aroma, sweetness, acidity, alcohol and tannin.

As I said earlier this is almost impossible to do with every dish at Thanksgiving but here are some suggestions.

Riesling from Germany or Washington State. These are sweet and most crowd pleasing. They are fruity and aromatic and in best examples have a nice layer of acidity that balances the sweetness. Stick to the less sweet and better balanced Rieslings noted



on a German bottle by the words *Kabinett* or *Spätlese* or anything from Washington.

Chardonnay from Burgundy, California, Australia or Chile.

Chardonnay is a chameleon-like grape and it expresses where it is grown particularly well. This concept is known as *terroir*. This means a Chardonnay will taste different depending on, not only how it's made, but also where it's grown. The geographic list above is from most expensive to least and you should expect more flavor, nuance and enjoyment from a more expensive wine and less from a cheaper wine. If an expensive wine fails to impress ask yourself why. Chilean Chardonnay will be the least expensive and will offer little opportunity for magic to happen in the way of a welcome a new flavor from your pairing. Chardonnay from Burgundy or California costs more but has the ability to make magic. Oaked Chardonnay can be buttery with aromas of coconut or butterscotch, unoaked will be citrus laden and have a sharper mouth feel.



Viognier (pronounced Vee-yon-yay) from France's Rhone River Valley, California or Australia has a nice aroma and mouth feel and is less dynamic than Chardonnay (read that as: less chance to screw this up and more chance



to impress with a cool sounding wine). Viognier has the aromas of peaches, honey and flowers. It is round and soft in the mouth but not too dry or too sweet and has good acidity to chop through most heavy foods.

Gewurztraminer from France's Alsace region or from Washington.

This is a very aromatic wine with lip-smacking acidity and high alcohol. It has aromas of tropical fruit, has a slight pinkish hue in the glass, and the alcohol while often over 14%, is well balanced in good examples and is perceived as sweetness. This makes the wine well suited to a heavy meal like Thanksgiving and also has the corollary effects of helping manage the stresses of 2020 and family. Alsatian Gewurztraminer can be difficult to find but is worth the effort as the Washington versions can sometimes be overly sweet. This is the most elegant wine choice for a Thanksgiving meal.



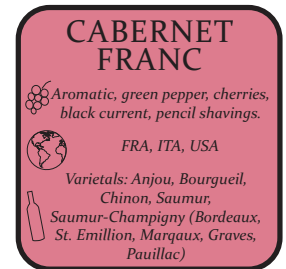
Pinot Noir from California. Be careful here because Pinot Noir can be mouth-wateringly delicious or lean, thin and disappointing. Select carefully and don't cheap out, there are no bargains when buying Pinot Noir so expect to pay more for more flavor. Stick to the flavor bombs from California with this grape for this meal. They can smell like cherries and thyme and are soft



in the mouth with the very smallest hint of sweetness. These wines have good acidity and cleanse the palate well.

Cabernet Franc from France's Loire River Valley, labeled as *Chinon*, *Saumur* or *Anjou*. Light, red, and dry. It shouldn't compete

too much with anything and that's the point when you are trying to pair with jello marshmallow salad and sage stuffing. You're never going to make a wine fit into those shoes, and Cabernet Franc won't even try. There is something refreshing about that.



Pinotage from South Africa. If you've got someone at your holiday table that wants a big, bold, red wine but you are afraid because your regular choices



won't pair with hazelnut and leek stuffing then serve a Pinotage. This wine is a hybrid of Pinot Noir and Cinsaut. and was developed in South Africa. This is a deep, red wine with supple smooth tannins and a pleasing smoky, earthy, rich aroma and flavor.

If you still can't decide and want a solid winning recommendation, Pinotage served along with a Gewurztraminer should please everyone at the table.

Happy Thanksgiving and
Bon Appétit!