

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Wine With Meat Loaf

Dining with wine has been a talking point for decades. Serving the right wine with a main entrée, or vice versa, is the refuge of people with formulae, which usually do not work.

Food editors and gourmet society sophisticates, among others, have always been into this “white wine with fish, red with meat” hooley until a few savvy folks wised up and realized that it wasn't the main ingredient that was the key, but a *mélange* of ingredients.

That is, sole poached in white wine is distinctively different from the same sole covered in a tomato reduction, green chili peppers, and cumin.

One book that tried to set diners right more than two decades ago was “Red Wine with Fish,” by David Rosengarten and Josh Wesson. The idea was sound, but most people never understood the ideas put forth.

Even while that book was making its way around the book stores, I saw people still trying to put a round peg into a rectangular pie pan by foisting off the old saying as being more or less valid.

The worst of it wasn't what the food columnists were saying. It was what the wine columnists were saying.

Much of what I've seen from wine writers in newspapers and magazines over the last two decades were food-wine suggestions that were elitist.

A great Chardonnay with lobster bisque? Sure, it may go well. And an Alsace Gewurztraminer with roast marinated pork loin with a veal demi-glace? Sure. And Chateau Latour with

Beef Wellington? Why not? Sancerre to go with bouillabaisse? I have no objections.

The problem wasn't that the ideas were wrong; it's just that no one ever eats that way on a daily basis. Rarely anyhow. The average American eats steak, fried chicken, spaghetti with meatballs, hamburgers, grilled sausages, chili, pizza, tacos, and all sorts of everyday food.

And no one ever suggested wine for the foods we eat daily.

Weekdays we eat simply; even on weekends we use all sorts of time- (and money-) saving steps to put out a dinner that's tasty and doesn't take four hours and *foie gras* to make.

So what wine goes with pizza? It all depends on the kind of pizza, and that leads to rule No. 1. Like prefers like. Pizza slathered with tomato sauce will be sweet-tart (from the sugar and acid), so would benefit from a medium-bodied red such as Chianti. If the sauce is also one that is sweeter than savory, Zinfandel may be best. Indeed, so would a plate of similarly spiced pasta.

But a pizza with a white sauce, no tomatoes, and loads of chicken might be best with a simple white wine, like a Lake County Sauvignon Blanc.

The choice of spices could alter such ideas. Look at a pasta *arrabiatta*, with a lot of Cayenne pepper, olives, and perhaps capers. Then a lighter wine, even a chillable red, would be a better pick.

Fried chicken with mashed

(See *Meat Loaf* on page 2)

Lamb=Bordeaux?

In the 1970s, I was advised by an old-timer that the classic pairing was Bordeaux and lamb.

I tried it and with younger Bordeaux I wasn't sure what to make of the pairing. It was OK, but nothing special.

As I began to read more about the way classic dinners were crafted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was obvious that lamb=Bordeaux was a mistranslation of what really was at play.

In the classic work “Notes on a Cellar-Book,” by the late Dr. George Saintsbury, a number of the classic English dinners included mutton, not lamb, which has a gamier flavor. And the wine often was a Bordeaux from the 1870s or 1880s, and (I assume) gamier as well.

Today's Bordeaux is a lot less gamy than the 19th century Bordeaux I have had and our lamb is fresh and rarely has a strong gamy aroma.

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Meat Loaf

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potatoes isn't often a very spicy dish, so I might pick a lightly oaked Chardonnay or even perhaps a young Sauvignon Blanc.

But the best wine I ever had with fried chicken was a bone dry Riesling.

Steak calls for something as beefy as an Australian Shiraz; grilled sausages and a Cru Beaujolais or a young Santenay works nicely.

Meat loaf also can be variations on a theme. When made with garlic and onions, I'd go with something as straightforward as Merlot or Malbec. But if you have a barbecue sauce coating, we're back to weight, so perhaps a Petite Sirah or a Zin.

Pinot Noir is the perfect choice for a rare roast beef, but think of

the weight of the wine. A heavy Pinot with 15% alcohol, as rich as Syrah, will overpower a dish as delicate as roast beef. The weights of the wine and the food should be roughly equal.

Moreover, a dish with actual sweetness (such as Sole Veronique or honey-glazed ham) should have a wine with an approximately equal sweetness. Thus German Kabinett is better than a wine designated "trocken." The trocken is fine with Cantonese food that rarely has a lot of spice. But Szechuan calls for a wine with a softening effect, such as an off-dry Gewurztraminer.

I am not suggesting that all of the above ideas are "best." I can imagine that some people may not like Sancerre, Semillon, or Chianti,

no matter how well it works with a dish. In such cases, find a wine that compromises, allowing some harmonies to work that all diners can appreciate.

For that reason, a dry or slightly off-dry rosé often is the best choice.

Rosé made with too much sugar or alcohol can be so clumsy that it isn't refreshing, and has the weight to be awkward with most foods. As a lighter wine, it has some weight to work with meat dishes, but not so heavy that it detracts from seafood and other light, delicate dishes.

In strategizing what sort of wine would work with a particular dish, think of how the various seasonings work with the food, and pick a wine that seems compatible in flavor and weight.

Aussie Hardships

The downturn in Australian wine sales here and the even greater drop in dollar volumes coincides with a horrid situation down under.

It's estimated in Australia that some \$400 million in vineyard and winery assets are for sale, with no expectation they'll sell soon.

A surplus of wine, a near-decade of drought, and a weak Australian dollar are only some of Australia's wine woes.

In the face of this, Bronco Wine Co. has launched Down Under, an Australian Chardonnay intended to

sell for \$2.99, the so-called Three-Dollah Koala.

Among the sellers of Australian properties is Constellation, which listed 20+ vineyards for sale. And Foster's listed 31 vineyards for sale, totaling some 10,000 acres.

Many owners of U.S. firms, in strained times past, have sold off vineyards and/or abandoned long-term contracts, to the detriment of their brands.

As Australian wine columnist Jeremy Oliver warned in a recent article, "if wine producers lose

control of key vineyard assets [that make] important wines, they could face trouble in future if competitors outbid them" for fruit.

"The difficulties faced by [those] attempting to sell vineyards in an over-supplied market could also diminish the value of the vineyards they retain, which in turn could force more vineyards to come up for sale if assets are devalued.

"It's potentially a very dangerous cycle."

Meanwhile, the latest Australian marketing strategy here is valid: to emphasize the regional greatness of many Aussie areas, not just a few.

Anticipate a greater number of excellent wines in the \$20 to \$25 price range from Australia in the coming year.

Especially, look at dry Rieslings, dry rosés, and balanced Shiraz as three prime areas for Australia wine for the rest of the year and into 2010.

Wine of the Week

2008 Bergerie de l'Hortus Rosé de Saignée, Coteaux du Languedoc (\$15): Stunning aroma of red berry fruit, faint violet notes and a hint of strawberries. Modest alcohol (13.5%). A Syrah/Grenache/Mourvedre blend from the south of France that proves light, delicate wines can have intense flavors. Great acid to work with a wide array of foods—meats, seafood, and almost anything else you can throw at it. Imported by Beaune Imports, Berkeley, CA.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last three days.

Exceptional

2007 **Saintsbury** Syrah, Sonoma Valley, Sawi Vineyard (\$40): Simply dramatic aroma of black pepper and violets, with hints of plum and underbrush. Just a tad coarse right now, but with air the wine settles to show perfect structure for aging a decade. But pure joy to drink now with roast meats. A great wine.

2006 **Mount Tamalpais** Merlot, Marin County (\$28): A hint of underbrush, green tea, herbs and spice, red fruit, and structure to age a few years. Only 12.8% alcohol. Last vintage of this wine; Jonathan and Susan Pey grafted the vines, saying retailers “wanted big, fat monster Merlot.” Looking for a chewy red wine? Go elsewhere. This is a classic Claret Merlot. Buy at www.marinwines.com.

NV **Gloria Ferrer** Blanc de Noirs, Sonoma Valley (\$20): Yet another release and another winner

NZ: Buy by Brand

Sauvignon Blanc once was a white wine without pedigree, but in the late 1990s, New Zealand taught the world that the long-respected grape in France had a distinctive personality.

Until then, California wineries had dumbed-down the grape by using vineyard techniques to make it so bland it wasn't identifiable.

In the last decade, American wine buyers have turned Sauvignon Blanc into one of the world's top white wines, and New Zealand's success has led to a strange situation.

On a trip to New Zealand in 2004, Juliann and I saw a frenzy of SB plantings that we knew would create problems. And they have.

from Bob Iantosca, a stylish cherry-scented Pinot-based sparkling wine that is one of the best in the state.

2005 **Bonny Doon** Le Cigare Volant, Earth (\$32): The superb Grenache (50%) is challenged by the 24% Mourvedre, which gives it an earthy character that emulates the Rhône. Air allows the wine to open, showing lots of depth and complexity. One of the best Cigare wines ever.

2008 **Bonny Doon** Vin Gris de Cigare, Earth (\$14): Berry and spice notes, a dry entry, but still rather succulent, a perfect all-purpose wine made in a legitimate *vin gris* style.

2008 **Tamari** Torrontez, Mendoza (\$15): Wonderful aroma of mint, pineapple, and passion fruit with a succulent entry, but superb balancing acidity. Tastes like a bit of Gewurztraminer was added for spice. A white wine grape that does well in Argentina and a delight

More than 2,000 acres of land that was totally inappropriate for grapes has been planted in Sauvignon Blanc, and the result is a virtual flood of utterly mediocre SB from New Zealand.

Most of these wines do not carry names I recognize, and in an article this week on *Harpers Wine and Spirits* in London, it was revealed that some UK retailers were offering New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc for £3.99.

This is the equivalent to \$8, or a bit less. To be sure, a few brands that have large volumes of wine to sell are discounting them, such as Villa Maria, which is selling 1.5 liters of its SB for £9.99 (\$20).

But from what I read online, I

on a hot summer day.

Very Highly Recommended

2006 **Artezin** Petite Sirah, Mendocino (\$25): Rustic, earthy and still peppery/spicy and coarse, just right to pair with a beef stew loaded with root vegetables. From Hess' “other” wine maker Randall Johnson.

2008 **Familia Bianchi** Sauvignon Blanc, Mendoza (\$13): For those who love white Graves, a bargain-priced wine from Argentina with a clay/limestone aroma, faintly varietal. But with aeration it opens to show more of the slate/hay characteristics of the grape.

2008 **Colina** “Alcance” Sauvignon Blanc, Casablanca Valley (\$15): White peach, slate and a touch of hay. Succulent and balanced. Imported by Jackson Family.

assume that most of the £3.99 stuff is pretty ordinary, and probably not worth the price.

If you want *quality* Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand, the best suggestion is to pay full price, about \$14 for most wines. It's still not much to pay, and the rewards will be obvious.

Bargain of the Week

2008 **Ironstone** Expression Rosé, California (\$10): Excellent aroma of watermelon and cherries and a soft, succulent entry, but with decent acidity, low alcohol (13.0%), and good balance. Carries its residual sugar well. Serve chilled.

What Cabernet Franc Can Be

One of our favorite wine regions is the Loire Valley. It lacks the panache of Bordeaux or Burgundy, but has great wine in a style we love.

Subscriber Dave Buck wrote to us this week about touring the area. His comments are worth noting:

“Last month my wife, Rosemary, and I had the opportunity to travel through France for close to a month and one of the highlights for me was visiting the city of Chinon in the Loire Valley.

“I had read that Cabernet Franc does very well there, more so than in Bordeaux. A singular event occurred when we visited the Couly-Dutheil tasting room, on the edge of town.

“Not only was there no fee, the pours were generous and we were able to taste virtually every wine they had for sale.

“We started with a beautiful

sparkling wine, moving on to an excellent rosé (100% Cabernet Franc) and followed by a ‘vertical’ of their more recent bottlings of Cab Franc, down to their magnificent 2001 release.

“What I found intriguing was that virtually all the wines had an alcohol content of no more than 12.5% and...no oak. They all exhibited great fruit, were well balanced, had good body, and a lingering aftertaste.

“In talking with the lady behind the counter, she kept emphasizing the fact that no oak was used and that the 12.5% alcohol was a constant (no heat there).

“Unfortunately, I had no access to the acid content or pH numbers. In addition, she went on to say that many wines in other regions, such as Bordeaux and Burgundy, according to insiders had become ‘Parkerized,’

and using her words, ‘too woody’ and ‘too powerful,’ among other things.

“She also felt that it was terrible that a handful of reviewers, led by Robert Parker, could influence the industry as a whole, solely for the sake of high scores. What a shame.

“We ended up buying a mixed case of Cab Francs, rosés and a single bottle of the bubbly. We enjoyed the wine for the remainder of our trip through Normandy, Brittany and ending up in Paris for a week.

“We even brought one of the ’01’s home to enjoy sometime soon.”

Cabernet Franc has fewer adherents than Cabernet Sauvignon, and the above remarks reflect how seductive the wine can be when it's made correctly.

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