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Thanksgiving Wines

Holiday Table Sipping

By Francis Fecteau

Even when surrounded by holiday cheer, tryptophan-induced turkey lethargy and the suppressed rage of extended-family holiday gatherings, one element that the host or hostess can control is the liquor selection. Granted, a drink is a drink and therefore good, but the right wine at the holiday table can elevate the spirit.

I know I should tell you exactly what to buy, but it's important to teach a wine drinker to "fish" rather than just hand them a bottle or shopping list. The point being, where would the pilgrims be if the Wampanoag Indians hadn't taught them to eat? Granted, the delightful Alcoholic Beverage Control wine store gnomes do their level best to help you with their Grrranimals-style food-and-wine pairing approach of posting paper turkeys on or near food-friendly wine selections; they are most always spot-on. But wandering your own way through the wine store and doing your own thing yields rewards, too.

For me, four flavors spring to mind for the holiday table: Syrah, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Gewürztraminer. Any or all of these can make the food and wine combinations at your holiday a seamless experience.

My favorite region for all of them this year is California's Mendocino appellation, which includes the Anderson Valley. Along with redwood trees and California's Golden Marijuana Triangle, the area is home to some of the most innovative, quality-driven wine producers and unique single-vineyard sites I've ever had the pleasure to taste my way through. Topographically, Mendocino is a more rugged landscape than its southerly neighbors of Sonoma and Napa.

Anderson Valley Pinot Noir and Chardonnay walk a fine line between the earthy subtleties of Burgundy and the excesses of ripeness that so often plague other domestic selections. Syrah finds a happy balance in Mendocino/Anderson Valley, too, with some of California's oldest and most revered patches of that varietal producing some stunning renditions. Syrah also serves as the backbone in many elegant blended wines.

In the Mendocino/Anderson valleys, I was also exposed to great domestic Gewürztraminer. I saw it on the vine there for the first time and was struck by the grape's charming peachy color and fresh apple-pie flavors when freshly plucked. Gewürztraminer is a temperamental little bugger that punishes bad timing; one winemaker said that he had to sleep in the vineyard to catch it at the exact proper ripeness and balance. And, while I've been confronted with renditions that are as charming as drinking soapy bathwater, Anderson Valley showed me what Gewürztraminer can be in capable hands—a wine with an aromatic profile that will sing at the Thanksgiving table.

When pairing wine with food, always remember that acidity is your friend. That's especially true with the gravy-laden richness of a harvest-centered meal. Palates change with the seasons (granted, I'll drink anything, anytime). But with an ever-increasing chill in the air, my palate wants warmer, more unctuous wine textures. This means richer wines and higher alcohol—not necessarily a bad thing—without losing bright, mouth-tingling acidity for balance. Yes, Virginia, you can have it all: thrilling richness buttressed by acidity.

The best part? Many of these Mendocino bottlings come from producers that qualify for Utah's shockingly progressive Small Winery Exemption (yes, "Utah," "progressive" and "wine" in the same sentence), thus putting the wine in your greedy little hands with some of the best pricing in the country, right during the holidays when you need it most. That's something to be thankful for.

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