
WINE, BEER & COCKTAILS

The Four Rules of Thanksgiving Wines

Wines of The Times

By ERIC ASIMOV NOV. 2, 2017



For Thanksgiving, be sure to provide both red and white wines for your guests. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Human behavior is often unpredictable. But immutable rules seem to govern certain situations, like Thanksgiving entertaining.

Rule No. 1: You will be anxious before the holiday.

This is inescapable. You will worry that you have not sufficiently disguised the conditions under which you ordinarily live, which is what cleaning house usually achieves.

You will be concerned that you do not have enough food, while at the same time fearing that you have too much, and that the turkey will be ready too soon, or too late, or never.

You will dread underlying tensions among family members and overbearing behavior.

I have not even mentioned the wine.

Rule No. 2: The holiday always goes beautifully.

This is the saving grace, invariably forgotten. If kept in mind, it can easily make these jittery few days far more bearable.

For most families, Thanksgiving this year will not be unlike Thanksgiving any other year. Whatever new elements arrive in 2017, the foreboding is the same as always.

Nonetheless, the projected disasters almost never occur. Everybody has a great time. Remembering this will not help to achieve preliminary serenity, but understanding the process can make the angst easier to endure.

In order to help, the Thanksgiving wine panel annually tries to eliminate wine selections from your areas of concern. Each year, we share a Thanksgiving feast in advance. We each bring two bottles of wine to the meal, each costing no more than \$25, with the aim of adding to our understanding of which types of wines work best.

As with many families, we welcomed a new member this year. Our colleague Tejal Rao — sitting in for Julia Moskin, who was away on assignment — joined me, Florence Fabricant, Pete Wells and our tasting coordinator, Bernard Kirsch.

Over the years, we have learned and affirmed that wine is the least consequential issue anybody will face at Thanksgiving. Why is that?

Rule No. 3: If the food is good and the company convivial, you cannot go wrong with the wine. If the food is bad and the company annoying, wine can only help.

What's the worst that can happen with wine? Only one potential disaster looms: running out.

The single most important guideline for selecting wine for Thanksgiving is simply to have enough on hand. We generally recommend one bottle per wine-drinking adult. This may seem like a lot, but it is simply a hedge against an insufficient supply. You do not have to finish it all. If you like, you can even give away unopened bottles with the leftovers.

Beyond quantity, you need to provide both reds and whites. You can add rosé or a sparkling wine, but both red and white are essential. You will have guests who contend that red wine gives them headaches or white wine gives them heartburn. This is not the time to debate these issues. Let guests drink what they want unfettered.

In our calculus, we imagine Thanksgiving as a large, freewheeling buffet meal, with lots of different dishes and a sprawling patchwork of flavors. It's not the time to fret about pairing particular dishes with certain bottles. The trick is to provide versatile, nimble wines that pair well with many foods and will not be as fatiguing as everything else.

That generally means bottles not especially high in alcohol, generally below 14 percent. They should not be tannic or oaky, but they must be energetic with lively acidity, which helps to refresh and cleanse the palate.

Over the course of many years we have identified wines that almost always work well: Beaujolais and bone-dry sauvignon blancs are crowd-pleasers. Basic Italian reds made of barbera or sangiovese are fine, as are Italian whites made of fiano or carricante. Loire reds, pinot noirs, chardonnays, chenin blancs, mencías from Spain, rieslings — all are fine choices.

These wines, I should say, fit our particular vision of the feast. If you are

having a small dinner party for six with multiple courses and you would like to serve precious bottles poured into exquisite glasses, by all means do.

For our party, we assume a crowd who might be drinking from tumblers or even paper cups. These are fine for big parties. But I do recommend steering clear of plastic goblets, which have a nasty habit of separating bowl from stem at the worst possible moments for your clothing, carpeting and anxiety threshold.

Almost all the wines the panel sampled were excellent, and the few that fell short were nonetheless fine. Tejal brought the two most fascinating wines, both white, sort of.

The first, the 2016 Caprice du Chameau from La Vrille et Le Papillon, a brother-and-sister team who make natural wines in the Ardèche region of southeastern France, was unfiltered, giving the wine a hazy appearance. Yet it was sublimely light and spicy, vibrant and thoroughly delicious. Surprisingly, it was made of viognier, which I usually associate with heavier, fruitier wines. Though visually unusual, the wine was ideal, with what Pete called “a feeling of over the river and through the woods.”

Tejal’s second bottle was more challenging, a 2015 from [RuBor Viticultores](#), made of chasselas, a Swiss white grape unaccountably planted 70 years ago in Cebreros in the Sierra de Gredos, a range of hills that cuts through central Spain. Though made from white grapes, the wine had been made as if it were a red. Instead of immediately separating the juice of the grapes from the skins, the producers macerated them together, extracting tannins and pigment.

The gritty, amber-colored result was savory, intense and unusual, and perhaps better for a crowd of questing wine fanatics than a general-interest holiday group. I would happily serve it with cheese, though not for the long haul of a feast.

Pete brought a rosé sparkling wine, a light, lacy cava from [Dibon](#) in the Penedès region of Spain. This fruity cava, unusually made entirely of the garnacha grape, would make a delightful aperitif, though we all would prefer not to drink sparkling wine throughout the feast.

His other wine was an inspired selection, a 2013 Tinto, or red, from the

intriguing Barraida region of Portugal from [Sidónio de Sousa](#), made from the baga grape. It was spicy, herbal and lightly fruity, and had just the sort of light-bodied charm that could carry through the entire meal.

Bernie took an unusual tack in selecting his white. He chose a Quincy, a Loire sauvignon blanc, because, he said, he remembered a meal many years ago when a Quincy was universally reviled.

This suggestion of overt hostility to the group could not be rewarded. We disappointed him by thoroughly enjoying the wine, a clean, citrusy 2013 from [Domaine Trotereau](#). We compounded the issue by liking his red even more, a 2013 pinot noir from [Red Tail Ridge](#) in the Finger Lakes. Its pale brick color seemed more typical of an older wine, but it was bright, juicy and fresh.

Florence's white, a 2016 sauvignon blanc from [Matanzas Creek](#) in Sonoma County, was an archetypal Thanksgiving white: neutral rather than flamboyant, a subtle character actor that would enhance rather than dominate. It had the sort of texture that continually invited another sip.

Her red was also from Sonoma, a 2012 [Buena Vista](#) merlot. It had the opposite character of the Matanzas Creek, with fruit flavors that were too intense. Tejal called the effect "sinister," but even so, it was easily tolerable.

My own wines included a savory white Bordeaux, a 2015 Lune d'Argent from Clos des Lunes, made by the excellent [Domaine de Chevalier](#). Though primarily sémillon with a quarter sauvignon blanc, it had a lot in common with the Matanzas Creek in that it was more interesting texturally than aromatically.

My red was a 2015 [Cahors](#) from [Château Combel-la-Serre](#), an easygoing wine that combined plummy fruit and chalky mineral flavors. It was made of malbec, but was more restrained than many of the fruity malbecs from Argentina.

Collectively, most of these wines added good options to the tried-and-true selections. Tejal, however, second-guessed her choice of the Spanish chasselas. "I realized that maybe something I personally liked is not for everybody," she said.

She's correct only to the extent of the distance that a wine lies from the mainstream. Otherwise, I live by the last rule.

Rule No. 4: Choose wines that you like; everybody else will like them, too.

Whites, Rosés and Sparklers

½ La Vrille et Le Papillon Vin de France Caprice du Chateau 2016
\$15

Bright, light and spicy, belying its cloudy, unfiltered appearance, with pure, unmediated flavors of pear and lime. (Fruit of the Vines, Long Island City, N.Y.)

Matanzas Creek Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc 2016 \$20

Not particularly expressive aromatically yet richly textured, lively, clean and refreshing.

Dibon Penedès Cava Brut Rosé NV \$17

Light, pleasing, fruity and lacy; an ideal aperitif. (V.O.S. Selections, New York)

½ Clos des Lunes Bordeaux Lune d'Argent 2015 \$20

Fresh, savory, balanced and energetic, with a pleasant texture and hint of citrus. (BNP Distributing, New York)

½ Domaine Trotereau Quincy 2013 \$25

Straightforward, with clean citrus and mineral flavors. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

RuBor Viticultores Sierra de Gredos Cebreros Chass! 2015 \$17

Cloudy, amber and intense with gritty tannins and oxidative flavors; perhaps not for a crowd. (A Katell Plevin Selection/The Vine Collective, New York)

Reds

Château Combel-la-Serre Cahors Le Pur Fruit du Causse 2015 \$15

Inky dark, yet easygoing, combining plummy fruit and chalky, earthy flavors. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

Sidónio de Sousa Bairrada Tinto 2013 \$16

Soft, smooth and well balanced, with flavors of dark fruits, spices and herbs. (NLC Wines, Brooklyn, N.Y.)

Red Tail Ridge Finger Lakes Pinot Noir 2013 \$25

Pale brick-red color, with fresh, bright, juicy flavors of red fruits.

½ Buena Vista Sonoma County Merlot 2012 \$10

Aromas of dark, saturated fruits, soft and dense, with staying power.

Recipe Pairing: [Cornbread Madeleines With Jalapeño](#)

A recent dinner at [Gloria](#), an intimate new seafood restaurant in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan, started on a fine note. Warm rounds of individual jalapeño-studded cornbread were served while we sipped cocktails. Always on the prowl for something new for the Thanksgiving menu, I thought of the cornbread as we sampled these Thanksgiving wine selections. Phil Johnson, an owner of Gloria, provided the recipe. But for Thanksgiving, instead of the four-inch cornbread disks served at the restaurant, I baked the batter in madeleine pans. I then froze the little cakes, so I would have them for the holiday. (I will reheat them covered in foil on a baking sheet at 275 degrees for 10 to 15 minutes.) The madeleines would welcome any quaff, cider or beer, not just wine. And the batter can also be baked in cast-iron corn stick molds, though the yield would be fewer, about 15. **FLORENCE FABRICANT**

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