

Wednesday, June 24, 2009

Picnic Vino

A no-nonsense approach to summer wine.

By Francis Fecteau

Having recently read good advice from another wine geek in this column about picnic and barbecue wines, I thought I'd contribute my 2 cents' worth to the topic of summer sipping. Everything is lighter in summer: the food, the wardrobes, the drink. Picnic fare becomes standard fare, and we eagerly seek out chilled dishes, the zip and crunch of summer vegetables and vinegars, and ripe, sweet tomatoes. The serious demeanor of colder months is set aside for a few warm moments, and our palates demand freshness and zing. These are the primary colors of the season's flavors and, as such, demand a counterbalance of freshness and brightness in our wines of choice.



When it comes to pairing food and wine, some beverage professionals will produce windy treatises, laundry lists of do's, don'ts and maybes (but only under conditions X, Y and Z on Tuesdays following a full moon at 4 p.m. in the afternoon). I prefer the less-traveled path. Noted Italian wine writer Victor Hazan—also husband to the utterly brilliant cookbook author Marcella Hazan—offers simple wisdom, something to the effect of, “You like the food? You like the wine? What more do you want?”

I counsel countless wait-staffers and restaurateurs alike on wine-and- food pairing rules. More often than not, it begins with, “Do no harm.” The only absolute warm-weather rule I can really think of is that one should avoid high-alcohol, high-oak wines with spicy-hot food; the result is akin to pouring gasoline on open fire. Alcohol exacerbates heat and kills the flavor of both the food and the wine. Even so, there are many who gladly eat and drink such combinations by the bucket. So be it; it's really a personal thing. It's summer, so experiment. Play.

My favorite starting point—for those bound and determined to make food-and-wine pairing complicated during this least-complicated of culinary seasons—is to do some homework. All food originates from someplace. Some of the world's finest goat cheeses are found in Pouilly Fume, Sancerre and Castilla y Leon—regions that are also famous for razor-sharp, dry white wines. Three guesses if goat cheese (from anywhere) pairs well with razor-sharp, high-acid white wines (from anywhere). In other words, if it grows together, it goes together.

So, what does make a great summer wine—an ideal picnic quaffer? First, as stated above, it can't be overly alcoholic. Wines with excessive alcohol generate “heat” towards the back of the throat, and the unctuousness from glycerol (sugar alcohol) comes across as oppressive.

Second, I prefer a wine with more acidity. Acidity is that element in wine that tingles the sides of the mouth. That tingle stimulates saliva production and that saliva, in turn, has an enzyme that stimulates digestion. (Ever wonder why you get the wine munchies?) Acidity is likely to be higher in wines from cooler climates or in varietals that don't require lots of heat, such as Sauvignon Blanc. And please, please, please don't be afraid of pink wines. Too much sugardimmed white Zinfandel may have deterred drinkers for years, but the tide has finally turned, and an ocean of delicious bone-dry, high-acid pink wines now pepper the shelves from all corners of the wine globe.

Best of all, great picnic wines are typically cheap. When grapes are picked early, when no oak is used and when second fermentations are avoided, the flavor profile of the original fresh fruit comes one step closer to your glass and to your picnic basket for fewer dollars.

