

Inspiration

IN “UNCORKING THE MYSTIQUE OF WINE RATINGS,” (*QB*, Sept./Oct. 2007), I pointed out that many tourists return from vacations in wine producing regions certain that wine tastes best when consumed where it is produced. The main reason why this seems likely is that people are generally in a better frame of mind while on vacation and the local wines taste best with regional food.

Although most of us are not on vacation much of the time, I have found that wine can be better appreciated locally if is consumed in a location that puts one at ease. Living in the Midwest, one thinks of drinking a fine vintage Port in front of a roaring fire on a cold winter night. Throughout the non-summer months, wife Pat and I look forward to superb vintage wines with dinner in our dining room.

Now that the days are lengthening, my thoughts turn to my favorite places to enjoy wine. My wife and I have worked tirelessly over the past 26 years to turn part of our backyard into a sanctuary. We have planted perennials and annuals as if there

were an impending shortage. Sitting on the patio, surrounded by these magnificent flowers, ferns and flora, I find my solace. We have many types of bird houses and feeders, fountains (including a mini-garden featuring a wine barrel fountain) with all this surrounded by large trees blocking all other sights. It is into this setting (after swimming daily) that I escape. I am fond of classical music and spend most days listening to Mozart, Vivaldi or Saint-Saens to optimize my frame of mind.

Within this environment, I find I am much better able to focus on wine appreciation while tuning out the rest of the world. The accompanying photo might help you to visualize the setting.

While I appreciate most well-made wines, I’ve noticed that I’m better able to focus on wine when I’m in my back yard. In this article, let’s consider two meals and my good choices of accompanying wines.

The first dish is built around eggplant. This vegetable, which originated in India, is particularly good in the summer if grown locally. Several years ago, Pat found the referenced recipe in



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this issue’s “What’s Cooking” column, and we’ve looked forward to it ever since. For those who prefer red wine regardless of the food, this is easy. The best wine with eggplant is Dolcetto, meaning “sweet young thing” in Italian. It is a workhorse grape, along with Barbera, in Piemonte, where it is grown. Best enjoyed young (2-3 years), it is widely paired with appetizers that stand up to its tannins (acidity) and is best when served slightly chilled (55-60 degrees). The shrimp and bay scallops, within the eggplant shell, cry out for a white wine, particularly on a warm day. Good choices include Chablis, Greco di Tufo, Albariño, Verdehlo and my favorite, Arneis. The greatest producers of Arneis are Bruno Giacosa and Vietti.

When we visited Vietti, the owner, Mrs. Currado, told us that years ago she had hired some workers to tear out the Arneis vines. When they returned the second day to finish the job, she paid them for the complete project but told them

to leave the remaining vines because she had decided that she had made a mistake in having them torn out. While she would have made more money by planting the vineyard to Nebbiolo from which Vietti produces great Barolo, she decided she loved Arneis. Today, most of the small amount of surviving Arneis can be traced back to her decision.

The other pairing involves my favorite dish, lamb. Over the past decade one of my best friends and I perfected the very simple recipe. It starts with a rack of lamb from which most all fat is excised. Then, we liberally sprinkle four herbs and spices – pepper, oregano, rosemary and thyme (remember the acronym PORT from the first four letters of each spice) on each side. After preheating the grill to the hottest setting and wrapping the bones with aluminum foil, we cook it on each side for eight minutes (medium-rare), let it rest for a few minutes and then marry with one-third inch potato slices coated with olive oil and grilled at the same time as the lamb. Many wines pair well with lamb but in warmer temperatures, I prefer Tempranillo.


My wife's favorite red wine and mine, for food-friendliness, is Pesquera, a good red wine and probably Spain's most famous Tempranillo. Although the owner, Alejandro Fernandez, produces four different levels of Pesquera in the Ribero Del Duero region, the least expensive, Crianza (about \$30-\$35), is the best value and an outstanding wine. It is extremely complex and also a great choice to accompany pork, chicken, beef and Mediterranean vegetables. Robert Parker, the famous wine critic, increased the wine's fame when he wrote that since the 1984 vintage, it belongs with the most famous Bordeaux wines as regards quality. My favorite producer of this varietal (a personal, all-time favorite wine) is Cenit, a wine from Zamora, reportedly made from the oldest vines in the Northern Hemisphere. However, Cenit is strong and bold flavored and doesn't lend itself to warm weather fare. The good news for those of us who are not "snowbirds" is that Cenit is much appreciated in Chicago winters.

Hopefully you now have some insight into where much of my wine inspiration comes from. You should adopt a place where you live and focus more deeply on fine wines and food and at least occasionally focus on wines (and particularly varietals) that are not familiar to you. Finally, I have earned more inspiration from reviewing the many photos taken by Thomas Balsamo, which I will need when I have to plant the two large hanging baskets in May (each takes 10 hours and 200 plants). A Sante! 



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