

Exploring Great Barbecue Wines

By Jim Bryant

As the temperatures moderate in September, I spend more time thinking of wine and food matches. Even into early fall, weekends are serious barbecuing time. It's still warm enough that great shellfish and fish can be cooked outdoors, and they go well with the wines reviewed in our last two issues. Try wild salmon with one of the French Chardonnay wines we've discussed, or pick a Pinot Noir as many in the Pacific Northwest do. Alternatively, grilled shellfish go perfectly with any of the "ABC" (Anything But Chardonnay) wines from our last issue.

Barbecue usually means meat, and meat cooked over an open flame is great with wine. Luckily, this is one type of cuisine where the best wine pairings are quite reasonable in price. Pork and chicken develop a smoky taste when cooked slowly over open flames, and several wines are a perfect match.

Fortunately for Americans, Zinfandel is the choice of most when pairing wine with barbecue. There are many styles of Zinfandel, and it rises to its zenith in Sonoma County. Luckily, many Americans found they loved white Zinfandel; otherwise the vines would have been ripped out and we would have lost one of wine and food's greatest combinations. (All Zinfandel vines produce only red grapes, but red Zinfandel is not as wildly popular as white. Thankfully, producers found a way to make white Zinfandel from red grapes by reducing the time of skin contact.)

Many Zinfandels (especially those in the \$30-plus range) are made from older vines (40 to 100 years or more). Buying a Zinfandel from older vines gives the wine great body and depth and matches particularly well with intensely flavored meats. In addition, Zinfandel styles run the gamut from bold, brash, in-your-face high-alcoholic "bombs" (which are interesting but certainly not food friendly) to more reserved examples. Most Zinfandels are naturally high in alcohol, but



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the best producers are great at taming the level to produce better food wines. In general, Zinfandel should be consumed within two to eight years, before the fruit fades.

The two Zinfandel producers with the longest track records are Paul Draper, a Barrington native (Ridge) and Joel Petersen (Ravenswood). Each have been producing more than 35 years, and when the wineries Rosenblum and A. Rafanelli also started producing great Zinfandel in the 1980s, the old rule was to buy Zinfandels beginning with the letter "R."

I still subscribe to this rule. Ridge Geyersville and Lytton Springs are my favorite Zinfandels, particularly with food. The Ravenswood single-vineyard choices (such as Old Hill Ranch and Dickerson Vineyard) are equally stunning examples of the greatest Zinfandels. At \$30 to \$40 versus comparable-quality Bordeaux at \$200 to \$500, the value of these wines is obvious.

While these Zinfandels match well with beef, I prefer great wines from the southern

Rhone (France) or from Australia. Shiraz wines from most famous production areas of Australia go well with barbecue. While most wine lovers know of Chateauneuf-du-Pape (CNP), it is usually associated with gourmet meals (such as rack of lamb or steak *au poivre*). Certainly, at \$35 to \$75, this wine goes well with barbecue, but its cousins, Vacqueyras, Gigondas, and Rasteau, are often as good or better. These wines are generally half the expense of CNP but perhaps even better with the smokiness of the meat.

In fact, several years ago, *Le Revue du Vin* (the authority on French wines) rated the 2001 Gourt de Mautens by Jerome Bressy (Rasteau) as one of the three must-have wines in all of France. A friend of mine, who is renowned for barbecue in Nashville, believes it is the world's best wine with pork or beef barbecue—as do I. Consider the gauntlet thrown—it is available in Illinois, so ask your local retailer or wine merchant to special order it for you. 