

Thanksgiving Wines: A Bounty of Options

By Mark Stenner

Written for the TulsaFoodBlog

www.tulsafoodblog.com

Yes, it's an obvious topic for this week. But given the feedback received thus far, it seemed like a worthy one as I can actually make some recommendations to you. And anyway, being by far the most important eating holiday in the American calendar I had to offer my wine take on this festive feast! That, and because it's another topic that has been over-complicated over the years.

Now, a perfect match or recommendation is impossible. For one, everyone's tastes are different. And two, the sheer permutations for what will be on the table are incalculable. There are so many pairings with Turkey, and so many possible spice and herb combinations, stuffing and gravy options, a perfect food and wine pairing probably doesn't exist. There is only one hard and fast rule. Avoid tannic wines. These will overpower the turkey. Wine and food should be about enhancing both components. The way both feel and taste in the mouth should be enhanced with even a middling combination. Tannic reds and Turkey are, in short, a disaster. The wine won't taste particularly bad, but the Turkey will. As for whites, avoid anything with too much acidity. You want fairly rich, round, full-bodied wines.

Now before you panic, here is the beauty of the dilemma. Given that Thanksgiving is often enjoyed in a large family or friend group, it is a great chance to experiment with a range of different wines, and it presents a wonderful opportunity to experiment and actually conduct a mini wine tasting at the Thanksgiving table. It's a win-win! Luckily for us all dear reader, there are lots of great choices for enjoying with your turkey, in more styles than you might think.

Let's break it down by styles first, and then I will offer some specific varietal recommendations at all price points.

Bubbles

Bubbles work with everything! People are now waking up to the fact that you can take a good sparkling wine all the way through from the hallway greeting to the pecan pie for dessert. Sparkling wines offer the greatest versatility. They are elegant, classy, fun, and you rarely feel bloated on champagne! Even if you're not convinced you can always greet guests with a glass of bubbles or even a mimosa to start the day in style.

Rosé

Rosés are great food wines (try a glass with barbecue sometime and see!). Rosés can have enough body to stand up to a rich protein, and the delicious cranberry, cherry, strawberry and white pepper flavors almost act as a condiment and side in itself! Bring a good bottle of a dry style and you'll have converts to the rosé cause!

Whites

The key to matching Turkey and white wines are finding a good white with good balance, where the fruit and acidity play nicely off each other.

If you have a lot of fatty dishes, you might want to go with something high in acidity, but be careful, you don't want anything too shrill. Although I'm the biggest fan of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc you will ever find, I'm staying away from one of my perennial favorites this year. I'd go with something from Sancerre (France) or California where the citrus flavors can be surrounded by herb or mineral undertones, making it a superior pairing with turkey and mashed potatoes. A good fruity Pinot Gris or Grigio is a wonderful choice, especially if your meal is going to be heavy on garlic and onions, herbs and rich, flavorful, high-fat dishes. Riesling is always a solid food pairing bet, and the acid, sugars and fruit, when in balance, are unbeatable. Be it a bone dry (Alsace in France , Australia) off-dry (Washington State , Germany) or fairly sweet, Riesling is excellent with turkey and any dishes that are spicy, salty or sweet. Riesling, with its lovely apple, apricot and honey tones is especially good with sweet potatoes and stuffings heavy on the spices and herbs. Depending on your sides and turkey prep, Gewurztraminer, with its floral and spicy component can be sensational, especially with a rich gravy. Gewurztraminer is also a killer combination with pumpkin pie! Albariño is another really stellar choice, where its apricot and peach notes, make it another good dessert choice.

Fuller-bodied Whites

There are lots of good full-bodied white options for a good T-day wine and this might be your safest bet. Chardonnay can be a good choice, especially one with soft rather than over-bearing oak, and maybe even something unoaked, as the oak can sometimes mask the turkey flavors. If you enjoy aromatic whites, Viognier, with its rich and full-body, is an obvious choice, as are its Rhône cousins, Marsanne and Rousanne. All of these wines offer sensational aromatics and a rich body to complement the variety of fatty and rich dishes on offer.

My choice for this Thanksgiving will be a wine I picked up in California, a blend of Marsanne, Rousanne, and Viognier, which offers a complex blend of aromas and rich flavors, perfect for the bird, and the sides. But never fear, there are good Rhône blends available here so you can go with any of these grapes or combinations thereof.

Lighter Reds

Stay away from tannic wines like Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, and Nebbiolo. The obvious choice here is Pinot Noir. With its lush and silky mouth-feel, inviting soft cherry fruits, and undertones of earthiness, it is never a bad choice with any roasted bird. Less obvious is Gamay, the grape of the Beaujolais region in France. Served slightly chilled, it is quite delicious with turkey. Another great choice I think are the wines from Rioja in Spain, made from the Tempranillo grape. Soft tannins, good firm body, and lots of tobacco and strawberry make for a great pairing. This grape also cuts well through the fattier parts of the bird, making it a good choice for those who favor the darker meat.

(See my Thanksgiving wine list for several other very interesting alternatives).

Heavier Reds

If you are a die-hard big Cab drinker then Syrah and Zinfandel are your best bets for T-day, but there are other intriguing options. I actually think Syrah and roasted meat is a great, great match, be it duck, chicken, Cornish hens or good old turkey. With Syrah and Zinfandel there is still lots of that big, bold fruit you love, but the tannins are generally softer with these grapes, in both their American and Australian manifestations. If you can find a good spicy Syrah it can really increase the complexity of the meal, and with its peppery aromas and flavors, it's another good wine with herb stuffings. Zinfandel, which also often reveals spice and pepper, is a great pairing if there are contrasting bitter and sweet flavors on offer. A grape that rarely gets mentioned on T-day lists is the Rhône red – Grenache, which is typically blended with Syrah and Mourvèdre, or produced as a varietal wine in Spain, where it is known as Garnacha. On its own or in 'GSM' blends, Grenache has lovely cherry, strawberry, and raspberry notes, and in really dense Spanish wines can often taste of figs and tar. Such wines would be great with heavily herbed dishes. Another grape I've never seen on Thanksgiving lists are Malbec, and I can see why, because when young, it can be quite tannic. In terms of bang for your buck, Malbecs from Argentina offer the most consistent value in red wines. It is possible to find world class wines in the \$15-25 range, no mean feat. With its superb structure, blackberry fruit, medium tannins and hidden acidity, if you want a smooth-drinking alternative to Cabernet, then this is your best bet. If you can't find an older example, just make sure you give the wine a good decant to round out those tannins. If you don't, it will diminish the meal!

Dessert Wines

There are several super choices for both the traditional pumpkin and pecan pies. Sherry made from the Pedro Ximénez grape is sweet and nutty, and is to die for with pecan pie. Late harvest of off-dry Riesling is also delicious, with its rich honey, honeysuckle and apricot flavors. Tawny port is also a fine match for pumpkin pie with its nuttiness, richness and viscosity. If orange or musk is your thing, search out a Muscat or Muscadelle wine. Sweet and unctuous these can be desserts in themselves. Running out of superlatives, Sauternes (made from Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc in the southern part of Bordeaux in France), if you have money to burn or someone to impress, has exotic pineapple, peach and orchard fruit aromas and flavors that will leave you licking the glass.

Whatever ends up on your Turkey Day table the most important thing to remember is that this is the time of the year we are thankful for all that we have in our lives. So don't stress about the wine. Have a little fun and be thankful we have such a rich variety of wines to choose from, even in Tulsa! I hope these recommendations prove useful to you all.

My Thanksgiving Menu & Wine List

The Feast

- Brandied Apple Cider Cocktails
- Pumpkin, Red Pear and Butternut Squash Soup with Crispy Sage, Walnuts and Spiced Crème Fraiche
- Roasted Turkey with Sage, Hazelnuts and Cider Gravy
- Roasted Brussels Sprouts with Apples, Bacon and Candied Pecans
- Pumpkin Gelato with sweet Cranberry Compote and Candied Ginger

The Wines

- Vega Barcelona, Cava, NV Brut. \$15. This is a really delightful bottle of sparkling wine, with bubbles that dance across the palate. Very deft and bright, with some biscuit and toast for the Champagne lover.
- René Muré, Cremant d'Alsace, NV Brut. \$20. This is a magnificent sparkling wine that blows away Champagnes at twice and three times the price. Rich, buttery, creamy and exotic, this is a wine I can't get enough of.
- Chateau Ste. Michelle, Columbia Valley, 2007 Nellie's Garden Dry Rosé. \$12. Over the summer months I tried about 30 different rosés in the search for the perfect summer pool sipper. With its dark and deep flavors, this was my favorite. The best way to describe it is as a red wine served cold. With its cherry, cranberry, strawberry flavors, and spicy, peppery undertones, this is a must have at my table this year.
- Raptor Ridge, Oregon, 2007/8 Pinot Gris. \$19. Although known for their superb Pinot Noirs, RR also makes this delightfully fruity Pinot Gris. Bursting with juicy orchard fruits, there is enough underlying minerality and acidity.
- Trimbach, Alsace, 2006 Pinot Blanc. \$17. This wine never ceases to blow me away. Such a depth of fruit, superb minerality, all pinned down by a vein of acid you can sense, but not really taste. For the money, it's a steal.
- Domaine Chandon, Carneros, 2006 Pinot Meunier. \$25. Want to take something a little different? A varietal Pinot Meunier (the other grape apart from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in classic Champagne blends) is hard to find but Carneros sparkling wine specialists Domaine Chandon make a super still wine from the grape. It's not cheap but it has lots of spicy, dark cherry fruit, with soft tannins.
- Belle Glos, Sonoma Coast, 2007 Meiomi Pinot Noir. \$23. Bold, sexy, seductive and charming. This a full-bodied steal.
- Pfaffl, Weinviertel, 2008 Austrian Cherry Zweigelt. \$15. Cleverly packaged and labeled, this is a great Pinot Noir wannabe. Given a good two hour decant (I actually unscrew to break the seal, and screw it back on fairly tightly, the night before and leave it to slowly oxidize in the fridge 24 hours prior to drinking)
- Rabbit Ridge, Paso Robles, 2008 Allure du Robles. \$9. This GSM blend is absolutely stunning for the money. Lots of ripe jammy fruit. A big showy wine in at a very modest price point.

For the kids: "Sonoma Sparklers" Sparkling Grape Juice. My son adores this fresh pear delight. "So fresh" is what he always says on his first sip!

Recommended Thanksgiving Day Wines

Sparkling

Vega Barcelona, Cava, NV Brut. \$15. Yum!

Peter Brum, Germany, NV Sparkling Grape Wine. \$15. A delicious wine with 24 carat gold leaves within. Fun!

René Muré, Cremant d'Alsace, NV Brut. \$19. Beautiful.

Gosset, Champagne, NV Brut. \$50. Served at every TWC end of year event because it is simply a stunning wine.

Rosé

Columbia Crest, Washington State, 2007 Two Vines Rosé. \$8. Cheap as chips and tasty!

Zaca Mesa, Santa Ynez Valley, 2006 Z Gris. \$16 at Ranch Acres. **On close-out for \$8 at Parkhill's!!!** Classy but might be past prime.

Chateau Ste. Michelle, Columbia Valley, 2007 Nellie's Garden Dry Rosé. \$12. Absolutely super.

Susano Balboa, Mendoza, Rosé of Malbec. \$12. Wonderful peppery mouth-feel. A legit homage to the glorious dry Rosés of the south of France.

Copain, Mendocino County, 2007 Rosé. \$15. A great bottle of wine. Period.

Van Duzer, Willamette Valley, 2008 Rosé. \$16. A cut above standard fare.

Whites

Domaine de Pouy, Cotes de Gascoigne, 2008 Blanc. \$8. Terrific value. Fresh, clean, dry. Great for herbed stuffings.

Jekel, Monterey, 2008 Riesling. \$10. A fine wine and value. If you like it with a little hint of residual sugar, this is a good choice.

Firestone, Central Coast, 2008 Riesling. \$10. Bone dry and delicious.

Mas Carlot, Vin de Pays d'Oc, 2006 Blanc. \$12. This blend of Marsanne and Rousanne combines minerality and flavor.

Pierre Sparr, Alsace, 2006 One. \$13. A terrific white blend showcasing the best of the Alsatian white grapes.

St. Hallett, Barossa, 2007 Poachers Blend. \$13. A deft and imaginative combination of Semillon, Sauv Blanc and Riesling. My house white.

Helfrich, Alsace, 2007 Pinot Gris. \$13. Spice, flavorful. Great value.

Helfrich, Alsace, 2007 Gewurztraminer. \$13. Super-duper!

Helfrich, Alsace, 2007 Riesling. \$13. Not as dry as most Alsations, finishes with a little sweetness.

Martin Codax, Rias Baixas, 2008 Albariño. \$14. Although made for seafood pairings, this has some lovely bitterness making it ideal for stuffings.

Laxas, Rias Baixas, 2008 Albariño. \$14. Rich and round.

Ferrari-Carano, Sonoma County, 2007 Sauvignon Blanc. \$15. Lots of grapefruit in this super wine. Rich mouth-feel.

Trimbach, Alsace, 2006 Pinot Blanc. \$17. Glorious minerality and depth.

Villa Maria, Marlborough, 2007 Private Bin Riesling. \$17. Bone dry and utterly delicious.

Charles Koehly, Alsace, 2004 Pinot Gris. **On close-out for \$16 at Parkhill's!!! This shows how whites can age. This is superb. Only a couple left.**

d'Arenberg, McLaren Vale, 2006 The Hermit Crab Viognier-Marsanne. \$18. Terrific aromatics and mouth-feel.

Palmina, Santa Barbara County, 2007 Pinot Grigio. I'm not a fan of the grape. This made me a believer. Deep, sensual flavors.

Zaca Mesa, Santa Ynez Valley, 2008 Viognier. \$20. Hard to believe you can get so much flavor in a glass. Rich. Magnificent.

Feudi San Gregorio, Fallanghina, 2007 Blanc. \$22. The Fallanghina grape is unique. This is like a unoaked Chardonnay on steroids. The minerality stirs something in me.

Trimbach, Alsace, 2006 Riesling. \$21. Bone dry. Super value.

J.J. Prum, Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, 2004 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett. \$27. Expensive, but glorious.

Reds

J. Lohr, Monterey, 2008 Valdiqie Wildflower. \$10. This curious wine is superb with a chill on it. A great substitute for Gamay,

d'Arenberg, South Australia, 2007 The Stump-Jump. \$12. This perennial GSM value never disappoints. Great cherry bite!

Gladium, La Mancha, 2006 Crianza. \$13. Delicious Tempranillo for a good price.

Paraiso, Santa Lucia Highlands, 2008 Pinot Noir. \$20. Great value. Lots of spice in the attack. Decant.

Van Duzer, Willamette Valley, 2007 Estate Pinot Noir. \$28. Lush and velvety.

Orogeny, Green Valley, 2006 Pinot Noir. \$30. Classy Pinot.

Baker Lane, Sonoma Coast, 2007 Hurst Vineyard Pinot Noir. \$37. I drank this incredible wine with the owner at his house. How cool was that?

Heavier Reds

Rabbit Ridge, Paso Robles, 2008 Allure du Robles. \$9. Fun, fun, fun. And surprisingly soulful.

Bleasdale, Langhorne Creek, 2005 Bremerview Shiraz. \$12. As smooth as the day is long.

Razor's Edge, Barossa Valley, 2006 Shiraz. \$13. Verging on over-powering this is a great wine for the price. Meaty and dense.

Montpezat, Coteaux du Languedoc, 2005 Palombieres. \$13. 80% Grenache, 20% Mourvèdre. This has it all. Complexity. Depth. Flavor.

Tablas Creek, Paso Robles, 2006 Cotes de Tablas. \$14. Good value GSM blend.

Decero, Mendoza, 2006 Remolinos Vineyard Malbec. \$18. The best sup-\$20 Malbec I've ever enjoyed. Complex. Satisfying.

Belle Glos, Sonoma Coast, 2007 Meiomi Pinot Noir. \$23. For the quality of this big berry rich wine, the price is a steal.

Baileyana, Edna Valley, 2006 Grand Firepeak Cuvée Pinot Noir. \$28. 2006 wasn't great for Pinot in Cali. This bucks the trend. Superb!

Dessert

Lustau, Jerez, San Emilio PX. \$26.49. Nutty, sweet, long. Lustau doesn't make a bad sherry!

Chambers, Rutherglen, NV Muscadelle. \$11 for 375 ml. Nutty and superb. Dessert in itself.

Chambers, Rutherglen, NV Muscat. \$11 for 375 ml. Just so decadent.

Concha y Toro, Maule Valley, 2002 Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc. \$14. Rich, unctuous, superb!

Margan Family Winegrowers, Hunter Valley, 2005 Botrytis Semillon. \$19 for 375 ml. Very Sauternes like for less than half the price!