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WINES OF THE TIMES

## What Becomes a Turkey Most

By ERIC ASIMOV

It may have been a few weeks early, but the Dining section's tasting panel gathered recently for Thanksgiving dinner, complete with turkey, sweet potatoes and all the traditional components. In a novel but fitting division of labor, we all brought the wine.

Our idea was to come up with some solutions for the vexing annual question of what to drink at Thanksgiving. On the face of it, no question should have simpler answers. Red. White. Cheap. Lots of it.

Seriously. Of all the holiday tasks routinely parceled out among guests, none should be easier than the wine. It requires no cooking, cleaning or warming up, and while a certain expense is necessary, it can be kept down, especially if the gathering will include lots of people drinking out of plastic cups. Yet short of a tough drumstick, few things are as chewed over as what to drink at Thanksgiving.

In our quest for both some general recommendations and some specific suggestions, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two colleagues, Frank Bruni and Julia Moskin. We were each assigned to select two bottles of wine that would be right for a Thanksgiving meal. Frank was so enthusiastic, he came with three wines. Our tasting coordinator, Bernard Kirsch, contributed a wine, too.

There were no guidelines except common sense, which I interpreted as, "Everybody will love the \$100 bottle of Krug Champagne you've selected, but don't be silly." As it turned out, we each arrived with one red and one white (except for Frank, who supplied two reds and a white). This may seem elementary, but it's worth repeating as a rule of entertaining: At almost any gathering, some people will want only white wine, and others will want only red. By all means, give it to them.

A second rule is to have a sufficient amount. Figure about one bottle per wine drinker, which means excluding children and Aunt Mabel, who each year claims to be looped after one sip. The hosts will not mind winding up with a few extra bottles. And not enough wine can turn even the most festive gathering instantly deadly.

Our choices were thoroughly surprising, and even a little bit esoteric. None of the usual suspects landed on our table: no cabernet, chardonnay or zinfandel, which is usually

singled out as the American wine for the American holiday. Julia had chosen an Oregon pinot noir, but otherwise our selections included unlikely choices, rieslings, gruner veltliner from Austria, barbera and falanghina from Italy, blends from California and a couple of totally unfamiliar wines, courtesy of Frank, which turned out to be big hits among the reds.

Here is what we learned: In general, lean white wines, especially those with mineral flavors and crisp acidity, are the best over the long haul. They are refreshing and keep the appetite sharp.

But by all means do not neglect the reds. The drier the red, the better, we decided. You may be surprised at how sweet many red wines are these days, especially American reds, which sometimes seem geared more toward soda lovers than wine drinkers.

Thanksgiving is not the time to obsess over matching food and wines, but if you want to play the game, remember that turkey is essentially a blank slate, bland enough to go with anything. The side dishes are usually trickier because they can range from the seriously savory, like a cornbread-and-sausage stuffing, to the ridiculously sweet, whenever marshmallows are involved. Often they are both.

With this in mind I chose a Selbach-Oster riesling from the Mosel region of Germany, with just a touch of sweetness that I hoped would be balanced by its mineral flavors and zingy acidity.

I also chose it because it was low in alcohol, just 9 percent compared with the typical 14 percent these days, which can make a big difference over the course of a long day. For that reason, I don't recommend zinfandel, which is often around 15 percent, a level that can make it tough to pull your head up for dessert.

The riesling was a good choice, but not as good as Florence's tart Cuvee R from Iron Horse, a sauvignon blanc with 15 percent viognier thrown in. It was sufficiently full bodied to stand up to everything on the table, but never heavy. Bernie's gruner veltliner, with its spicy mineral flavors, was also an excellent choice.

Julia also presented us with a riesling, from Oregon, which I found a little more cloying than the Mosel. But she was playing by a different set of rules. "I'm very strict about American wines on Thanksgiving," she said.

Her pinot noir from Holloran, also from Oregon — "the winemakers who moved up there kind of remind me of the Pilgrims," she said — was a good American choice among the reds, as was Florence's Côtes de Tablas from Tablas Creek Vineyard, a California interpretation of a Côtes du Rhone. But the real stars were from France, courtesy of Frank.

His Domaine le Briseau was the kind of wine I dream of finding, full of fascinating flavors yet delicious with every bite of food, produced from a grape I'm not familiar with,

pineau d'Aunis. It's the kind of wine that changes with every sip, or, as Frank described it, "a scarf-wearing Isadora Duncan of a wine."

It was a hard act to follow, and admittedly that wine will be difficult to find. But Frank had a backup choice, a Clos Roche Blanche from the Touraine region of the Loire Valley.

This was a solid wine made from the gamay grape, the source of Beaujolais, but without the sweetness that often turns up in Beaujolais. Best of all, it was only \$11.

This, too, may be hard to come by, but Beaujolais would be an adequate replacement, as would a crisp sauvignon blanc from California, New Zealand or Sancerre, if you cannot find the Iron Horse Cuvee R.

But I wouldn't sweat the choices. Look in general for lean whites with good acidity and dry reds. Don't spend a lot if it's a big group. Add a turkey and stuffing. And set a place for Isadora Duncan.

## **Tasting Report: Wines to Complement Drumstick, Breast and Wing**

### **REDS**

#### **Domaine le Briseau Les Longues Vignes Vin de Table 2002**

**\$22**

**\*\*\* 1/2**

Fascinating wine with complex gamy, smoky, spicy cherry flavors. (USA Wine Imports, New York)

#### **Tablas Creek Vineyard Côtes de Tablas Paso Robles 2001**

**\$20**

**\*\*\***

Gently spicy and light-bodied with complex flavors; a little oaky.

#### **Clos Roche Blanche Gamay Touraine 2003**

**\$11**

**\*\* 1/2**

Solid, straightforward, appealing gamay flavors; accessible but not engrossing; a crowd pleaser. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

#### **Holloran Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Le Pavillon Vineyard 2001**

**\$33**

**\*\* 1/2**

Peppery tobacco flavor, slightly oaky.

#### **Fantino Barbera d'Alba Vigna dei Dardi 1999**

**\$17**

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Fruity and earthy, but too sweet for the long haul. (Robert Chadderdon, New York)

## **WHITES**

### **Iron Horse Cuvee R Alexander Valley T Bar T 2002**

**\$22**

**\*\*\* 1/2**

Full bodied yet lip smacking, with citrus and herbal flavors; keep cool.

### **Franz Hirtzberger Gruner Veltliner Rotes Tor Spitz/Conau-Wachau 2002**

**\$24**

**\*\*\***

Citrus and mineral flavors with a spiciness that stands up to food. (Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago)

### **Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett Mosel-Saar-Ruwer Zeltinger Sonnenuhr 2002**

**\$18**

**\*\*\***

Slight sweetness offset by good acidity and mineral flavors; rich but delicate. (Terry These Selection/Michael Skurnik, Syosset, N.Y.)

### **Yamhill Vineyards Riesling Oregon 2001**

**\$14**

**\*\***

Floral flavors seemed to fade as wine warmed up; keep cool.

### **Ocone Falanghina Taburno Fattoria la Madonnella 2003**

**\$12**

**\*\***

Piercing citrus and floral flavors lacked balance. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)