



The Wines of Summer

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



The weather has been beautiful the last few weeks but we all know what's coming: a south Texas summer that will bring enough heat and humidity to change the way we live. Air conditioning helps but we will still know at the cellular level that it's hot. We will instinctively want different sorts of food and drink. Grilled beef still tastes good but only the most dedicated carnivores can eat a heavy steak dinner when it's sweltering outside. A little sliced flank steak or top sirloin served over a mound of salad greens better fits the season.

Comfort foods such as chicken pot pie, pot roast, beef stew, and meatloaf are replaced with grilled seafood, more green salads and fruit salads, meatless dinners, and lighter pasta and vegetable dishes. And as the foods change with the temperature, so does our idea of the ideal drink.

Remember that chewy, rich Napa Cabernet Sauvignon that went so well with a steak in November, or the buttery-ripe, oaky Chardonnay that perfectly accented a Pork Crown Roast at a holiday dinner in December? How about the Chateaufeuf du Pape paired with Boeuf Bourguignon in January, or the Vintage Port that warmed your very soul in February? These are faded memories in June as you seek refreshment and relief from the heat rather than warming satisfaction. The new order of the day is finding a light-to-medium-bodied, crisply-balanced refreshing white, a dry, fruity, balanced rosé, or a light-to-medium-weight, fruity red that can handle a light chill. These are the wines of summer.

THE BASICS

The most basic summertime vinous need is a wine that refreshes the palate and cools the body. Light-weight, fruity, well-chilled white and rosé wines fit the bill like nothing else. The "no-no whites" - no oak and no malolactic fermentation - are perfect for summer. Whether your tastes run to refreshing Rieslings or the drier whites or even to dry rosé, help is as close as your neighborhood Spec's.

Rieslings with their lower alcohol contents, moderate, sweetness, and a refreshing fruit - acid balance are the quintessential summer quaff. They go well with everything from fried or grilled shrimp to Chinese take-out. Riesling makes an equally fine accompaniment to a grilled pork tenderloin or an afternoon floating down the Guadalupé. The natural sweetness most Rieslings exhibit allows them to work well with even some vinegary salad dressings. Look for tall tapered bottles labeled Riesling QbA or Riesling Kabinett. This summer, I'll be drinking Nicolas Hermen Riesling (in the blue bottle), Selbach Riesling in the green one-liter screwcap bottle, Leitz Dragonstone (aka Rudesheimer Drachenstein), and Schloss Vollrads Riesling QbA. Remember nothing brings out the natural sweetness of fresh shrimp like Riesling. And nothing else is so perfect when balanced against spicy seafood dishes.

If your taste, or the dish - say grilled catfish fillets or earthy-briny fried oysters - calls for a drier white wine, consider a dry, crisp Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand or the Loire or a Sauvignon-based blend from Bordeaux. Look for young, fresh Sauvignon Blancs offering lots of fruit and no contact with oak barrels. These Sauvignon Blancs routinely reveal a crisply balanced kiwi-gooseberry-citrus fruit character accented with grace-notes of fresh herbs and/or newly cut grass or hay. The citrus can lean to lemon or grapefruit. These wines are usually fermented in temperature-controlled, stainless steel tanks and bottled very young to preserve as much of the refreshing fruit as possible. New Zealand Sauvignons on my summer sipping list include Kono, Tohu, and Smythe & Renfield. For lively Loire Sauvignon, I look to Rossignole Sancerre Vieilles Vignes or Bouchie-Chatellier Pouilly Fume "Renardiere". All of these are 100% Sauvignon Blanc fermented and aged with no wood contact (oak barrels or otherwise) and no malo-lactic fermentation (which adds complexity at the cost of at least some fruit character) - which is to say that they are "no-no wines". For a bit more complexity and character, try an Entre deux Mers such as Ch. Bonnet Blanc. A "no-no" blend of Sauvignon blanc with some Semillon and Muscadelle de Bordelaise, this is my go to wine for my Asian grilled catfish and for oysters on the half shell.

If Riesling is too sweet and Sauvignon is too aggressive (as it can sometimes be), my new favorite dry alternative is ... Muscadet. Formerly boring, bland, and blasé (at least the commercial wines of the 1980s and 1990s seemed that way), Muscadet has comeback with zippy, zingy, refreshing wines offering ripe lemony citrus and lots of mineral. My summer sipping list includes Dimerie Muscadet, Herbages Muscadet Classique and Guilbaud Cuvee Du Lion Muscadet Sevre & Maine, at least one of which is due to join me for a plate of mussels at la Vista (one of our favorite BYOB restaurants) in the next few weeks.

If the situation or the dish calls for a bit more weight, go "Gris" as in Pinot Gris (Pinot Noir's "gray"skinned sibling) from Alsace or Oregon. Whether a nice piece of grilled snapper or a pan sautéed butter-fried trout, good Pinot Gris with its distinctive and reliable pear, lime, and mineral notes if a supper accompaniment. And nothing else combines freshness and richness like

Pinot Gris. For me it can be Zind Humbrecht or Paul Blanck from Alsace or it can be Ponzi, King Estate, or Chehalem from Oregon. While Pinot Grigio is the same variety as Pinot Gris, most wines labeled Pinot Grigio just don't have the same richness and character as the true Gris. A great exception - and one of my favorite summer gluggers - is Bella Serra "Il Rosado" Pinot Grigio. In this sort of coppery "rosé" version of Pinot Gris, the winemaker allows some skin contact so the "gris" of the grape skins yields some natural color to what is normally made into a pretty antiseptic white wine. With that color comes more flavor and a welcome bit of richness and the whole thing comes at a low price. This wine is really misunderstood so it may be less available but it is also worth seeking out.



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Sometimes white doesn't quite work and red is too much. That's the niche filled by the dry rosés – which the French often call “vin gris” (but which has nothing to do with Pinot Gris). Light, refreshing, and often strawberry-scented, these dry roses which may be made from everything from Malbec to Merlot and from Pinot Noir to Grenache are perfect for spicy seafood soups and stews, cold-cut and cold salad meals, and even cold fried chicken. Look for wines such as the Provence roses from Commanderie de la Bargemone. From California, try the fine Saintsbury Vincent Vine Gris Rose of Pinot Noir and the often excellent Sangiovese and Syrah based Solorosa. For a darker but still lively Bordeaux rosé, look for Ch. Parencherre Bordeaux Clairet. All are appropriate for seafood soups and stews from bouillabaisse to cioppino to gumbo.

ADVANCED SUMMER SIPPING

Even with the range of wines so far discussed, there are times when only a red will do. And what about your after dinner sip of sweet wine? Does that have to go away because Port and Sauternes are just too heavy for the weather? How about an aperitif? Does even Champagne seem a bit heavy? Don't fret. I'm a professional and I'm here to help.

As an aperitif, think about a glass of Varichon & Clerc, a French sparkling wine from the Savoie area of eastern France. This light, dry, refreshing mountain meadow sparkler is fine on its own but is cheap enough (yes, I wrote “cheap”) to get doctored up with a bit of Violette Liqueur (for a Kir Violette) or some Crème de Mure (for a Kir Royale).

To replace a before dinner cocktail, try a large splash of either Dow's or Kopke's White Port on the rocks with a squeeze of lime (or two, or three). It is very refreshing in a that-tastes-like-a-Margarita sort of way. For a tall drink, fill a Collins glass with ice cubes and mix two parts white Port with one part club soda and one part tonic water. Don't forget the lime squeezes.

Sometimes, no matter how high the temperature gets, the situation or the food call for a red wine and only a red wine will do. White wine just doesn't work with pizza and certain dishes (such as Paella and Jambalaya) so a cool (not cold) red is often the perfect accompaniment. The best wine for this job is a full-flavored but low tannin red. The lower tannin content allows the wine to accept a light chill and still show its fruit, and keeps the wine from clashing with fish oils. For me, this requirement can be met in one of two ways: GSM or Pinot Noir

“GSM” is Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre, the holy trinity of southern French wine making. Try southern French Grenache-and-Syrah-based reds such as St. Cosme Cotes du Rhone and Perrin Reserve Cotes du Rhone (from the Perrin family, owners of Ch. Beaucastel in Chateauneuf du Pape). Good and cheap French reds in this mold include Maison l'Aiglon St. Chinian, the Pegovino VdP d'Oc red (from Laurence Ferraud of Domaine Pegau in Chateauneuf du Pape), and Little James Basket Press red.. Serve these as cool as 55° with anything off the grill (except fish) and with any tomato-and-garlic-based cooking (including fish dishes). For the Aussie take on things, look to d'Arenberg's Stump Jump red. For a California alternative look at the fine Cline “Cashmere” red or the excellent Beckmen “Cuvee Le Bec”.

For perfect summer Pinot, your options include Burgundy, California, Oregon, and New Zealand. Whichever you choose, you are looking a red fruit with more cherries than berries, some spice, and a tell-tale cola nuance. Think grilled salmon or anything chicken. For Burgundy, look for wines labeled estate-bottled wines “Bourgogne Rouge” or “Hautes Cotes de Nuits Villages” from any top domaine. Possible producers include Michel Gros, Ambroise, Piere Labet, Domaine Arnoux, Gibourg Mugneret, Michel Magnien, and more. From California, try the fine value-priced Hahn Pinot Noir or the Wagner Family's (owners of Caymus) really fine Belle Glos “Meomi” Pinot Noir. From Oregon, look for Ponzi, Adelsheim, Willakenzie, or King Estate. From New Zealand, check out Oyster Bay, Wild Earth, Smith & Renfield, and Mt. Difficulty's “Roaring Meg” Pinot Noir. All will satisfy and none will break the budget.

That ideal summertime after-dinner sip may seem elusive but it is as close as Vins Doux Natural from the south of France and Tawny and Colheita Ports. Vin Doux Natural are lightly fortified (about 15% alcohol), often Muscat-based specialties from the Rhone and Languedoc. Labels to look for include Muscat Beaugues de Venise, Muscat de Rivesaltes, and Banyuls. The Muscats show generous levels of sweet apricot, citrus-peel, and honeysuckle flavors over crisp, lemony acidity. Banyuls, a Red Grenache-based Vins Doux Natural offers a southern French take on something approximating Tawny Port. For a California alternative check out the Black Muscat based Quady Elysium which is my go to wine for berry-and-chocolate desserts. Portugal's aged Tawny Ports and especially their vintage-dated cousins Colheita Ports are ideal for a summertime after-dinner sip. These medium-sweet, well-integrated, nut-and-dried-fruit flavored wines can be served as cool as 50° and will not go bad for months after the bottle is originally opened. In the Aged Tawny range, look for Fonseca's 10 Year Old Tawny and Taylor Fladgate's, Kopke, and Smith Woodhouse' 20 Year Old Tawnies. For tasty vintage-dated Colheita Ports, look for the fine Messias, Kopke, and Smith Woodhouse.

Finally, the one wine that most clearly says “summer” to me is frankly delicious Moscato d'Asti. Whether it is Castello del Poggio Moscato d'Asti or Villa Jolanda Moscato Rose (or one of a couple of dozen others from Italy or California), the sweet fresh lemon and lemon-drop with honey and honeysuckle fruit and fresh floral accents seem made for sipping chilled while sitting in a rocking chair on a well-shaded porch. If a good Moscato doesn't bring a smile to your face, you may be in need of a serious attitude adjustment.

There's a whole world of good wine out there ideally suited to the food and lifestyle of a south Texas summer. All these suggestions have been personally tasted (tested?) and proven to beat the heat. Try a few and you'll not only have some new friends for summertime drinking and dining; you'll also make some acquaintances you'll cherish year-round in their more traditional roles. ❄

