

February 24, 2009

# The Sommelier Says....

Hello and welcome to the newsletter for <http://www.wine-sommelier.com/>

## **Which wines should you like?**

Interesting topic to say the least, and I have never been one to say, you SHOULD like this wine. It is all a matter of personal taste and experience.

But when you look at the most popular varietals in the USA today, #1 is Chardonnay, #2 Merlot and #3 is.... dare I say it White Zinfandel. I was actually surprised by the #2 choice too, because I felt that after "Sideways", no one was going to ever drink that 'freakin' Merlot ever again.

While I am currently working in a wine list for a local wine bar, having to decide which wine to have on it and which wines not to include is a difficult task. My ego gets in the way as well as my personal tastes. I have relationships with some winemakers that I must promote because I believe in their product and their consistency. On the other hand I need to have wines that satisfy the consumer. Name brands or those wines that are highly rated in the magazines are wines that most wine consumers are familiar with. Those are guaranteed sales, but as a Sommelier, a part of my job is also to educate the wine buying public on the other choices out there.

Recently while working at the wine bar, I asked a number of customers what kind of wine they enjoyed and the #1 answer was "Napa Cabernet Sauvignon". I asked which ones, and most people could not name a brand but they knew that they 'should like Napa Cabs'. I offered them a different wine, a local one from Rancho Ventavo, the Tempanillo. These 'experienced wine drinkers' asked me what kind of blend that was. I explained that it was a single varietal and a Spanish grape made by a winemaker in Moorpark! The overall feeling that night was the patrons enjoyed the Tempranillo. Add one more varietal to their cellars!

But I want to go back to Merlot now. Being #2 in sales in the entire US for 2008 is huge, and should not be ignored. Maybe we in this area of the country are a little 'Sideways' in our thinking- maybe we need to go back and check out that varietal again. What percentage of all of your wines that you own are Merlot? Mine is less than 5%.

Merlot, which means "black bird" in French, is a distant cousin of Cabernet Sauvignon. A big difference between the two is the skin. The Merlot skin is much thinner. This grape also ripens earlier than Cabernet. Like Cabernet, Merlot comes from Bordeaux, where it was used primarily for blending.

Merlot by nature is a soft, drinkable wine with rich, plum-like flavors with blueberry and cherry notes. The grape—naturally low in tannin—is low in acid. People call it "smooth." It is frequently blended with Cabernet to make a more full-bodied wine.

One of the nicest Merlots that I have had in years came from Paso Robles, Maloy O'Neill's Hillside Merlot. It goes for about \$25 a bottle and is well worth it. I can also say that my friends at Dark Star also produce a very nice Merlot.

But don't take my word for it, go out tonight to your local wine shop and pick up a few different bottles of Merlot. The nice thing about the "Sideways effect" of Merlot is that you can get that varietal a lot cheaper than any Pinot Noirs!

Rediscover Merlot tonight, you won't be disappointed!

I would be interested in hearing from you which Merlot's you tried and what your experiences were.

## **I Hate Asparagus**

Well I don't really hate it; I just do not like trying to pair a wine with it...

Yes, there are a number of foods that are tricky to match with wine, but they're certainly not impossible.

Asparagus contains phosphorus and mercaptans, both of which are rough on wine. But there's no need to eliminate asparagus from the menu; adding some butter will soothe some of the vegetal quality. Olive oil and nut oils can also tame the grassiness. Chablis, Pinot Grigio, and Sauvignon Blanc have enough acidity to hold the vegetable in check.

Artichokes are even trickier. They contain an acid called cynarin, which tends to make everything else taste sweeter. Steamed artichokes can distort white wines, making them seem sweet and flat, and can make red wines taste thin. But if the artichokes are sautéed, they take on a nutty quality more amenable to wine pairings. You can use lemon in the preparation, or offer lemon wedges to counteract the sweetness. I would select a wine with high acidity to help bring the pairing into balance. If you toss sautéed artichokes with mushrooms and pancetta in pasta, they can even behave with an elegant, non-tannic red.

Tomatoes can also be difficult, because they have both high acidity and sweetness. Serving medium-bodied, aromatic reds with high acidity such as Barbera, Sangiovese, Merlot, even a dry rosé will harmonize; if you want a white wine, consider a Sauvignon Blanc.

While it's true that certain foods can be difficult with wine, it's equally true that certain wines can be problematic for the chef. Oaky Chardonnay battles with sharp-flavored ingredients such as leeks, broccoli, olives, capers, asparagus, and tomatoes, as well as with sweet components such as fruity sauces and coconuts. And spicy foods accentuate the oak and the alcohol in the wine. High-alcohol wines can annihilate delicate dishes. They often lack acidity, which is a key for balance, and they are lethal with spicy foods.

Selecting the right wine for the right dish can seem like a daunting task- but don't think too hard on it either. If you really want to try to get it right and are lost for a possibility, drop me a note and I will try to get you in the right direction!

## **Looking ahead**

\*- ***Coming soon to Wood Ranch..... a NEW wine bar... and a great Sommelier doing all the selections! That's all I can say for now ;)***

\*- ***March 7/8-Sonoma Barrel Tasting Weekend***

*<http://www.wineroad.com/>*

\*-***April 4 1st Annual Camarillo Crush Wine Tasting***

Entry Fee: \$25.00 per person

Please send check or money order payable to

Steve Folkes, 1461 La Culebra Cir., Camarillo, CA 93012

*No later than March 9, 2009*

\*- ***May 16 Wine Spectator Grand Tasting in Las Vegas***

*<http://www.winespectator.com/GrandTour/WSgrandtour.html>*

\*- ***June 14 Ojai Wine Festival***

*[www.ojaiwinefestival.com](http://www.ojaiwinefestival.com)*

\*- ***July 17-18 California Wine Festival-Santa Barbara***

*<http://www.californiawinefestival.com/>*

Cheers-

Tim

**If you would like to be removed from this list, please reply to me at [tim@wine-sommelier.com](mailto:tim@wine-sommelier.com) and request removal from this list.**

**If you know someone that wants this list, please have him or her send me an email requesting to be included too!**