

Wine Spectator

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ENTERTAINING WITH THE PROS

Nine leading sommeliers answer holiday
dinner questions BY OWEN DUGAN



Holiday meals often pose quandaries when it comes to matching wines. Large gatherings mean diverse tastes, and traditional menus often contain clashing flavors. For some expert advice, we turned to a group of top restaurant professionals to speak about wine on the holiday table. From hors d'oeuvres to pecan pie and beyond, these experts weigh in on versatile wine choices, best matches, even portion control. Listen in and make this year's dinner smoother and more memorable than ever.

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What's the first wine you serve guests?

Michael Shearin, Drago Centro, Los Angeles: Champagne is good with everything. Over the last few years at my in-laws' in California, we have a traditional meal and we've started with Champagne.

Brian Duncan, Bin 36, Chicago: Sparkling wine. I like sparkling Chenin Blancs. They have a little fruit to them, and they go with appetizers. It's great for shrimp cocktail—a killer combo. Chenin Blanc just rocks with the spiciness. It's underutilized, and is such a great food wine.

Belinda Chang, The Modern, New York: In my house, Champagne—from the moment people walk in the door until the moment they leave. That's the standard that I always have in my refrigerator.

Marian Jansen op de Haar, Fleming's (locations nationwide): Basically, I almost always [bring] Champagne. I mean, what's not to like? You can start with it and it goes with everything.

Some dishes are standards on most American holiday tables—turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, cranberries. What wines make the best matches for the traditional menu?

Shearin: Pinot Noir, whether from Burgundy or Oregon, is a favorite of mine to bring out the earthy flavors of the stuffing and the whole culmination of things. And



"IN MY HOUSE, CHAMPAGNE."

—BELINDA CHANG, THE MODERN



"I LIKE SPARKLING CHENIN BLANCs."

—BRIAN DUNCAN, BIN 36

obviously, the wines are somewhat versatile there.

Duncan: Wine for turkey? You know, people call me at the restaurant for wine advice. They'll say, 'I'm having chicken tonight,' and I say, 'Chicken who? What're you doing to it?' The strong flavors are the sweetness from the sweet potatoes, and [then there's] collard and mustard greens and smoked ham hock. What you do with the turkey is almost secondary. So when you have those broad strokes of flavor the bitterness of the greens really responds well to Zinfandel, and you can also get away with matching the sweetness of the sweet potatoes to the ripeness

of the Zinfandel. It's a versatile Thanksgiving wine. And if you invoke anything spicy, Zinfandel steps up again.

Virginia Philip, L'Escalier at the Breakers, Palm Beach, Fla.:

Gewürztraminer, for me, is the turkey pairing. It's a white meat that usually has a heavier sauce—like you would do a natural au jus or if you did some sort of pan drippings—that for me with the Gewürz works well because it's not too overpowering as far as the fowl, but it's powerful enough that you feel like you're tasting a real wine.

Paul Botamer, Fearing's, Dallas: One of the funner wines we did one year at

WHAT ABOUT STUFFING?

THAT'S A FAVORITE OF MINE. There's always sausage in the stuffing. Both sides of the family. Syrah is really good with that. I love how many different styles Syrah can be. With sausage, you want a wine with a little spice—Syrah, Grenache. Or if I'm sticking with Burgundy, the wines from around Gevrey can have that meaty quality. —MICHAEL SHEARIN

IT'S MY MOTHER'S BASIC RECIPE, but we make two kinds. We make oyster dressing and it's all cornbread based, or sometimes I add wheat or pumpernickel. The other one has sage, turkey necks, giblets, mushrooms. I don't get all the raisins and fruit in the stuffing. If you're serving Zinfandel, Syrah, Pinot, what other wines could be better for that? And if you go for mountain Zinfandels, they have a Bordeaux style, a little earthier. —BRIAN DUNCAN



“WE DRANK 1983 RENÉ ENGEL CLOS VOUGEOT.”

—VIRGINIA PHILIP,
L'ESCALIER AT THE BREAKERS



“ROSÉ IS A HAPPY MEDIUM.”

—RAY GUMPERT,
EMERIL'S NEW ORLEANS

[now-closed *Wine Spectator* Grand Award-winning restaurant] Mary Elaine's was we featured a sparkling Shiraz with the turkey. Which actually was really well-received. But usually for Thanksgiving dinner I look for a red with softer tannins, maybe Grenache, or Rhône style, something with some spice to it but not too heavy.

William Sherer, Aureole Las Vegas: I believe ultimately it's white wine, certainly with the turkey. If you can get a white that has a minerality or an earthy character—I think a lot of the stuffings, the gravy, the mushrooms and even the root vegetables have an inherent earthy

character that you want to pair with. I think wines of Europe in general are good, but specifically Alsace.

Jansen op de Haar: If I want a crossover, I bring a sparkling rosé. And I usually bring a Riesling—a sweeter one. I usually take a lighter red, a Beaujolais, Pinot Noir, something like that. Or some lighter style Rioja or Barbera, something hardly oaked or unoaked.

Ray Gumpert, Emeril's New Orleans: I think that it's comfortable flavors—honey, apple—you think about things like sweet potatoes that might be on the table,

turkey and gravy, with a kabinett-level Riesling will be nice. That might not necessarily be my pick all the time for a white wine for Thanksgiving, but with people who are not so accustomed to wine and are just getting into wine, I think it's a good way to go. So there you go, you have sweetness in the potatoes, you've got richness in the gravy and things like that, where that minerality and that acidity can kind of help cut through it, and it's just a crowd-pleaser.

How much do you consider the guests' tastes?

Chang: You can think about the demographic of the party, whether they're wine geeks or not. Then Pinot Noir or something from a thin-skinned grape. I love Julienas right now, and St.-Amour. Beaujolais producers tell you that old Gamay turns into Pinot Noir. A lot of people don't give it a chance. Lay it down. See what happens. Also Grenache. [But] where I've lived it's usually cold at that time of year, so I just love some decadent, luxurious, serious thick-skinned varietal, be it Cabernet or Barolo.

Laura Williamson, Vin Tabla, Tucson, and Dove Mountain Grill, Marana, Ariz: I have to listen to what people like and blend that in, but really the ultimate goal is to get them to trust you, because a lot of times what they like will not work with Thanksgiving. I pick a variety because it's always about that. I would rather eight to 10 people have a 2-ounce taste and keep moving on to different wines, because there is so much that you can play with.

WHAT ABOUT STUFFING?

[TURKEY] IS KIND OF A NEUTRAL DISH, so you can pull out whatever you want from the cellar, and then adjust the stuffing and accompaniments to work with the wine. So if you're having Bordeaux, you can put more savory herbs in the stuffing—fennel, rosemary—and sausage. I really love Right Bank Bordeaux—I'm a huge Cabernet Franc fan—it always has that kind of herbal character that lends itself nicely to those flavors. Sometimes we just want to drink all white, hang out with the Chablis all afternoon, so then I'd put oysters in the stuffing. —BELINDA CHANG

I WOULD PICK TOCAI FRUILANO from Colli Orientali. Because the savoriness of the wines. It's got a distinct minerality that focuses on the herb, so it's more like lemon verbena, lemongrass or a little bit of pine bark in there; there's something in there—it depends on the age of the wine—that pulls out the mineral component and earthiness of the herbs. —LAURA WILLIAMSON

Philip: To be honest with you, it depends on who's coming to that dinner. If it's like my mom, who drinks wine but who isn't overly wine-savvy, I always pull a Beaujolais, because she really likes it and it's fruity and easy to drink. But I always try to make it worth my while too, so I might do [a cru Beaujolais], something like a Brouilly.

Botamer: If you open a few bottles, you're safe. We always have a bunch open at the restaurant. There might be one or two people who don't like the wine you pour so you pour them another one. It works at home too. You can't have too many open bottles at home. At least not at my house.

Sherer: The most important thing at Thanksgiving is to have a magnum. Because Thanksgiving is about enjoying in abundance, and I think [the wine] should be magnums so you have enough to go around. I think my biggest complaint is when someone brings a bottle of wine for a group of eight or 10 and there's somebody who doesn't get any.

What about those dishes that just don't work well with wine? Can you suggest adjustments?

Williamson: It's going to depend on the particular wines and having tasted them, but if the turkey needs a little squeeze of lemon, like a chicken can take, that's one way to adjust that. You could also use a little lemon in the stuffing, but it really depends on where you need to balance—the salt and the herbs and the fat, too.



"A LOT OF FAMILIES WILL HAVE TURKEY AND LASAGNA."

—MARIAN JANSEN OF DE HAAR, FLEMING'S



"I'D GO TO THE FARMERS' MARKET AND SEE WHAT'S GOOD."

—MICHAEL SHEARIN, DRAGO CENTRO



Sherer: I would say not too much sugar in the cranberry sauce. Maybe add some lemon zest or juice to the cranberry sauce—I think it helps with the pairing with the turkey. Not too much honey or brown sugar in the sweet potatoes. That might help. Herbs—fresh herbs are always a good thing in all the sauces, specifically with the bird. I think my favorite herbs with that are fresh savory and fresh tarragon.

Shearin: I've never been a fan of cranberry sauce—that tartness is supposed to balance—but it's too much of a contrast. And the green bean casserole with the onion strips on top? I mean, they're not

even fresh at that time of year. So first, I'd go to the farmers' market and see what's good.

Do you recall any particularly great pairings or fantastic bottles?

Philip: Oh, this is a crazy thing, we did a 1983 René Engel Clos Vougeot. There were only three of us there, and I opened it up for my sister, my brother-in-law and myself. It was the history, because Engel is no longer around and so it was an iconic moment, at least it was for me. They really thought it was good too, and they're pretty wine-savvy. It just had this beautiful mushroomy, dried cherry,

WHAT ABOUT STUFFING?

SOMETIMES WE PUT CHESTNUTS IN IT, and would do Meursault in a heartbeat. If you're going to put chestnuts in it or any type of nut, it has more of a nutty, hazelnut characteristic to it. So for me, I think the breeding and the spice notes on that, depending on what you use, can definitely hold up to a heavier wine. It's a pretty full dish, with all that bread. —VIRGINIA PHILIP



I'M A FAN OF THE FUNNY PARTS. The giblets, liver, the kidney, all that. You have to play up the earthy characters. I also like white Rhône wines with an earthy stuffing. I really like Condrieu. It just has a lot of minerality from the Viognier in that area that tends to go really well with offal, or the mushroom or the giblets. —WILLIAM SHERER



“MAGNUMS, SO YOU HAVE ENOUGH TO GO AROUND.”

—WILLIAM SHERER, AUREOLE LAS VEGAS



“I WOULD RATHER 8 TO 10 PEOPLE HAVE A 2-OUNCE TASTE.”

—LAURA WILLIAMSON, VIN TABLA AND DOVE MOUNTAIN GRILL

rhubarb, mossy flavor that was really well done. It was really good, the nicest bottle that I've done with my family for Thanksgiving.

Botamer: A couple of years ago we had a 1988 Savennières that really did nicely. Especially with the turkey and stuffing. That steely minerality cut through all the richness of the gravy and everything. It was refreshing. And though it was nearly 20 years old, it tasted like it was just made. Those [wines] hold up incredibly long.

Jansen op de Haar: I remember the Dr. Loosen Ürziger Würzgarten Spätlese Riesling. I had visited the winery with my brother and sister once. It's so beautiful, and we tasted through all these wines and brought some to the house we were staying at. It's so good with turkey and stuffing. I'm not a huge fan of sweet stuff, cranberry and all that, but Riesling can go with that. But the complexity is what makes it go with everything.

Gumpert: There is a Provençal rosé called Domaine Houchart. It's Grenache-

based, it's dry, and it's got this really pretty watermelon and soft red fruit. You know, a wine-geek wine. Crisp, clean, floral. I think it has enough acidity that it could stand up to everything that's going on. It's fresh, it's clean, it's very moderate in alcohol. You have to remember too we have New Orleans temperatures, so even though it's red wine weather in a lot of places, you never know what you're going to get here. Rosé is a happy medium.

What about your own traditions?

Botamer: We do family Thanksgiving on the Sunday following, because I'm working. We either do a traditional meal, or I'll smoke a whole turkey, which is how my wife likes it done. It comes out great. You have to brine it to keep it moist. If you brine it and smoke it, Champagne is great with it. My favorites are grower Champagnes.

Jansen op de Haar: I'm from Holland so my holiday experiences are different, but I've been here 30 years. A lot of families—they'll have turkey and lasagna—it goes back to eating what you like. The main thing about the holiday is getting together. One year I had Jewish friends over and I made matzo ball soup, then we had turkey. I used the Julia Child recipe where you cut the turkey apart and cook the parts separately and then put it back together so it looks like a whole turkey again. It's a wonderful recipe. For the stuffing, I combine recipes, but I do really like mushrooms in the stuffing ... because I want to drink Pinot Noir.

WHAT ABOUT STUFFING?

SOMETIMES WITH A TRADITIONAL MEAL you can make it a little fancy. Like with the stuffing, you can dress it up or dress it down—pun intended—you can put morels in it or just make a regular. With morels I'd want a Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast or something like that. I drink a lot of American wines now. Fleming's [list] is mostly American wines, and I live in Napa, so I drink probably 80 percent American wines. —**MARIAN JANSEN OP DE HAAR**

PINOT NOIR. OREGON, RED BURGUNDY. Especially down here in New Orleans, another thing you'll see is a lot of oyster stuffing. You have a lot of flavors and a lot of seasonings that are going to lend themselves better to an earthy red than to a white, but at the same time when you have things like oysters, you definitely don't want to overpower that with anything that has any tannin, first of all, and also is soft enough. [something that] lends itself to stand up to the parts of the dish it has to stand up to, but not overpower other parts. —**RAY GUMPERT**



"I SMOKE A WHOLE TURKEY."

—PAUL BOTAMER, FEARING'S



Gumpert: For the most part, we do really traditional stuff. Some stuff that we do is Southern and a little different, like deep-fried turkey, which adds another level of richness to it obviously. Usually it's a family-style meal, so when I'm going for wines with that I try to pick things that are going to lend themselves to a whole bunch of flavors. Medium-bodied reds, I think Rhône Valley varietals are always a safe way to go. I've been loving a lot of the Spanish Garnachas too. That's hand in hand with some of your Côtes du Rhône's and stuff like that.

Chang: I'm first-generation Taiwanese born in the United States. We had some funky holiday traditions. My mother had Julia Child [cookbooks] and *Joy of Cooking* to try to honor the indigenous traditions in the U.S., but my family also always had Peking duck, and that's a tradition I try to uphold even if I'm not with my family. We always had noodles as well—the Chinese always have noodles at holidays because noodles are symbolic of long life. There's always rice, and bean cakes. We'd have this duck hanging in the laundry room for a couple of days and my friends would come over and be like, what is that? [With the duck], there are a couple of methods of attack. I definitely had some revelations. I

never thought that in the world there was a use for sparkling Shiraz until someone brought that for our feast, and it was actually pretty spectacular with the duck. That sucker's got a lot of fat so you need that cleansing acidity and the cleansing bubbles to get you through. Nothing else handles it well.

Last year [I hosted the holiday dinner] at my apartment here in New York. I think I had the whole staff from Café Boulud. Even the chef, Gavin Kaysen, came. It was a little nerve-wracking. I think he could see the look of panic on my face; I was having some trouble with the turkey. I've had other holiday meals with him and he always does oyster stew, so I've had that with him in three cities, and we always get some Chablis with that, something with a little bottle age, so that's a holiday tradition.

What about wines to serve with dessert?

Duncan: Sometimes I bring dessert

wines. My family has expensive taste. They like the Kracher wines [from Austria]. I made a chocolate pecan pie and did a vintage Sherry, a Pedro Ximénez 1971—they thought the sky had opened up and it was a new world and a new day. That was huge.

Shearin: Wine with dessert can be kind of difficult. Pecan pie is something I love at the holidays that I never eat during the year. It's such a simple, Karo syrup-laden thing that still tastes very, very good. But what is the perfect wine match to pecan pie? Vin Santo, something like that?

You know what I prefer when it comes to dessert, is milk. Whatever great wines I've had, and I've done this at great restaurants, if there's a chocolate dessert I'll have that and a glass of milk. The perfect pairing is milk, and then a cup of coffee. I'm still a kid when it comes down to it. □

OUR ROUNDTABLE WINE PROFESSIONALS: WHERE TO FIND THEM

Paul Botamer Fearing's, Dallas; AWARD OF EXCELLENCE;
www.fearingsrestaurant.com

Brian Duncan Bin 36, Chicago; www.bin36.com

Belinda Chang The Modern, New York; BEST OF AWARD OF EXCELLENCE;
www.themodernnyc.com

Ray Gumpert Emeril's New Orleans; GRAND AWARD; www.emerils.com

Marian Jansen Fleming's, locations nationwide;
op de Haar AWARD OF EXCELLENCE; www.flemingssteakhouse.com

Virginia Philip L'Escalier at the Breakers, Palm Beach, Fla.;
GRAND AWARD; www.thebreakers.com/restaurants_lounges/l_escalier

Michael Shearin Drago Centro, Los Angeles; AWARD OF EXCELLENCE;
www.dragocentro.com

William Sherer Aurcole Las Vegas; GRAND AWARD; www.aurcolelv.com

Laura Williamson Vin Tabla, Tucson, AWARD OF EXCELLENCE,
and Dove Mountain Grill, Marana, Ariz.,
AWARD OF EXCELLENCE; www.vintabla.com

