

Wines for Holiday Celebrations

Halloween marks the end of harvest here in Oregon as cold temperatures and the beginning of winter rains put an end to crush activities. As this year's harvest wines are put safely away in tank or barrel, wineries now look forward to brisk holiday sales as wine lovers stock up on their favorite tipples for holiday celebration. With an eye to Southern Oregon wines, let's run through some possible pairings for the holiday season.

Thanksgiving is one of our great American traditions, and a holiday where food takes on a large role as a way to give thanks. Traditional Thanksgiving dishes of Turkey, stuffing, cranberry, etc., are an excellent showcase for Oregon's most famous grape variety, Pinot Noir. The light body and fruity aromatics of Pinot Noir pair especially well with light colored meats and buttery or fruity side dishes. Because of the lightness of these dishes white wines are also welcome as Thanksgiving. Pinot Gris has become a very popular variety here in Oregon, but our local producers also make some fantastic examples of Riesling and Gewurztraminer. These wines are usually light, fruity, and carry enough acidity to pair well Thanksgiving fare. Rieslings can range from bone dry (no sugar left) to moderately sweet, so ask your local winery about the styles they produce to find one which pleases your palate. Another wine style seeing resurgence in popularity is Rosé. These not-quite-red-or-white wines can also pair nicely with Thanksgiving dishes and are offered at a number of local wineries. After dinner a sweet dessert style wine, or wines labeled "late harvest," is a pleasing addition to sweet desserts, or perhaps sipped on their own as a digestif.

Holiday festivities also call for selecting special wines to accompany delicious year-end feasts. Traditional family Christmas meals seem to vary widely from family to family, so pairing wines can be a bit more difficult. My own family's Christmas dinner changed over the years from more traditional meat and potato-based dishes to shrimp scampi and Ambrosia salad. My wife's family is from the Midwest and their traditional Christmas dinner is oyster soup and chili, which is a bit of a worst case scenario in terms of wine pairing. Still, going with a special bottling from your favorite local winery is a good bet. The wines styles and varieties mentioned above also work for lighter holiday meals.

For heavier meat, barbecue, or stew dishes a bigger red wine is probably in order. Many local producers are making very interesting wines with Tempranillo, a Spanish grape variety, and Syrah or Rhone-style blends. Rhone blends are traditionally made up of Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvedre; all blending components of wines from the Southern Rhone valley in France. Malbec, another grape variety originally from France but now often associated with Argentina, is also enjoying rising popularity with local producers who have been winning awards with wines from this grape. Finally, it's hard to go wrong with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot wines, and local Zinfandels can also be crowd pleasers.

After holiday dinner it's a great time to relax, chat, or play games with friends and family. Several local wineries are producing sweet fortified wines, known as Port-style wines, which are great for sipping by a cozy fire. Sparkling wines are also an important holiday tradition, especially for New Year celebrations. While I'm not aware of any local producers making sparkling wines with Southern Oregon fruit, there are several Oregon producers in the Willamette Valley who produce excellent sparkling wine.

Many local wineries are hosting special events with wine and food pairing on the weekend following Thanksgiving. So, take some time out of your Black Friday shopping to relax with friends and enjoy our local wine culture, and be sure to grab a couple of bottles to enjoy over the holidays.