



Uncorked
BY EDWIN SOON

THE RIGHT MATCH

Kick off a new year with a selection of wines to liven up your dinner parties.



Let's begin the year with eight affable party wines that will make the most of revelry during this season.

1. GRUNER VELTLINER, THE SPICE OF WHITE

Asking after Austria's very own grape-wine may have you stuttering. But take one sip and you'll be ordering up a Chinese banquet to accompany it – the wine is that versatile! Perfumed and citrus fruity, sometimes with lentil and bay leaf aromas or floral with white pepper nuances, there's nothing like it.

2. VERITABLY RARE VIOGNIER

Forty years ago, the world's only eight hectares of Viognier vines were to be found in the Rhône. Today, there are about 100 hectares in various countries. The wine can be soft and creamy or delicate and powerful at the same time. Flavours span the seasons – apricots, flower-orchard, kiwi, lime, mango, acacia, tangerine peel, jasmine, mint, roses, guava, toast and vanilla. No other wine oozes more sensuality. France's best examples are Condrieu and Chateau Grillet. Southern France's Languedoc's Viognier is a good bet but don't be surprised to find some interesting and compelling Viogniers from California and Australia. Enjoy with stir fried seafood dishes, satay and *gado gado*.

3. SUMPTUOUS SANGIOVESE

The grape of Tuscany is multifaceted – silky tannins, cherry-strawberry fruit with unique blueberry and cranberry aromas. There's a world of spice – clove, cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Choose from Brunello di Montalcino a dark wine with black cherry dark chocolate and tobacco accents; *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* that is complex, fleshy and weighty wines with rustic flavours that include blackberry, prune and licorice; and Chianti Classico famous for its bright fruit tones of sour cherry or pomegranate, accented by a chalky note thanks to grapes growing on lean, mineral-rich galestro soils. Sangiovese is not limited to Tuscany. You will find equally interesting and tasty wines from regions such as Umbria, Lazio, Marche and Emilia-Romagna. Dishes to pair with include roast goose, *ayam penyet* and the like.

4. RIGHTFULLY READY RIOJA

Most Riojas are blends of several grapes with Tempranillo as the major variety. Lovers of mature wines can whisk them off the shelves and they will be readily drinkable. Crianza are at least three years old, Reservas are aged a minimum of four years and Gran Reservas, mellow and regal are still surprisingly affordable even after two years ageing in barrel and additional three years aging in bottle! Beef dishes, short ribs and Indian roast lamb call out for Rioja.

5. MALBEC'S PARADISE FOUND

Shunned for its rusticity, rebuked for its feebleness from diseases and rejected for its ungainly lack of colour, the Malbec grape was expelled from France's best vineyards. In search of a refuge the mournful Malbec migrant traipsed itself to Spain, Italy, Russia, South Africa, Australia and Chile. Finally, amongst the wildflowers of the temperate climes of Argentina's Mendoza, Malbec found its Eden. In the arid plateaus with iron-magnesium rich soils the grape flourished. Argentinian Malbecs are fruity, spicy, fragrant expressive wines – delicious and delectable with BBQ chicken wings, Korean BBQ and also grilled meats, especially steak.

6. SEND IN THE BLENDS

European winemakers are masters of blending varieties of grapes from a single vineyard to achieve a complex balance. Alternatively, various grapes are blended to achieve a superior wine. Think Bordeaux, Rhone Valley, Languedoc and Champagne. The Australians who usually blend one grape sourced from various parcels and parts of their country have revived the ancient recipe of Cab-Shiraz that was once a Bordeaux blend but which is now illegal. Such wines go well with Northern Indian fare. And the tastiest economically white wines of Australia happen to be Sauvignon Blanc-Semillons. Fish and crustaceans, steamed, fried or stewed and served with sauce (containing garlic, ginger, chilli, coriander etc.) are enjoyed best with blended whites.

7. SANCTIFIED WINE

The most fickle of grapes, when well crafted, Pinot Noir will charm the stiff upper-lipped and becalm



misanthropists. Eminently drinkable when youthful with its delicate tannins; cherries, raspberries, cinnamon and chocolate show up. When mature, meaty and earthy flavours emerge. That's when you should lay out the silver and crystal. Grand Cru Burgundy demands as much – after all, monks in the Middle Ages had already divined the best parcels of land in Burgundy. Alternatives to red Burgundy include Pinot Noir from New Zealand, Oregon and Germany! Peking Duck and Tuna sushi are natural cohorts with Pinot Noir.

8. THE ALL AMERICAN

A chameleon of a grape is Zinfandel. Harvested ripe, it was mistaken for port. As a rosé wine, it quenched Gold Rush miners' thirsts. These days as a red table wine, it's so pure with fruit and even sophisticated in temperament. Red Zinfandel with a juicy nature and tannins might not work with seafood or fiery hot food. However, they can handle milder curries, especially those thickened with yoghurt and nuts. White Zinfandel usually a little sweet, are the perfect quaffing accompaniment to spicy Asian fare.



- 1 Malbecs are fruity, spicy and expressive wines.
- 2 Le Altanza wines from Rioja.
- 3 Red Zinfandel can go with milder curries – the Ernest and Julio Gallo Sierra Valley Ruby Cabernet.

Edwin Soon is a qualified oenologist and has run wine shops and worked as a winemaker in various countries. He now writes and teaches about wine around Asia.