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Journal

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Pour a Glass of Romance With a Meal

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

Any wine can enhance any romantic event, particularly when paired with the right food, but this Valentine's Day, our focus will be on Spanish wines.

Why Spanish wines? Wouldn't a French or Italian wine be romantic, too? Yes, and all the qualities and history of those wines also are reflected in wines of España. Spain has the most acreage devoted to wines of any country in the world, 4.5 million acres, and is the third largest producer of wines.

Quality wines from Spain are generally less expensive than their Italian and French neighbors but share a similar heritage. In fact, many French wine producers set up bodegas in the Rioja district of northern Spain when Bordeaux vines were struck with the insect phylloxera—a louse in more ways than one—that devastated much of France's vines in the 19th century.

Spain has experienced a renaissance in wine making since the 1980s, so that now it isn't just sherry and sparkling wine (cava) for which wine lovers clamor. The main winemaking regions in Spain are La Rioja, Catalonia, Ribera del Duero and the Sherry District. Sherry is produced in Andalusia in sunny southwestern Spain while the other regions are north of Madrid.

Easy drinking

The most accessible wines are the Riojas, made principally with the Tempranillo and Garnacha grapes. The classification of these wines is defined by the aging times in oak barrels and bottle before their release dates. The youngest of these is the Crianza Rioja, followed by the Reserva, and finally the Gran Reserva Rioja.

My wife and I shared a bottle of Gran Reserva Rioja accompanied by a rich seafood paella while enjoying an energetic flamenco show in the picturesque hilltop town of Mijas, high above the Mediterranean near Malaga. Now that is high romance. I've been a fan of Riojas ever since.

The most famous wine from the Penedes region outside Barcelona is a sparkling wine called cava, of which Cordonui and Freixenet are the biggest producers. Cordonui was the wine we chose for our wedding reception, and it was well received by our guests. The Ribera del Duero region, between Madrid and Rioja, makes some of the most expensive wines, such as Vega Sicilia.

That brings us to sherry, and we aren't talking cooking sherry either. The Palomino and Pedro Ximenez grapes are the principal grapes used in the

making of sherry. The sherry bodega is an above-ground structure to store wine. That is so the sherry can breathe in its loosely corked barrel to oxidize the wine.

The producers lose a minimum of 3 percent of the wine using this technique, called the angel's share. Many claim this is why the people of Sherry, breathing in the angel's share, are so happy all the time.

A little sherry

The Solera system is an aging and maturing process that takes place through the dynamic and continuous blending of several vintages of sherry that are stored in rows of barrels. The purpose of this type of blending is to ensure the house style of the sherry is maintained.

The types of sherry are defined by the range of dryness, from the very dry Manzanilla and Fino wines, to the Amontillado and Oloroso medium-dry wines, and culminating in the cream sherries. The Pedro Ximenez grape, often abbreviated "PX," is the main grape used in the making of cream sherry.

Meal for two

Now we're ready to put together that romantic meal I alluded to in the beginning. Why not start with caviar or smoked salmon paired with a cava sparkling wine to tease the palate, followed by a Rioja Reserva to accompany a lamb or beef dish, and top it off with a chocolate dessert and a cream sherry. Be careful not to drool on the newsprint while you read this. Salut!

4. Keep a mixture of oats, cinnamon and brown sugar in a resealable plastic bag in the freezer. When you're making banana bread or other fruited breads, pull out this sweet mixture and sprinkle a bit on top for extra flavor and crunch. Or, add a tablespoon to a bowl of chunky applesauce for a snack or as another take on oats for breakfast.

SOURCES: Quakeroatmeal.com and "Whole Grains Every Day, Every Way" by Lorna Sass (Crown Publishing, 2006)

ORIENTAL STUFFED MUSHROOMS

Makes 8 servings

24 large mushrooms

{ cup reduced-sodium

soy sauce

\ cup dry sherry

{ pound ground turkey

} cup oats, uncooked, quick or old-fashioned

{ cup sliced green onions

\ cup finely chopped red or green bell pepper, or both

1 egg white, lightly beaten

1 tablespoon Dijon-style mustard

2 cloves garlic, minced
 Salt and pepper, to taste
 Shredded parmesan,
 optional

Remove and reserve stems from mushrooms. Place mushroom caps in large bowl.

In small bowl, combine soy sauce and sherry. Pour over mushroom caps. Cover and marinate at least 1 hour, stirring once after 30 minutes.

Finely chop reserved mushroom stems. Place in large bowl with turkey, oats, green onions, bell pepper, egg white, mustard, garlic, salt and pepper. Mix well.

Drain mushroom caps, reserving marinade. Fill caps with turkey mixture, packing well and mounding slightly. Place on broiler pan. Brush tops with reserved marinade.

Broil 7 to 8 inches from heat for 13 to 15 minutes or until turkey is cooked through. Just before pulling from broiler, you can add shredded parmesan. Allow to melt. Serve immediately.

-- From quakeroatmeal.com

PER SERVING:

Calories, 130.5; protein, 9.6 grams; carbohydrates, 14.2 grams; total fat, 3.4— grams; cholesterol, 22.4 milligrams; saturated fat, .8 grams; dietary fiber, 3.7 grams; sodium, 369.7 milligrams; sugar, 3.6 grams; vitamin A,— 29.5 retinol equivalents; vitamin C, 14.8 milligrams; calcium, 20.7 milligrams; iron, 3.2 milligrams; alcohol, 1.3 grams.

NOTE: Information is meant only as a guide; the ESHA Research program does not compensate for crop-growing conditions, and some methods of cooking affect nutrient content.

OAT AND TURKEY SOUP WITH TEX-MEX FLAVORS

Makes 6 servings

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 large onion, diced

1 stalk celery, diced

1 teaspoon salt

2 cans (10 ounces each) diced tomatoes with green chiles, with liquid

2 teaspoons chili powder

1 teaspoon dried oregano

[teaspoon ground cinnamon

3 pounds bone-in turkey thighs, skinned

{ cup steel-cut oats

1 cup frozen corn kernels, rinsed under hot water

1 ripe avocado, halved,

pitted, peeled and cut into half-inch cubes

3 to 4 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh cilantro

2 to 3 tablespoons freshly squeeze lime juice

Freshly ground pepper to taste

In large, heavy pot, heat 1 tablespoon of oil. Stir in onion, celery and \ teaspoon salt. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until onion is translucent, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, remaining salt, chili powder, oregano and cinnamon.

Add 5 cups water, stir to scrape up any browned bits sticking to bottom of pot. Add turkey thighs and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low. Cover and simmer for 15 minutes.

Stir in oats. Cover and continue simmering until turkey is tender and easily pulls away from bone, 25 to 45 minutes longer, depending on size of thighs.

Transfer turkey to cutting board.

If oats are not tender, continue simmering the soup, uncovered, until they are done. Otherwise, turn off heat. Skim off any fat that rises to top of soup.

When turkey is cool enough to handle, remove meat from bones and shred into bite-sized pieces. Stir corn and shredded turkey into soup. Reheat if necessary.

Turn off heat and stir in avocado, remaining olive oil, cilantro and lime juice to taste. Correct seasoning with salt and pepper. Serve hot in large bowls with tortillas for dunking.

-- From "Whole Grains Every Day, Every Way" by Lorna Sass (Clarkson Potter, 2006, \$32.50)

PER SERVING: Calories, 461.3; protein, 51 grams; carbohydrates, 27 grams; total fat, 16.4 grams; cholesterol, 190.5 milligrams; saturated fat, 3.5 grams; dietary fiber, 7.9 grams; sodium, 334.4 milligrams; sugar, 6.1 grams; vitamin A,— 114.5 retinol equivalents; vitamin C, 27.6 milligrams; calcium, 98.6 milligrams; iron, 5.6 milligrams; alcohol, 0 grams.

NOTE: Information is meant only as a guide; the ESHA Research program does not compensate for crop-growing conditions, and some methods of cooking affect nutrient content.

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com

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