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Journal

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Toasting the Turkey With Taste

By [Jim Hammond](#)

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: This month features one of the biggest feast days of the year, but paradoxically, one of the most challenging with which to pair wines.

Traditionally, Thanksgiving is turkey with a roast ham as backup, neither of which carries a long list of preferred wines for that perfect marriage with food. I could cheat and segue to dessert and dessert wines, but then I thought about my traditional Thanksgiving with our good friends the Careys and decided to plunge in.

Any Web site you browse is guaranteed to have several wine suggestions for turkey and trimmings. Consistency of choice is not one of the things you'll notice. In fact, it would appear most wine specialists use a dartboard to find the right mix.

When our Native American friends came up with the idea of this feast day, they were not thinking of how turkey and root vegetables could be set off with a nice Sangiovese. Now if you substitute a roast lamb or beef, all sorts of options open up.

However, if you are a traditionalist and want to challenge me to match the bird with the wine, here are some possibilities. Whether the turkey is smoked or roasted, and more importantly, what side dishes and sauces accompany the main dish— all factor into the best wine choices.

Lightly oaked or nonoaked fruit-forward wines are best as a general rule. The level of sweetness of the meal and the richness of sauces will influence the wines to choose.

Champagne or sparkling wines will always work, and this is the season for bubbly bargains. Sparkling Brut rosé and Blanc de Noir work particularly well and add to the festivity. Sparklers with good acidity and fruit with yeasty notes can work wonders and help to clear the palate between courses.

White wines typically pair with many of the side dishes as well as the fowl. Sauvignon Blanc is a versatile choice with notes of citrus, pear, mango, good acidity, and little or no oak. Pinot Grigios, Gewürztraminers and Rieslings also pair nicely with many dishes. As it happens, New Mexico has several good examples of these wines.

Seeing red

Red wine choices are more limited but can also be a good match,

particularly with the dark meat and the rich stuffing packed into the bird. Pinot Noir is a most versatile red wine here; typically vinified into a medium-bodied wine with good mouth feel, with notes of cherry and strawberry, and low tannins.

Sangiovese, particularly from Tuscany, or done in the Tuscan style also works well. My favorite domestic Sangiovese wines come from Vino Noceto in the Shenandoah Valley of California. Their wines have lots of cherry/berry favors including cranberry in a medium-bodied wine that is a good alternative if Pinot Noir is not your favorite choice. If your bird is prepared Italian style this one may be a match made in heaven.

For desserts, even if you didn't save room, a good port works well with mincemeat. I know a lot of people treat mincemeat pie like fruitcake, but that always leaves more for me. Chocolate-based desserts work well with port as well, but try a late harvest Zinfandel with its lower alcohol level and intense fruit-bomb flavors. Fruit pies pair with wines made from late harvest or Botrytis cinerea white wine grapes. Botrytis, or noble rot, is the alchemist's catalyst in the making of Sauternes. And here I always thought noble rot was a dissipated monarch.

Holiday memories

In case you were wondering what the Careys have to do with all this, let me explain. The Careys have been good friends for decades, and soon into that relationship, my wife and I were invited to join their family and friends in the celebration of a traditional Thanksgiving. That became a yearly event when they discovered I could carve the bird. Well, Bob Carey could carve the bird, too. The only problem is no one recognized it as turkey when he was through.

I had a small role in making the Careys fine wine enthusiasts, so they often wanted to know my recommendations. Bob Carey's strategy was to visit his favorite gourmet wine store and ask the wine sommelier for suggestions. I'm sure they greeted him with open arms knowing he would take away a case of personally selected wines. Each wine was a good choice in its own right, none perfect for turkey, but no one noticed.

I call this the shotgun approach to wine pairing. Because the turkey was usually brought down this way, why not the wines?

For us, this potpourri of wines always worked. Each wine the Careys served was a treat in itself. So what if they didn't marry with the bird; this was smorgasbord time. If a wine didn't blend, it did contrast beautifully.

This year as in the past, Thanksgiving will bring a bountiful harvest at the Careys', and a time to share friendship, good food and good wine.

If the food and wine are not perfectly balanced at your house, I can only hope the warmth and joy of family and friends is as great as at the Carey house. Salut!

TIDBITS

Learn how to pair
wine with turkey

Whole Foods Market is hosting a class on Thanksgiving wines from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Friday at the store's Extended Café, 5815 Wyoming Blvd. NE.

For \$15, you can learn about which wines are best with classic Thanksgiving fare. You'll get to sample holiday wines and snacks.

Space is limited. You can reserve a spot by calling 856-0474.

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