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# Wine Enough to Please Them All

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

THESE next five or six preholiday weeks are the times that try wine lovers' souls.

What, we ask ourselves every year, should we drink with the festive bird or beast? It is a question many of us are called upon to answer repeatedly — first before Thanksgiving, then again before Christmas, and maybe again before New Year's Eve.

There is no pat answer, at least none that go beyond the sound if rather unhelpful advice "Drink what you like." But there are certain important aspects of celebratory feasting that should be kept in mind because, like candles in the dark, they can provide a flicker of guidance in making choices.

Start with this: Relax. If Cousin Lew, a newcomer to the family table this year, turns out to be allergic to red wine, give him a sherry or a Coke. If Aunt Emily thinks your wine choices are a wee bit pretentious, so be it; she probably thinks the same about your car. If others think you are too cheap to pour something that measures up to their lofty standards, let them take their snobbery to a restaurant next year and exercise it on an overpriced wine list.

This is just wine, not life; a drink, not moral theology.

For hundreds of years, a glass or two of fizz has heralded auspicious events, and both Thanksgiving and Christmas are celebrations of very auspicious events, national in one case, religious in the other, even if that is sometimes forgotten. So consider breaking out the Champagne for a preprandial drink. If you hit the lottery recently, go for the miraculously full-bodied Krug, perhaps the finest of Champagnes. If not, try nonvintage Veuve Clicquot — rich, reliable and attractively priced, a favorite around our house.

Nothing quite matches Champagne, in either quality or price, but a few other bubblied come close, like Roederer Estate, made in California's enigmatic Anderson Valley by the same firm that produces the sumptuous Cristal in France. Iron Horse, from the Russian River, is another winner. Italy provides appealing alternatives, including Franciacorta (Ca' del Bosco is superb but costly) and prosecco (Mionetto, moderately priced, is eminently drinkable).

My wife, Betsey, a Southerner, likes oysters at holiday time; perhaps they are a first-course tradition in your family, too. The Champagne or other sparkling wine will taste good with them, providing that it is ultradry or brut, but my preference would be for something still and dry, like a fragrant Sancerre from the great Henri Bourgeois, or a flinty Chablis Premier Cru from one of the several growers in the Dauvissat family, or a faintly iodinic muscadet from Louis Métaireau. California sauvignon blancs from Cakebread (crisp and citrusy) or Geyser Peak (made in a frankly Antipodean style by an Australian winemaker) would also serve nicely.

So much for the preliminaries. What about the main course, the enormous main course, full of contradictory flavors, that tradition dictates for these days of feasting? Once in a while, like many people, my family rebels, and we eat a rib roast of beef or even a goose, but it's usually turkey, stuffing, brussels sprouts, creamed corn, cranberries, pies and the like.

That parade of bland, sweet, fruity, sometimes spicy flavors is hard to match with wine, and it has produced some outlandish suggestions, including gewürztraminer, which the Alsatians who make it drink with

everything, from sauerkraut to cheese. Not for me, but I can imagine solving this conundrum with Conundrum, a Napa Valley blend of five varietals that yields an unusual white wine, both lush and robust, lively and full of tropical fruit flavors.

Better though, in my view, a red with good fruit and slight sweetness.

BUT which? Since holiday meals are usually served to a crowd of people, often people in a mood to drink more than they usually would, you will want something that you can afford in quantity. But presuming that neither Robert Parker nor your favorite sommelier is joining you, people are not likely to spend much time discussing the wine's pedigree, aroma and maturity anyway.

So unless you are planning to have just three or four at your table, leave the Beychevelle, the Bonnes-Mares and the Opus One in the cellar.

The most obvious choice, I suppose, is Beaujolais, but not Beaujolais nouveau, even though its annual release on the third Wednesday in November closely coincides with Thanksgiving. The best bet would be one of the more substantial crus, like Brouilly, but a good Beaujolais-Villages would be a more than adequate choice if you're faced with irrigating a crowd.

Among dependable Beaujolais shippers whose wines are widely distributed in the United States are Joseph Drouhin and, of course, Georges Duboeuf, dubbed "the Grand Fromage" of Beaujolais by Hugh Johnson, the English writer.

Other affordable, attractive choices might be a good Côtes du Rhône, one from Guigal or another well-known grower, for instance, or an Old Vine Red from Marietta Cellars in the Sonoma Valley — a varying but always reliable blend of Zinfandel and several various grapes of Rhone Valley origin.

Pinot noir, once considered unmanageable outside France, may be the perfect holiday grape, producing scented, sometimes voluptuous wines in many countries these days. Wines from the fringes of the fabulous Côte d'Or in Burgundy can be bargains; look for St.-Aubin, which comes from a side valley in the more southerly Côte de Beaune, or a Côte de Nuits-Villages.

New Zealand, which first made its name with white wines, is now turning out such vivid and aromatic pinot noirs as Ata Rangi from Martinborough and Felton Road Block 3 from Central Otago, which is not a million miles from Antarctica. Australian pinot noirs from Coldstream Hills, founded by the wine critic James Halliday, and Jeffrey Grosset, who makes the New World's best riesling, Polish Hill, merit consideration if you can manage to find them.

But, hey, we're Americans, and Thanksgiving is a unique American holiday. So you might want to look to Oregon for your pinot — say, Benton Lane, a relatively inexpensive charmer packed with the flavor of cherries. Up the price ladder a bit, I would recommend the Burgundian-style bottlings of David Lett's Eyrie Vineyards, or Brick House, an alluring, more obviously Yankee pinot made by Doug Tunnell.

Betsey and I like to drink the wine of friends on important days. Both Mr. Lett and Mr. Tunnell, who in an earlier life as a CBS News correspondent was a colleague, fall into that category, as does the remarkable Paul Draper, one of whose Ridge zinfandels might make a fine holiday companion, too.

If Rhone-style red seems a good idea, you could hardly do better than the luscious Nine Popes (the name is an awful pun on Châteauneuf-du-Pape), made by Charles Melton, a Marlboro Man look-alike, in Australia's

Barossa Valley. Or the toasty, mourvèdre-dominated Bandol produced in Provence by Domaine Tempier, which Alice Waters served at the 30th birthday party of her restaurant, Chez Panisse. Or, for that matter, one of the many successes of the original Rhone Ranger, Randall Grahm — maybe Cigare Volant or Old Telegram.

And to finish? What better than one of the exquisite Cognac-model Germain-Robin brandies made on Ansley J. Coale's mountaintop farm in northern California? No, they're not cheap, but a little drop'll do you.

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