

# The Washington Post

## The Annual Puzzle of What to Pour

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Every November, wine columnists wail about the difficulty of pairing wine with the traditional Thanksgiving meal. So many flavors on the table! Nothing matches sweet potatoes and mini marshmallows or lumpy turkey gravy! Cranberry sauce from a can? Sacre bleu! You can hear their hands wringing louder than church bells.

The typical solution is to come up with a single wine that might not match everything on the table but will at least minimize the horror. So you'll read that the ideal Thanksgiving wine is zinfandel for its power, pinot noir for its food-friendly delicacy or Gewürztraminer for its sweetness.

My usual response is: Open one of everything. The only challenge with Thanksgiving is that there is so much food on the table at once instead of an orderly progression of courses in the classic manner. Any wine should match some flavor in the feast; just take note of what you eat before you sip. I also suggest a bottle of Beaujolais nouveau (available in wine stores every year on the Thursday before Thanksgiving) as a celebration of the harvest just passed.

Thanksgiving should be viewed as an opportunity to experiment with food-and-wine pairings, not as a challenge. I asked several local sommeliers -- professionals at pairing food and wine -- for their perceptions on the Thanksgiving conundrum and what they are planning to open this year.

"The general tendency toward off-dry wines is a reaction to the amount of sugar in the meal -- either naturally or by someone's hand -- and the ubiquitous pie spice in everything," said John Wabeck, the former chef of Firefly and New Heights who is transitioning to be sommelier at the forthcoming Inox in Tysons Corner. "Having a touch of residual sugar can help with a dry bird, too; hence the Rieslings and Gewürztraminers."

Wabeck spends Thanksgiving with a group of chefs and wine pros who each contribute "a bottle or four," primarily Burgundy, both white (chardonnay) and red (pinot noir). He said he enjoys playing the contrarian with other wines, such as Beaujolais: not nouveau, but various cru Beaujolais such as Regnie and Moulin-a-Vent.

Jill Zimorski, sommelier at Cafe Atlantico in Penn Quarter, regularly faces what could be the city's most daunting wine-pairing dilemmas for patrons of Minibar, José Andrés's avant-garde restaurant-within-a-restaurant. For her family's Thanksgiving feast, Zimorski borrows a page from her Minibar playbook by opening the meal with something foamy.

"I like to start everything with bubbles, and I think a rosé sparkling wine is the best food wine ever," Zimorski said. She recommended a Cremant d'Alsace Brut Rosé, made entirely from pinot noir. For the main course, she stays with Alsace for a rich pinot gris, a style of wine that typically has enough complexity to match the sugar and spice in a Thanksgiving meal, "even with my mom's pumpkin pie," Zimorski said. Oregon pinot gris offers a domestic (and typically less-expensive) alternative.

"Drink local" is a theme advocated by state agriculture commissioners across the nation this Thanksgiving. Local is also the choice of Daniel Mahdavian of Refuel Consultants, a sommelier who advises start-up restaurants on their drinks programs. "If it is a traditional turkey dinner, I like an exotic, fruity Virginia viognier or pinot gris for a white, and then an American zinfandel or Virginia cabernet franc or petit verdot," Mahdavian said.

Not everyone I spoke with agreed that American wines are well suited for this most American of meals. "American wines tend to be fruit bombs that can overwhelm more subtle foods," said Brent Kroll, the barely-old-enough-to-drink sommelier who is reshaping the wine lists at Ardeo and Bardeo in Cleveland Park. I, for one, have never thought of Thanksgiving dinner as subtle, but Kroll noted "a certain gaminess and earthy quality to many of the dishes," such as heirloom turkey and mushroom or chestnut stuffing. Those characteristics can be tough to match with fruit-forward American wines, he said.

Kroll, like Wabeck, said he favors crus Beaujolais for their combination of fruit and earth. And though he may be too new to the area to think of Virginia cabernet franc, he does recommend the cabernet franc-based reds from France's Loire Valley for their versatility with a variety of foods.

So are there any hard-and-fast Thanksgiving wine rules? "As long as you follow the basic tenet of pairing -- to match the weight of the wine to the weight of the food -- you can't go wrong," Wabeck said. "Especially if it's a wine you like."

## Winzer von Erbach, Erbacher Riesling 2007

(1 liter)

Germany, \$14

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