

Bloomberg

Drink to a Feud-Free Thanksgiving With Riesling, Pinot, Port: John Mariani

*By John Mariani
November 22, 2010*

I'm through worrying about what wines to serve with Thanksgiving dinner.

It is a family holiday -- with all its crazy antagonisms -- and flaunting connoisseurship in front of one's mother-in-law, who only eats white meat, or Uncle Dave, who only drinks Bud Light, is tempting an argument.

The gastronomic challenge is to find wines that go with the wide array of flavors in a lavish display of dishes ranging from sweet potatoes to cranberry sauce, Brussels sprouts to well-seasoned, herb-inflected stuffing (not to mention marshmallows).

One thing I do know, Champagne or sparkling wine goes with just about everything, especially as a first-course wine. Since this is the most distinctly American holiday, I'd choose a good California sparkler, like J Brut Rose (\$30) from Russian River Valley. Made from pinot noir grapes by owner Judy Jordan, this has the body and fruit to go with almost any appetizer and even last throughout the meal as a festive, celebratory wine.

For white wines I also want body. A boldly buttery chardonnay like those made by Acacia, from California's Carneros region, is, at \$17, a very good buy for a large gathering, and it's very good with the turkey's white meat and roasted skin.

But to cut through the strong and sweet flavors like cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, and pepper, it takes acidity, and nothing does the job better than a slightly sweet riesling like Hogue Cellars Genesis (\$13) from Washington's Columbia Valley. (Hogue also makes a late-harvest sweet riesling (\$17) that would be perfect with pumpkin pie.)

Cold Climate

I am a big fan of New York State's Finger Lakes rieslings, whose terroir is ideal for that cold climate. None is better than Dr. Konstantin Frank's Dry Riesling (\$12), which has brisk acidity and good, apple-pear fruitiness that matches up well with sweet and savory dishes.

Obviously, Thanksgiving centers around the turkey, which is not a strong-flavored fowl (unless you obtain a wild, never-tender bird), but has a good deal of fat within its skin and in the gravy; the dark meat has more richness and succulence. So one might stick with the big chardonnay. In fact I'd leave it on the table after the appetizer, but also bring out a fine

pinot noir. The problem is that way too many California pinots are too high in alcohol, which tends to blur the taste of the grape.

Which is why I've long favored Domaine Drouhin's flagship Laurene pinot (the 2007 vintage sells for about \$65) from Oregon, which has loosened its tannins and reveals its complexity and elegance without bludgeoning the palate with alcohol burn. At the price, it's a pinot I'd serve only to those at the table who appreciate fine wine (at my table they sit closest to me). Drouhin also makes a less pricey pinot at about \$35.

Pinot Noir

For something lighter and far less expensive, Rodney Strong Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$19-\$23) is a delight with turkey and usually has a touch of syrah in it whose cherry-like fruit takes on the cranberry sauce and sweet potatoes very well indeed. The 2009 is in the market now, but you can still find the exemplary 2007.

You could go with an American Rhone-style wine, like the limited production (330 cases) 2008 The Third Man label of Gramercy Cellars, out of Walla Walla, Washington (\$45). Winery owners Pam and Greg Harrington are fierce believers that "within 20 years Grenache will be among the top 3 noted varietals in Washington." Their Third Man bottling -- with 60 percent grenache, 20 percent syrah, and 20 percent mourvedre -- takes its name from the feeling mountain climbers sometimes get of a presence who supports them in trouble.

Bourbon Finish

I doubt many hosts will serve a cheese course after all the preceding food, but if so, a good Port is in order. There are, however, no good American Port-style wines, so I'd veer from my American chauvinism to open a bottle of a light but rich ruby Port like Noval Black (\$22), which needs no decanting.

Otherwise, with cheese and dessert I would resort back to the Late Harvest riesling from Hogue Cellars, or even a glass of Kentucky bourbon, like Blanton's Single Barrel bourbon (\$40-\$50) to ease out the rest of the evening.