Entertaining with wine - part two

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by Fred Dog

, we looked at how much wine, water, and non-alcoholic drink to provide. Here are some specific suggestions as to what sort of wine to serve at which sort of gathering.

Pre-Meal Drinks Party

Wine (plus a non-alcoholic alternative) is much easier to serve than lots of different mixed drinks. People with carpets tend to prefer to serve white wine, and it is true that many, possibly most, reds are too full-bodied and tannic to be at their best without food. Sparkling wine seems special, but can go to the head very quickly, which may be a problem, or not. A good champagne can be the greatest treat of all, but perfectly well-made, more economical alternatives can be found from Germany, Italy, Saumur, Limoux, Alsace, California, New Mexico, Australia, New Zealand and England (a cool, or cooled, climate is vital). Still white wines that fit the bill of being light enough but not too acid to drink without food include many not-too-expensive examples from Alsace; dry, Kabinett and Spätlese wines from Germany (Mosel especially); light Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc such as a Vin de Pays d'Oc; Chablis and unoaked examples from the southern hemisphere; well made Pinot Blanc/Bianco and Pinot Gris/Grigio which combine the softness of Pinot with an appetising tang, and fresh, lively Verdejo and Albariño from Spain.

All-Evening Informal Party

The wines listed above could certainly be served all evening, but after a while your guests may start to crave something more substantial. Red wines that can happily be sipped at with no substantial food to break their fall on the palate tend to be light bodied and low in tannin, such as Beaujolais and other Gamays; red Loire and other Cabernet Franc wines; simpler Merlots; young Pinot Noir (except for most red burgundy); the new generation of juicy young reds from Spain and Portugal; Dolcetto; and of course practically any rosé can fit the bill here, particularly those from Spain, which have a fuller, drier taste, nearer to red than white. And if you really are fonder of your carpets than of humouring your guests, you could always switch to a fuller-bodied, oaked white such as a Chardonnay or Semillon when you start to serve the food.

Extended Lunch Party

A similar range of wines as for an evening party could be served here, but in smaller quantities perhaps. Warmer weather may require the addition of some examples from the following section.

Wine To Watch Football (Or Other Games) With

Well if it's Man U, it has to be red, it seems. Fairly bold so as to provide some anaesthetic against defeat, and slightly syrupy to lubricate the throat. Australian Shiraz fits the bill perfectly.

Outdoor Wines

It is usually a waste to serve too fine a wine out of doors, especially in hot weather when the bouquet is lost all too easily to the sun and breeze. Barbecued food, however, calls for its own brand of earthy, robust flavours and, perhaps not too surprisingly, hot climate wines come into their own here, including wines from Australia, the southern Rhône, dry rosés and reds from Provence, practically anything produced on the shores of the Mediterranean, Argentine Malbec, or California Zinfandel; even retsina from Greece.

Before A Meal

Any of the wines suggested for a pre-meal drinks party make fine aperitifs, as drinks designed to stimulate the appetite are called. The classic aperitif is dry sherry, generally about 15% alcohol (not much more than many other wines) , widely misunderstood, but one of the wine world's great, undervalued treasures. In warm weather a freshly opened, chilled, bottle of Fino or Manzanilla can give even more concentrated pleasure than a fine white wine (and is the perfect foil for green olives, sweet and juicy jamon serrano and salted almonds) while a dry nutty Amontillado is the perfect antidote to cold weather and an incipient cold. Sercial Madeira can also be beguilingly tingly and a real wake-up call in a glass. The most classical unfortified wines to serve as aperitifs are champagne, Mosel and lighter Alsace wines.

Dinner Party

I usually serve an aperitif (see above), one or two (related) first course wines, usually two and sometimes even three different main course wines (moving from lighter to fuller bodied and from young to old), one of which may continue with the cheese but more often (especially since my recent wine and cheese experiments

), we move on to a sweet white wine, or strong and sweet wine such as port at the end. The whites might be two Californian Chardonnays or white burgundies from different producers, the reds could follow a geographical, varietal or even vintage theme. But then I want to show off, and this is wildly in excess of what is necessary or even sensible, which is probably an aperitif, a white and a red (to cater for those who just can't handle one or other colour). All I would say in my defence is that you learn so much more when comparing similar wines than when drinking them in isolation.

After A Meal

To my mind and palate, sweet wines taste much more delicious drunk on their own (or with cheese) than they do with most sweet food. Any reasonably sweet wine can be delicious after a meal, and those with a fair degree of acidity such as Germans, Austrians, Loire or Jurançon can refresh as well. This is also the time to serve sweet fortified wines (port, sherry, madeira, marsala, malaga, liqueur muscat, southern French and indeed all rich Muscats et al) as well as wine in its strongest, i.e. distilled, form: cognac, armagnac and other brandies. The spirit that finds most favour with wine fanatics other than brandy is Chartreuse which, like wine but unlike any other spirit, has an uncanny way of developing in the bottle.

Daytime Drinking

I may be a killjoy, but low alcohol wine seems the crucial element in a bottle to be sprung open for sipping between meals. Mosel comes into its own here, as does Italy's panoply of lightly fizzing Moscato, the wrongly reviled Asti included. Buying an example other than the cheapest is the key to enjoyable grapey froth instead of a headache.