

White wines to warm up your fall meals

What better wine to go with a roast or gratin than a harvest wine with the taste of fall? Here are whites from Alsace and Oregon, Hungary's Tokaj, Campania and the U.S.



Good fall wines include these selections from Europe and the U.S. (Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times)

- Good fall wines include these selections from Europe and the U.S.



- Favorite harvest whites and where to find them in L.A.



- Pyramid Audacious Apricot Ale

- 2007 Pyramid Valley Vineyards Growers Collection Calvert Vineyard Central Otago Pinot Noir

By Patrick Comiskey

October 7, 2009

-  E-mail
-  Print
-  Text Size

The equinox is past, the shadows have lengthened, and apples, pears, winter greens and mushrooms are filling the markets. It's the time of year when you remember that you possess a working oven in which to roast birds and gratins and root vegetables. Dinner starts to fall into its cozier category, and your retinue of white wines will have to adjust to the season.

Plenty of wines occupy this comfort zone, leading not with energy but with weight, wines designed not so much to cleanse your palate as to envelop it like a blanket.

These wines will have a deeper color than your typical summer wine, more gold than green. Where summer wines have an angular, thirst-quenching acidity, harvest whites are more zaftig, more mouth-filling, as if they're carrying an extra layer for the evening chill.

A few rules of thumb: Let's decree that harvest whites come by their weight honestly, without appreciable oak contact. Let's begrudgingly leave off Champagne and Riesling in part because their invigorating acidity represents such a contrast to the mood we've set for ourselves. And finally, let's seek out our autumnal whites in places where there actually is an autumn.

Alsace and Oregon

Alsace is a warm place in a cool strip of the continent. Nestled on the border of France and Germany and nearly as northerly as Champagne, it is protected on its western border by the Vosges mountain range; foul-humored summer storms pile up on its western slopes, sparing the eastern valleys for a long, radiant growing season.

Setting aside the glorious Rieslings from the area, many of the white wines of Alsace share a limpid golden quality, a late-afternoon richness of color with a corresponding intensity of flavor.

Consider off-the-path varieties such as Pinot Auxerrois, from producers Albert Mann and Domaine Ehrhart -- in fact, Adelsheim Winery in Oregon is now making an estimable Auxerrois too. Or grab a lush Alsatian Sylvaner from Albert Boxler or Domaine Ostertag; these wines possess verdant ripe apple flavors that play beautifully against a meal of roast pork or mild wurst.

Alsace is also the French home for the grape Italians call Pinot Grigio; only here it's called Pinot Gris and it couldn't be more different. In fact, I'm convinced there should be some white wine axiom akin to the "no linen after Labor Day" rule imposed upon fashion.

To wit, after the first of September it should be forbidden to sip Pinot Grigio; you should be required to pour Pinot Gris instead.

Take your pick, Kreydenweiss, Dirlinger-Cadé, Deiss, Weinbach; all will be richer, riper, more exotic, more complex than any Grigio can hope for -- and well-suited to autumnal dishes.

Oregon's excellent Pinot Gris also possesses that unique Alsatian marriage of richness and freshness -- these wines tend to be a bit more fruit forward, with a cushiony warmth that complements dishes that include roast chicken and poached salmon. Look to the ever-dependable bottlings from King Estate, Elk Cove and WillaKenzie Estate.

Hungary's Tokaj

If they gave out prizes for the world's greatest neglected wine regions (and they don't, because, well, they're neglected), I think the winner hands-down would be Tokaj, in the northeastern corner of Hungary. The region was nearly brought to ruin by years of

Communist rule, when agricultural imperatives stressed volume over quality. But at the end of the Cold War, the newly democratic government welcomed foreign investment, which has resulted in a renaissance for the region.

Best known for its stunning botrytized Tokaji Aszu dessert wines, it makes expressive dry white wines too, made mostly from the grape Furmint (sometimes a dollop of Harslevelu is added). Dry Tokaj whites are rarely fully dry, but their steadfast acidity more than supports a modicum of residual sugar, which will almost certainly go undetected. From that sweetness, however, you get amplitude, a rich, pleasing mouthfeel in the service of baked apple and pear nectar flavors, occasionally straying into peach and citrus.

There is a small but growing contingent of dry Tokaji whites in the market, including one from the Royal Tokaji Wine Co., one called Mandolas from Oremus and exotic, saffron-scented Tokaji Sec Kiralyudvar (the name means "Imperial Courtyard"), as rich as roasted apples.

American Rhône

Perhaps the richest whites produced in the U.S. that don't go by the name of Chardonnay are transplants from the Rhône Valley, primarily the triumvirate of Viognier, Roussanne and Marsanne. With its heady peach and apricot scents, I'm going to relegate Viognier to late summer sipping, and focus on Roussanne and Marsanne, two varieties that are often undeservedly overlooked.

Marsanne and Roussanne still haven't captured consumers' imaginations in the market, and that's a shame. Less than well-crafted bottlings can seem a little monochromatic, but in the service of a meal, these are some of the most versatile white wines produced in America today.

Their complex flavor spectrum ranges from crisp apple to orange jam, supported by a breadth and palate weight that few wines can match, with the body to stand up to roasts of pork and game, not to mention a natural alongside your next Dungeness crab feed.

Marsanne is the sturdier of the two, a little plainer, but it has the sort of viscosity that sings with food. Roussanne, by contrast, has an almost uncanny, elusive complexity, falling in the spectrum of gold, laced with exotic herbs such as cumin and saffron, honey and beeswax flavors.

Just a few producers bother with these exotic whites: Qupe makes a Marsanne and a Roussanne; both are remarkable expressions of each grape. Stolpman Vineyards' l'Avion bottling of Roussanne is among the most voluptuous available.

Meanwhile, there are exceptional blends that employ these varieties: Peay combines the two for its tiny, coveted Sonoma Coast bottling, Tablas Creek's Cotes de Tablas and Bonny Doon's Cigare Blanc also employ the grapes in balanced, lean blends.

Italy's Campania

We must make one important departure from our "autumnal region" dictum -- and it lies toward the instep end of the Italian boot, south of Rome, none of it far from the Mediterranean coastline; it's the region anchored by Campania, where a renaissance of indigenous white varieties has brought a wonderful spin on the harvest white.

Running from Naples to the Amalfi Coast, the whites of this area represent a repository of

viticultural history for Italy (and for Greece, which introduced viticulture here), and have improved to the point where, as David Lynch and Joe Bastianich write in "Vino Italiano," the region is "living up to its past."







Four white varieties dominate: Coda di Volpa, Greco di Tufo, Falanghina and Fiano. All have a nutty, citrus oil sheen to the flavors, with a resinous, vinous density of texture that makes them feel rich and mouth-filling.

Of these I find myself gravitating toward Fiano, for its finely delineated pine-inflected topnote, accenting flavors of hazelnut and lemon. The vinous Fiano di Avellino from Clelia Romano, "Colli di Lapio," is thought to be among the finest expressions of that variety, while farther south, Marisa Cuomo makes exquisite wines on the Amalfi Coast, like her incandescent Ravello, made mostly from Falanghina.

And just for something different, take a day trip off the continent to the island of Ischia, where Casa d'Ambra has almost single-handedly elevated a little-known variety, Biancolella, in its Calitto bottling. With its deep golden color and scent of dried herbs, its pleasingly rich tarte tatin flavors, it's worthy of your dinner table some October night, an island breeze to accompany a seafood stew.

food@latimes.com

Copyright © 2009, The Los Angeles Times

-  E-mail
-  Print
-  Digg
-  Twitter
-  Facebook
-  StumbleUpon
-