

News-Record
Thursday, Dec. 10, 2015

SMARTEN UP
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

CHEERS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

It's fair to say that Diane Letulle is always in corkin' good spirits.

An experienced oenophile who writes *The Wine Lover's Journal* and is compiling a memoir of her own travels through vineyards and wine cellars around the world, Diane is also in her element this season, guiding other wine-lovers through the mysteries of choosing the just-right bottle for holiday celebrations.

Correction: there is no mystery at all, Diane assures her students at the wine tastings she conducts for the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School (her next wine-pairings dinner is set for Tuesday, May 10, at CODA in Maplewood).

Never be intimidated when it comes to selecting wines for the holidays, Diane counsels. While it's easy to fall back on wines you already know, "Don't always rely on, say, the one Chardonnay you usually drink. Be adventurous. Expand your wine vocabulary.

"When in doubt, ask the experts in the wine shop," she says. "They know what's on their shelves and love to talk about them."

Spelling Wine Success With Four SSSSs

Want to taste wines the way to pros do? Diane offers a "Four S System:"

S #1: Sight. Study the wine you are considering. "The color reveals its age," Diane points out. Whites get darker with age. Reds get paler. As a rule, whites are drunk young while reds improve with age.

S #2: Swirl. Swishing the wine around in a glass is no mere affectation: it agitates the aroma molecules and develops the fragrance of the wine.

S#3: Smell. "Much of the pleasure of drinking wine comes from the aroma," she reminds. "Our taste buds only know sweet, bitter, sour, and salty. Smelling lets you detect the many more nuances that exist in wine."

S #4: Sip. Among the varied flavor nuances you can expect to find in different wines are lemon, honey, and *terroir* -- that's French for the soil and environmental conditions under which the grapes were grown.

What Wine With What Holiday Foods ?

Diane has a simple answer: "With light food, a light wine. Pair heavier foods with a heartier wine."

For example, with filet of sole, think of a Pinot Grigio or Sauvignon Blanc. "Beautiful with a lemon sauce on the fish," she promises. Save the big wines like Burgundies and Cabernet Sauvignon for big entrees, like steak and roasts, she advises.

And turkey? What wine works best with the traditional holiday bird? "You're having brown gravy? Then consider a red wine," Diane advises. "In this case, match the gravy, not the meat."

Ditto for any dish with a cream sauce or cheese sauce. Here, she recommends a Chenin Blanc, "A food-friendly, value wine" that pairs nicely with light sauces.

Other easy choices include Beaujolais, "a friendly, low-alcohol, not-very-serious" wine that complements a variety of foods. And Pinot Noir, an "easy-going, fresh, fruity wine" that is also food-friendly, value-priced, and very popular, many thanks to the 2004 movie, 'Sideways.'

Since that movie, sales of Pinot Noir -- rhapsodized by one character in the film -- have skyrocketed, Diane explains. On the contrary, sales of Merlot -- mercilessly dissed by another character -- have dropped off significantly. "The wine industry calls it 'The Sideways Effect,'" she explains.

What about dessert wines? "Americans don't drink many sweet wines," Diane reports, but the pairings she suggests could change things come Christmas:

- Port and dark chocolate;
- Vin Santo and biscotti;
- Sauterne and cheese with honey;
- Moscato d'Asti with sponge cake or butter cookies, which "used to be for Grandmother and the children," Diane smiles, "But everyone loves them."

Her only rule about dessert wines: the wine should be sweeter than the dessert. "If you are having a really sweet dessert, serve it with coffee. Then bring on the wine."

Golden Rule for Holiday Wines

Wait. There is one more "rule" in Diane's playbook: Don't stress about choosing wines.

"You want people to be happy. Serve what you know your guests like to drink. Buy both whites and reds. After all, the holidays are about family, tradition, and fun!"

###

Rose Bennett Gilbert is a journalist, wine enthusiast, and trustee of the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School