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## **Make mine wine: take the guesswork out of pairing wine with our global buffet table holiday menu - includes information on dessert wines**

Take the guesswork out of pairing with our Global Buffet Table holiday menu.

Wine and food ... food and wine. The Europeans understand how both taken together create great meals. While the hustle and bustle of daily life in the United States regrettably makes the European-style dining experience less commonplace, there are certain times of the year to take advantage of it. And the holiday season is the one time when almost everyone has the opportunity to relax, create the proper ambiance necessary for a great meal and enjoy this experience to the fullest.

Wine is much more than a handmaiden to great food. Today, people commonly select a wine first, then choose food to match, instead of the other way around. Wine is no longer an afterthought, no longer a junior player in the total cuisine experience. Increasingly, people have come to understand wine and food are meant to go together; wine and food play off against each other to create an experience that is greater than the individual parts. If you've ever experienced a great wine at a wine tasting absent food, and that same wine with food, you'll understand. Many wines are made to be had with food, when their subtle qualities and character can stand out.

And the selection of fine wines has never been better, constantly expanding to offer a world of choice. Consumption of so-called premium wines from small producers in the competitive middle-and upper-price ranges has increased over the past several years, while consumption of wines as a whole has remained constant. As they learn about wines, people simply are becoming more discriminating and more demanding. The consumer standards have become more rigorous; the wine producers have listened and responded.

While much is known about the wide range of major varietals (a word meaning wines made chiefly from one variety of grape) of wines such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, more and more people are attuned to how these wines can vary significantly from country to country, from region to region and from winemaker to winemaker.

A rapidly emerging segment of the fine wine field is wine produced according to the principles of organic farming and the classic traditions of winemaking. Here, winemakers with their own vision of how wine should be made organically, are making their presence felt through the outstanding quality of their offerings. Many would be classified as boutique wineries, because their output is quite small, generally no more than several thousand cases and as few as several hundred per year. By the standard benchmarks of the business,

Organic wines are produced using organically grown grapes. Synthetic fertilizers or pesticides are not allowed on the vines or in the soil. In France, for example, a country that produces outstanding organic wines, the soils have to be declared free of pesticides (which typically takes years to establish) before the wines can be certified organic.

Strict rules also govern the winemaking process and storage conditions. Many chemical substances that are used to stabilize wine are avoided by organic winemakers. Sulfites, which are used to stabilize wine and ensure consistency of shelf life, are used only minimally, if at all by winemakers. And in France, only pure sulphur dioxide, not chemical powders is used, and then only in amounts that are far less than commonly used in conventional winemaking. Several wines get all the sulfites they need from the grape itself, which contains enough naturally occurring sulfites to suffice during the winemaking process.

In the United States, wine can be sold with up to 350 parts per million (ppm) of sulfites. Organic standards limit sulfites to 100 ppm or less, and most European organic wines are even lower. Many are so low, less than 10 ppm, that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms' mandatory "contains sulfites" warning on each label is not even required.

Some people have little tolerance for sulfites: They experience headaches or other side effects when the amounts in red wine are

too high. The Food and Drug Administration estimates up to 5 percent of the population is allergic to this substance. For them, organic wines are an especially good choice, specifically those with minimal amounts of sulfites. But for others, who are just interested in a fine wine, organics can effectively compete for the business. Today, in contrast to years past, interesting and exciting full-flavored and well-balanced wines are being made in the organic manner, including a number from Europe and some from the United States. Some highly acclaimed wines are produced using organic principles, even though they are not marketed or advertised that way, for fear of limiting the breadth of their market. In certain circles, a stigma is still attached to organic wines, but that is rapidly changing.

A wonderful occasion to sample organic wines (and others as well) is during a special holiday meal. When people come together for a multicourse meal, it affords a rare opportunity to experience several wines at one meal, each being matched to a specific course. One can rarely do this on a routine basis: There aren't enough people gathered around the kitchen table to finish off several bottles of wine and the so-called shelf life of opened, unfinished bottles of wine is limited. But, enough of the formalities. Let's discuss our wine choices for a wonderful and festive holiday buffet. Our wines were chosen to present a cross-section of varietals and winemaking techniques.

Our criteria were limited to three basics. The wine should be:

- \* an outstanding example of a finely produced organic wine
- \* fairly priced, averaging \$12 per bottle or less
- \* supportive partner with the food course.

We have also included two additional examples of excellent wines from small boutique winemakers that are not organically produced.

The eight recipes chosen for "The Global Buffet Table" span the globe in food style, presenting a real challenge for the wine selection but nonetheless an interesting wine "tour" for guests lucky enough to be invited. We suggest the wines be placed with the matched foods at the buffet table, so that guests, if they desire, can partake of both at the same time, maximizing their enjoyment and minimizing any confusion with regard to proper wine choices. And as with the cuisine, the caution to "not overdo it" is appropriate. Because of the number of wines featured, we recommend small samples of each.

**Spinach Tiropetakia:** The interesting balance of flavors and textures offered by this dish suggest several wines, each complementing the food flavors in different ways. A white wine, the domestically produced Adler Fels Sauvignon Blanc, with its crisp, fresh acidity, bright fruit and medium body would balance nicely with the cheese. As an alternative, a red wine, Les Romarins Cotes Du Ventoux, a French Syrah-based wine, would work well with the nutmeg and spinach flavors and contrast with the slightly salty fete cheese. Serve the red slightly chilled.

**Roasted Mediterranean Vegetables:** The nutty, wood caramel quality of the balsamic vinegar in this dish acts as a nice balance to the roasted vegetables. The additional flavors of garlic and onion suggest a full-flavored, robust wine as a complement. We suggest two reds from the south of France: the **Mas Gourgonier from Les Baux de Provence** or **Chateau Bousquette from St. Chinian**. Both offer a nice touch of spice and pepper and the requisite acidity to balance the robust flavors of the dish.

**Crudites with Ginger-Lime Dip:** The medley of flavors in this dish, with its slightly sweet undertones, suggests a crisp, refreshing organic sparkling wine, **Bossard-Thuaud Champenoise**, from the Loire valley of France. This dry wine complements the mango chutney flavors; this sparkler's touch of yeast and refreshing bubbles will impress your guests and adds a particularly festive note.

**Tortellini Antipasto Salad:** The tortellini antipasto, an Italian staple, inspired us to pair it with another Italian staple, **Chianti**. In this case, our choice was of a young and light Chianti, providing good acidity and fresh open flavors such as the Tuscan organically produced **San Vito Chianti Classico**, a newly introduced wine to the United States. This Chianti is far removed from those straw-encased wines so prevalent in past years--thank goodness!

**Tofu Satay:** This Thai-inspired dish motivated us to pair it with a nice French wine, **Jacques Frelin Muscat**. This white wine with its light herbal and fruit flavors and medium dry body would go nicely and introduce guests to a not often sampled wine varietal. A red wine alternative, which is equally interesting and becoming more popular as a stand alone varietal, would be the **Biorigine Cabernet Franc**. This French wine with its nice soft, round character and hint of oak would complement the peanut sauce of the dish, a major component of a satay.

**Vegetable Paella:** With this delicious version of the classic Spanish dish, we turned to an excellent Catalan producer of organic wines, **Bodega Albet y Nova, whose Xarello**, a traditional white grape that is also a mainstay of Spanish sparkling wines, called cavas, offers the body and aggressive fresh flavors necessary for this rich and flavorful cuisine. A word of caution: Make sure the vintage on this wine is either **1994 or 1995**. This wine is better young than aged. An alternative, one of our favorites is **Juve y Camps Reserve Familla**, one of the premier producers of Spanish sparkling wine. This is a rich, robust wine, extra dry, that will work well with the rustic flavors of this dish. It is not organically produced.

**Endive Spears:** The panoply of robust flavors in this dish combined with the rich but dry texture of the goat cheese called for a crisp, aggressive white wine. We offer two choices, both decidedly different in style and texture. First Chateau Meric Graves, from one of Bordeaux's premier organic wine producers, is crisp, with an interesting mineral acidity. In contrast, the Frelin Viognier, with its perfumed, ripe bouquet, medium body and dry finish, would allow guests to sample an old line varietal grown mostly in France's Rhone, that is emerging as a viable competitor to the better known white wines.

**Caraway Bread Sticks:** This component of the meal is really for "noshing" before the full-fledged eating begins. And an intriguing way of breaking the ice with guests would be to introduce them to two red wines that stand up quite well by themselves or with light toasts such as the bread sticks. Generally, the expectations of most are for an introductory white wine at the beginning of the evening. However, try something unorthodox here, by serving guests either the **Rateau Cote De Beaune Clos Des Mariages** or the **Shug Carneros Estate Pinot Noir**. Both are exceptional examples of the best of a hard to grow grape, the Pinot Noir. The Rateau is organically produced in Burgundy. The Schug is not organic, but enjoys such popularity in Europe that a good portion of it is sold there each year. Both wines are medium bodied and would be great for starters.

Please sample the foods and wines in our suggested pairings--and then let the fun really begin! We guarantee you and the other guests will not be running out of things to talk about. Contrast other wines with the same foods. Or better yet, change the order in which you sample the foods and the wines. You will notice how both can take on completely different tastes and character when you try this. Experimentation of this type illustrates very clearly the complex nature of food and of wine, made even more interesting by how they play off against each other. See what the others think. Probably no two people will perceive things the same way. Remember, it is OK to disagree about wine pairings.

In the final analysis, did you agree in general with our pairings? If not, don't despair. After all you are the expert when it comes to what you prefer. The bottom line is: Enjoy the holidays and the foods and wines that go with it.

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THE CROWNING GLORY of a great meal is dessert, especially one made with chocolate. And although it is not widely recognized, a full-bodied red wine with a chocolate dessert delivers an experience almost beyond compare. The flavors and character of both complement each other almost perfectly.

So prepare whatever your favorite chocolate specialty is. Our selection for the wine to accompany a chocolate dessert is a Cabernet Sauvignon from Bordeaux, Chateau Chante L'Oiseau, another highly regarded but small, estate that produces exceptional organic wines. Your guests will appreciate this interesting, and in many cases novel touch.

What a great way to end the meal and look forward to next year's holiday season.

Philip Bernstein and Gary Rohy own The Organic Connection and Fine Wine Brokers of Chicago. They will happily answer your wine and food pairing questions at (312) 989-8580.