

## Choosing Wines for Thanksgiving

If there is a holiday that begs for wine, it is Thanksgiving. More than any other beverage, wine is ineluctably tied to the harvest, to bounty, to the very core of what we are thankful for. But there is another reason, too, and it is hedonistic. Wine at Thanksgiving teaches us how to dine, not just eat. It is a provocative distinction, the idea of dining versus eating. But every year, Thanksgiving is there as a reminder that it is actually pretty easy to take a humble meal and elevate it to an extraordinary experience. A few candles, cloth napkins, beautiful plates, a sensational wine and all of a sudden, turkey and mashed potatoes are transformed. It is this transformation that makes Thanksgiving so special and so memorable for each of us.

Beautiful plates, of course, are the easy part. The nagging question always seems to be, which wine? Or better yet, wines. After decades of enjoying wonderful Thanksgiving meals, here is my strategy:

1. Forget about perfection. Like most human marriages, food and wine marriages are rarely perfect. On Thanksgiving, there are just too many flavor variables going on, everything (possibly) from cranberry sauce laced with orange peel to brussels sprouts with chestnuts to sausage and wild rice stuffing, to get too hung up on a quest for the perfect match. Besides, it is the feeling around the table, the combined effect of the food plus the wine plus the people plus the ambience that counts most.
2. One easy axiom of food and wine pairing is simply this: Match good to good, great to great. If you are having a humble Thanksgiving with a simple roasted bird, mashed potatoes and root vegetables, why buy an expensive rare Bordeaux? A Thanksgiving meal of this sort is comfort food at its finest hour, and so the wines should be comforting, too. Think juicy Zinfandel or a lush, super-soft Shiraz. On the other hand, if you are pulling out all the stops and having Thanksgiving as your pièce-de-résistance dinner of the year, that expensive Bordeaux would be a great choice, as would a top-notch Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.
3. Synchronize intensity. A turkey with a rich stuffing and rich gravy does not cry out for a delicate light wine. (Just as a lovely mild fish dish is not built to handle a massively concentrated wine.) Powerful red varietals include Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petite Syrah and most good Merlots. Powerful whites (and if you are a white-wine lover, who says you should not have white) include Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer and Viognier.
4. Let food flavors suggest wine flavors. For example, a roast turkey with a spicy stuffing immediately suggests a spicy wine, like a peppery Syrah from the Rhône or a flamboyant Gewürztraminer from Alsace. So when you go to the wine shop, bring your recipes with you, and be sure to tell the wine merchant what the dominant flavors are in the dishes you will be cooking.

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## Swirl, Sip, Savor

Dinnerware is the centerpiece of any table setting. Simply put, when you are hosting a small group, you have even more ability to create an elegant environment by using beautiful plates, sparkling wineglasses and festive linens.

A key ingredient for the perfect table is glassware. Our philosophy is that the glass should enhance the experience of the beverage, and the glassware should never interfere with the beverage's flavor or its appearance. The important features are the shape, the quality and the clarity of the glassware. There is the right shape of glass for nearly every drink—whether you're serving wine, a classic cocktail or simply water.

## About Riedel

Riedel is a 250-year-old Austrian glassworks manufacturer that still makes some of their glassware in the traditional way in factories high in the Tyrolean mountains in Kufstein.

In the late 1950s, Claus Josef Riedel began to produce lead crystal wineglasses that harmonized the personality of a wine, its aroma, taste and aesthetics. Traditionally, stemware has a basic bowl shape, which varies in size depending on its use. In 1961, Riedel introduced wineglasses created in different sizes and shapes that directly influenced the bouquet and taste of wines.

Today, Georg Riedel has fine-tuned and extended this concept, and he is constantly searching for the complicated scientific reasons to explain why the relation between the character of the grape variety and certain glass shapes is so important.

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Meanwhile, in a small saucepan over low heat, combine the remaining 4 Tbs. (½ stick) butter and the milk and heat until the butter melts and the mixture is hot, about 8 minutes.

Set a potato ricer over a large bowl and pass the potatoes through in batches, removing the skins from the ricer as needed. Using a silicone spatula, fold in the milk mixture and 4 to 5 Tbs. of the brown butter until smooth. Season with salt and pepper.

Transfer the potatoes to a serving dish. Garnish with the sage leaves and drizzle with the remaining brown butter. Serve immediately. Serves 8 to 10.

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## Pumpkin Crème Brûlée

*This autumnal dessert is enhanced with warming spices that are freshly grated to maximize their flavor. A microplane grater makes fast work of grating whole spices.*

Preheat an oven to 300°F. Have a pot of boiling water ready.

Pour the cream into a small saucepan and whisk in the cinnamon, allspice, ginger and nutmeg. Set over medium-low heat and warm the cream mixture until bubbles form around the edges of the pan and steam begins to rise from the surface, about 3 minutes. Remove from the heat and let stand for 15 minutes.

In a large bowl, whisk together the egg yolks, vanilla, salt, pumpkin puree, the ½ cup granulated sugar and the brown sugar until smooth and blended. Slowly pour in the cream mixture, stirring until blended. Pour the mixture through a fine-mesh sieve set over a bowl. Divide the mixture among four 8-fl.-oz. ramekins and place in a large baking pan. Add boiling water to fill the pan halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Cover the pan loosely with aluminum foil and bake until the custards are just set around the edges, about 30 minutes.

Transfer the ramekins to a wire rack and let cool to room temperature. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or up to 3 days.

Just before serving, sprinkle 1 tsp. granulated sugar evenly over the surface of each custard. Using a kitchen torch according to the manufacturer's instructions, move the flame continuously in small circles over the surface until the sugar melts and lightly browns. Serve immediately. Serves 4.

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# Technique Class: Small Crowd, Big Flavor— An Intimate Thanksgiving

While simple, homey foods make a wonderful Thanksgiving meal, sometimes the occasion calls for a menu that's a bit more refined and suitable for a smaller group of friends and family. Perhaps you'll be hosting the in-laws for the first time or inviting a business colleague to your home. This is the time to dress up the table with your finest dinnerware and linens and cook an extra-special meal.

To create a festive mood, pour sparkling wine when your guests arrive. Then impress them with a menu that includes a delicious rolled stuffed turkey breast and braised chestnuts enriched with Madeira cream sauce. To end this celebratory gathering, serve pumpkin crème brûlée in place of the traditional pumpkin pie.

## Rolled Stuffed Turkey Breast

*Ask your butcher to butterfly the turkey breast halves. This involves splitting the meat almost all the way through so it can be opened out like a book. Then the turkey breasts are filled with a savory stuffing, and rolled and tied before roasting. During roasting, the stuffing will absorb the flavorful juices from the turkey.*

Preheat an oven to 425°F.

In a large saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the onion, celery and fennel and sauté, stirring occasionally, until soft and translucent, about 7 minutes. Add the mixed fresh herbs, parsley, salt and pepper and stir to combine. Transfer to a large bowl. Add the focaccia stuffing and 3 cups of the stock and stir to combine; add more stock if needed to form a moist stuffing. Set aside.

Place 1 butterflied turkey breast on a work surface, with a long side nearest you, and season with salt and pepper. Mound 3 cups of the stuffing in the center, leaving a 1-inch border on each long side. Fold the long side nearest you over the stuffing to enclose, gently pressing on the filling, then roll to form a cylinder; do not roll it too tightly or the filling will slip out of the ends. Using kitchen twine, tie the rolled turkey breast crosswise at 1-inch intervals. Rub the outside of the turkey breast with 1 Tbs. of the olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Repeat with the other turkey breast half. (You will have some stuffing left over.)

Place the remaining stuffing in the bottom of a roasting pan. Set the turkey breast halves, skin side up, on top. Roast for 25 minutes, then reduce the oven temperature to 350°F. Continue roasting until the skin is crisp and an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breasts registers 165°F, about 40 minutes more.

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### Ingredients for Pumpkin Crème Brûlée

1½ cups heavy cream

1½ tsp. freshly grated cinnamon

¼ tsp. ground allspice

½ tsp. freshly grated ginger

¼ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg

5 egg yolks

½ tsp. vanilla extract

Pinch of salt

6 Tbs. pumpkin puree

½ cup plus 4 tsp. granulated sugar

1 Tbs. firmly packed light brown sugar

### Ingredients for Rolled Stuffed Turkey Breast

4 Tbs. (½ stick) unsalted butter

1 large yellow onion, diced

4 celery stalks, diced

1 fennel bulb, trimmed and diced

2 Tbs. minced mixed fresh herbs, such as rosemary, sage and thyme

½ cup minced fresh flat-leaf parsley

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

1 box focaccia stuffing\*

3 to 3½ cups chicken stock, warmed, plus more if needed

2 boneless turkey breast halves, each about 4 lb., butterflied by your butcher and pounded to ½-inch thickness

2 Tbs. olive oil

1 jar turkey gravy base, prepared according to package instructions, for serving\*

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\* Available at Williams-Sonoma stores.

#### Ingredients for Stuffed Acorn Squash

1½-lb. loaf country-style bread, cut into ¾-inch cubes

6 acorn squashes, each about 1 lb.

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

3 Tbs. unsalted butter

2 small yellow onions, chopped

3 garlic cloves, chopped

¼ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg

½ cup chopped mixed fresh herbs, such as sage, thyme and oregano

3 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 cup dried cranberries

2 cups chicken stock

2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

Transfer the turkey breasts to a carving board, cover loosely with aluminum foil and let rest for 5 to 10 minutes. Remove the twine and cut the turkey into ½-inch slices. Serve immediately with turkey gravy. Serves 8 to 10.

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## Stuffed Acorn Squash

*This hearty side dish is a wonderful accompaniment to the holiday turkey. It's also excellent with roasted pork and makes a great vegetarian entrée, paired with a tossed green salad.*

Position a rack in the lower third of an oven and preheat to 350°F.

Spread the bread cubes out on a baking sheet. Bake, stirring occasionally, until the bread is dry and crispy, 25 to 30 minutes. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and let the bread cool completely. Transfer to a large bowl and set aside.

Increase the oven temperature to 375°F.

Cut the stem end off each squash. Using a spoon, scoop out the seeds and pulp from the center and discard. Cut a thin slice off the bottom end of each squash to create a level surface. Season the squash cavities with salt and pepper. Stand the squashes upright in a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

In a large sauté pan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the onions and sauté until soft, about 10 minutes. Add the garlic, salt and pepper and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the nutmeg and the mixed fresh herbs. Add the onion mixture to the bowl with the bread. Add the parsley and cranberries and stir to combine. Stir in 1½ cups of the stock. Spoon the stuffing into the squash cavities, mounding a small amount on the top.

Pour the remaining ½ cup stock into the baking dish. Bake until the squashes are tender when pierced with a fork and the stuffing is browned, 1 to 1¼ hours. If the stuffing begins to brown too quickly, cover the squashes loosely with aluminum foil. Remove the squashes from the oven, drizzle each with 1 tsp. olive oil and serve immediately. Serves 6.

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## Braised Chestnuts with Madeira Cream Sauce

*To prepare fresh chestnuts, with a sharp knife, score a shallow X across the flat side of each chestnut, cutting all the way through to the meat. Soak in cold water to cover for 15 minutes, drain and spread out on a baking sheet in a single layer. Roast in a preheated 400°F oven, stirring once or twice, until the peels have curled open along the cut marks and the nuts give slightly when pressed, 10 to 12 minutes. Cool slightly, then remove the outer and inner peels.*

In a large fry pan over medium-high heat, melt 4 Tbs. (½ stick) of the butter. Add the mushrooms and the ½ tsp. salt, cover and cook, stirring once or twice, until the mushrooms are tender and lightly browned, about 7 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.

Return the fry pan to medium heat and melt the remaining 4 Tbs. (½ stick) butter. Add the carrots, cover and cook, stirring once or twice, for 15 minutes; do not let the butter brown. Add the shallot, cover and cook for 5 minutes. Add the stock, the ¾ cup Madeira and the mushrooms. Bring to a simmer and cook, uncovered, stirring once or twice, until the carrots are almost tender, about 12 minutes.

In a small bowl, stir the 2 Tbs. Madeira into the cornstarch to make a slurry. Add the slurry and the cream to the fry pan. Scatter the chestnuts over the mushrooms and carrots. Bring to a simmer, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce has thickened, about 5 minutes. Season generously with pepper. Taste and adjust the seasonings with salt.

Fold the chestnuts into the sauce, breaking them up as little as possible. Transfer to a warmed bowl and serve immediately. Serves 8 to 10.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Collection Series, *Thanksgiving*, by Michael McLaughlin (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

## Brown Butter Mashed Potatoes

*To produce fluffy mashed potatoes, boil the potatoes whole in their skins so they will absorb less water. Then use a potato ricer. Place the cooked potatoes in the perforated chamber, set the tool over a bowl and squeeze the handles. The potatoes emerge as fluffy, ricelike grains that blend readily with other ingredients, such as the brown butter used here.*

In a small saucepan over medium-high heat, melt 8 Tbs. (1 stick) of the butter. When the foam subsides, add the sage leaves and fry until crisp, about 3 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the sage leaves to paper towels to drain and season with salt. Reduce the heat to medium and continue cooking the butter until it is brown but not smoking, 2 to 3 minutes more. Pour into a heatproof bowl and set aside.

Put the potatoes and 1 Tbs. salt in a large saucepan and add water to cover the potatoes by 1 inch. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, reduce the heat to medium and simmer until the potatoes are tender when pierced with a knife, about 15 minutes. Drain well in a colander.

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#### Ingredients for Braised Chestnuts with Madeira Cream Sauce

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter

1½ lb. shiitake mushrooms, brushed clean, stems removed and caps quartered

½ tsp. salt, plus more, to taste

1 lb. carrots, peeled and cut diagonally into 1-inch pieces

⅓ cup minced shallot

1¼ cups chicken stock or low-sodium canned chicken broth

¾ cup plus 2 Tbs. medium-dry Madeira wine

4 tsp. cornstarch

¼ cup heavy cream

1½ lb. fresh chestnuts, roasted and peeled, or 3 cups purchased steamed chestnuts

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

#### Ingredients for Brown Butter Mashed Potatoes

12 Tbs. (1½ sticks) unsalted butter

10 to 12 fresh sage leaves

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

3 lb. small Yukon Gold potatoes, skins on and left whole

¾ cup milk

## Developing the Shape of a Riedel Glass

Years ago, Riedel discovered that the same wine tasted completely different when served in different glasses. He was then able to determine the glass shapes in which the wine seemed to improve. The shape of a Riedel wineglass is responsible for the flow of the wine and where it touches the various taste zones of the tongue. The initial contact point depends on the shape and volume of the glass, the diameter of the rim, the rim's finish and the thickness of the crystal.

According to Riedel, once the tongue is in contact with the wine, three messages are transmitted at the same time: temperature, texture and taste. Wine is composed of fruit, acidity, mineral components, tannin and alcohol. Guided by the fine-tuned shape of the proper wineglass, the combined senses of smell and taste lead to a wonderful world of flavor.

In the end, there is no single perfect wine for a given dish. Rather, there are lots of intriguing likely culprits. Part of the joy of cooking, it seems to me, is the discovery of those wines. That is why on my dinner table this Thanksgiving, there will be (as there always is) more than one wineglass at each place setting and more than one type of wine waiting to be poured. At some point in the meal, I will ask friends and family what they think the best wine is, and opinions will always differ, making for a lively dinner table conversation. Which is just as it should be on Thanksgiving.

One final question: How much wine do you need? That depends on how long the dinner will last. Keep in mind that it is never bad to have leftover wine, but it is always frustrating (and sometimes embarrassing) to run out. That is why caterers work on the formula of one bottle per person. Since a standard bottle of wine contains about five glasses, this should be more than enough for Thanksgiving and still leave you with wine to enjoy on the weekend while you are recuperating!

Karen MacNeil, Author, *The Wine Bible* (Workman Publishing, 2001).

## Setting the Table

Place a charger beneath the dinner plate to add color and versatility to the place setting. The salad plate goes on top of the dinner plate and should be removed after the first course. If you're using an additional plate for bread, position it to the left of the larger plate, above the forks.

