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## Wines to grace your Thanksgiving table

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Thanksgiving dinner is the best and worst of all possible meals for wine pairing.

Strictly for food matching, it's a mess. One forkful might include savory goodies like stuffing and sweet indulgences like cranberry sauce. The next could be candied sweet potatoes with marshmallow topping -- a nightmare for any sommelier.

Yet, this is a time when we gather with loved. It's a great occasion to open and share a wine you enjoy.

My strategy on Thanksgiving is to serve wines buffet style, just as dinner is usually served. I open a few different bottles, leave them in the center of the table and let everyone choose what they like.

While I drink wines from around the world 363 days a year, Thanksgiving and July 4 are two days I reserve to be grateful for America's viticultural bounty.

Here are some selections I might bring to the table this year. Look in local wine shops or contact the wineries directly for information on where to find them.

**NV Gruet Blanc de Noirs Brut (\$15)** -- I love sparkling wine on any festive occasion. On Thanksgiving, it's particularly appropriate because the bubbles cut through heavy sauces and refresh your palate.

Gruet winery in Albuquerque, N.M., makes one of my favorite sparkling wines in this price range with Pinot Noir grapes grown in that state's cool

weather. (Grapes don't need to get as ripe for sparkling wine as for still.) Its flavors of ripe pear and citrus, with a hint of berries on the finish and fresh acidity, go particularly well with turkey-day food.

**NV Frank Family Vineyards California Rouge (\$28)** -- For an interesting bubbly variation, do as the Australians and enjoy your turkey with a dry sparkling red wine, like this one, which has good flavors of strawberry and blackberry and wonderful balance of acidity and tannins.

**2004 Patianna Mendocino Sauvignon Blanc (\$16)** -- Whenever I'm faced with a difficult food pairing, Sauvignon Blanc is my go-to wine. This organically grown one brings you as close to the earth as any wine I can think of.

It smells like fresh, healthy green plants, along with some garden soil, Granny Smith apple and fresh lettuce. On the palate, the strongest sensation is one of greenness. Usually that's a slur in the wine world -- you don't want too much green pepper in your Cabernet Sauvignon. But in this case, it's a healthy, vibrant green that tastes of rain-country-grown fruit.

The primary flavors are Granny Smith apple, underripe mango and fresh lettuce. This wine has a long, long finish, a quality for which I'm always thankful.

**2004 Thomas Fogarty Monterey Gewurztraminer (\$17)** -- Gewurztraminer is a cool-climate grape with spicy, floral flavors that make it an invigorating choice for the somewhat bland flavors of

turkey and mashed potatoes.

This bottling, from grapes grown in foggy Monterey County, has a slightly sweet aroma of ripe pear, fresh lime and white pepper with strong floral notes. On the palate, you get flavors of ripe fruit -- pear and lime, with some white pepper. Floral accents come in on the midpalate and linger on the long finish.

It's very slightly sweet, with just a hint of residual sugar, and that will help keep it from tasting sour when paired with cranberry sauce or candied sweet potatoes.

**2004 Francis Coppola Sofia Carneros Pinot Noir Rosé** (\$15) -- Rosé is a great choice at Thanksgiving. Like Sauvignon Blanc, it's so versatile that it's one of my first thoughts any time I have a bunch of unrelated stuff on my plate.

This wine is a pretty, medium-red color, almost a light red wine rather than a rose, and has enticing aromas of strawberry, hibiscus tea, talcum powder and a hint of Japanese plum.

On the palate, it has excellent balance, with mingled floral and strawberry flavors and some hibiscus tea. This is a dry wine -- no White Zinfandel here.

All of these wines are fairly affordable. That said, holidays are a nice time to splurge. Save the pricey Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot for a rib roast at

Christmas and spend the big bucks on a Pinot Noir instead. The lighter body of Pinot makes it a better match for Thanksgiving.

Moreover, the top-end prices for Pinots are well below those for Cabs: Three-digit prices are rare, even for the very best Pinot Noirs in California. Yet because Pinot Noir is as difficult to grow as reported in the movie "Sideways," it's very difficult to find good ones under \$25.

**2001 Calera Jensen Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir** (\$50) -- Calera owner Josh Jensen is a pioneer of Pinot Noir in California. He bought land with limestone soils -- similar to those of France's Burgundy region -- on remote Mount Harlan in San Benito County in 1974, when most enophiles believed good Pinot couldn't be made outside France.

The Jensen Vineyard is his best site year after year, and this wine follows form: It's rich and complex, with black cherry and blackberry flavors, plenty of spice and the kind of long finish that invites you to pace yourself before grabbing another forkful.

Wine grapes are a gift; open some on Thanksgiving.

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