

The Washington Post

As American as the holiday

Advertisement

By Dave McIntyre

Wednesday, November 18, 2009

An iconic American Thanksgiving meal prepared by an iconic American chef (such as Mom, Dad or Grandma) calls for iconic American wines.

Thanks to increasingly thirsty and adventurous consumers, "American wine" today is changing rapidly with the rise of regional and local products and the growing popularity of different grapes and styles. So which wines or types of wines would count as American icons?

Here are some suggestions arranged by category, with representative examples.

This is by no means a definitive list, and every longtime wine drinker will be able to suggest others. But with these categories I've tried to capture what American wine has been, and what it is becoming.

-- **California chardonnay.** Maybe chardonnay is no longer synonymous with "white wine," but it is still the most popular white grape among U.S. consumers. California continues to set the standard. Chardonnay does best in coastal valleys that run west to east, rather than north to south, to capture cooling ocean influences. My choice for the most iconic chardonnay site in California is [Bien Nacido Vineyards](#) in Santa Barbara County. There is no Bien Nacido winery; the vineyard sells its grapes to more than 20 wineries throughout the state. It has more than 600 acres, most planted to chardonnay and pinot noir. Bien Nacido fruit is so expressive that several of its clients produce bottlings from individual vineyard blocks. Look for chardonnays from Qupe, Au Bon Climat Winery and the Ojai Vineyard.

-- **Pinot noir.** The cooler regions of California that favor chardonnay offer the same advantages to pinot noir, and Bien Nacido could stake a claim for icon status with this grape, too, especially after the 2004 film "Sideways" made Santa Barbara even more famous. Oregon's Willamette Valley also makes a strong claim with this grape. But my vote goes to Carneros, which arcs along the northern edge of San Francisco Bay straddling the Napa and Sonoma county line, and the region's pioneering [Saintsbury Vineyard](#). Established in 1981, Saintsbury set the standard for modern California pinot noir, and it is still among the best.

-- **Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon.** From the Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour Private Reserve, created with the 1936 vintage, to today's cult cabernets, the Napa Valley is inextricably linked with cabernet sauvignon. The trend is increasingly toward proprietary blends that are not labeled as cabernet, but cab is still king. There are too many labels to choose from for icon status, but one that excels for quality and accessibility is [Sterling Vineyards](#). Sterling celebrated its 40th anniversary this year, and its wines have shown marked improvement over the past few vintages, from its \$25 Napa Valley cab to its pricier Reserve and Diamond Mountain Ranch bottlings.

-- **Zinfandel.** Chardonnay and pinot noir have Burgundy as their benchmark, while cabernet sauvignon and merlot are modeled after Bordeaux. Zinfandel is unique in that there are no foreign models for it to emulate. Prices and alcohol levels have soared in recent years, but old-vine plantings continue to excel at expressing California terroir. The "Three R's" -- [Ravenswood](#), [Rosenblum](#) and [Ridge](#) -- remain zinfandel icons.

-- **Sparkling wine.** Champagne devotees are loath to admit that the United States can produce top-notch bubbly. Well, that just means more for the rest of us. [Schramsberg](#) set the standard in the early 1970s, prompting major champagne houses such as Roederer, Chandon and Taittinger to invest in California

vineyards. Although Schramsberg and Iron Horse remain the best native U.S. sparkling wine producers, they are challenged by contenders in other states, such as [Argyle](#) in Oregon, [Chateau Frank](#) in New York, and [Kluge Estate](#) and [Thibaut-Janisson](#) in Virginia.

-- **Oregon pinot gris.** Long before pinot grigio became a fad, Oregon was producing excellent wines from the same grape in a middle ground between the crisp, refreshing Italian style and the lush, earthy pinot gris of Alsace. I've often wondered why Oregon pinot gris isn't more popular. Its medium weight makes it a logical alternative to heavier chardonnays, and it is extremely food friendly. [Ponzi Vineyards](#) makes an exceptional pinot gris.

-- **Columbia Valley Riesling.** Riesling is making a comeback among U.S. wine drinkers, and it's about time. Perhaps that is because more wineries are making drier versions that express the character of the grape and the region where it is grown. Washington state's Columbia Valley leads the way: Look for [Chateau Ste. Michelle's](#) Eroica and the evanescent [Poet's Leap](#), both made by leading German winemakers in joint ventures. Oregon's Willamette Valley and New York's Finger Lakes are close rivals for icon status.

-- **Local wines.** Not long ago, a "local" wine for Americans meant California. Today, the growth of local wineries throughout the country is transforming the U.S. wine industry. The most iconic local wine in our region is the [Horton Vineyards](#) Viognier, which revolutionized the Virginia wine industry in the early 1990s. It remains one of the Old Dominion's best.

McIntyre can be reached through his Web site, <http://www.dmwine.com>, or at food@washpost.com.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2009 The Washington Post Company