



Time to Change Your Lists

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



The weather is changing and so are dishes I want to cook. This summer was all about grilled fish, salads, gazpacho, simple seafood, and fresh veggies. The heaviest thing on my summer menu would be pasta or rice but not as a feature. The only beef is by way of a stir fry or sliced top sirloin on a salad. As the first cool fronts work their way into Houston, I start wanting braised and roasted meats, grilled steaks

and lamb, and more complex cooked vegetable dishes along with soups and stews. As I write this, I have short ribs braising in a dutch oven with stock and wine, onions, carrots, celery, and parsley. It is simple and classic and it is absolutely comfort food. It is also for tomorrow as it will taste better after it sits overnight in the refrigerator.

As the temperature changes, my shopping list changes, too. My spot grocery list (meal specific) reflects the kind of fall cooking I was just writing about but my staples shopping list also changes. In the fall and winter, I buy more dry pastas and brown rice, potatoes reappear (they've been gone since May), and I start keeping more onions, celery, carrots, and parsley on hand all the time. I regularly buy mushrooms because I know they'll get used. I buy more and different cheeses. I keep smoked sausages in the refrigerator and usually have some bacon on hand. My staples list is such that I can cook some meals just from the (often long shelf-life) foods in the pantry and the refrigerator with no pre-planning or extra trip to the store. Since Spec's on Smith Street - which is where I work - has fresh produce and a full gourmet foods department, I do a lot of my "grocery" shopping - especially for staples - there.

One of my wife's fall favorites is the Mac & Cheese I make to clean out the cheese drawer scraps. I sweat out some mushrooms and green onions and then add some diced smoked sausage, quartered cherry tomatoes, chopped fresh spinach (which we always keep at home), stir that into cooked and drained pasta (either classic elbows or the spiral fusili) and then mix in the shreds and crumbles of whatever is left-over in the cheese drawer. I sprinkle some freshly grated Parmesan on top and bake it at 350° for about 30 minutes.

In addition to a different grocery list, all of those fall flavors require a different wine palate than did the flavors of summer cooking. While we always keep sparkling wine, Riesling and Pinot Noir (including red Burgundy) in the house, in the fall I start bringing home more Cabernet (including red Bordeaux), Grenache, Malbec, Pinot Gris, and even the odd Chardonnay. (By the way, the smell of those short ribs cooking is driving me nuts.)

The lighter weight and cleaner flavors of Pinot Noir and Riesling are perfect for the simpler foods of summer but the other techniques and ingredients used for the richer cooking of fall and winter demand more choices.

The classic accompaniment to grilled steaks or grilled lamb is young Cabernet Sauvignon and young Cabernet-based red Bordeaux. The rougher texture and vivid but darker cherry-berry fruit provide a good foil to the charred crust of the steak as well as the meltingly juicy fat of the meat. Steaks most often are seasoned simply with salt and black pepper. Black pepper and Cabernet Sauvignon are friends and the tobacco note that ripe-but-not-over-ripe Cabernet offers is a fine complement to the flavors of grilled steak. A bone-in rib-eye grilled just shy of medium rare recently paired beautifully with a Ch. Pontoise Caburris Haut Medoc 2006 but would have gone equally well with a fine Argentine Malbec or a classic Napa Cabernet.

For braised meats, the challenge and profile are different. The slow, wet cooking of braising makes for extraordinary richness as the connective tissues in the braising cuts (short ribs, oxtails, osso bucco, pork or lamb shanks, lamb or pork shoulder, pot roasts, and so on) break down and the meat becomes buttery tender. Braised meats may be served over rice or risotto, pasta or potatoes, with mashed turnips, or shredded over a salad. The leftovers can be packed into homemade ravioli or folded into a delicious quesadilla. The best wine for these ultimate comfort foods is based on Grenache. Whether from the south of France (Rhône, Languedoc, Provence), Spain (Priorat, Carinena, Campo de Borja, Catalan), California, or Australia (McLaren Vale or Barossa Valley), Grenache is usually blended with at least some Syrah and Mourvedre and often lesser amounts of Carignan and/or Cinsault. In France' southern Rhône Valley, look for Chateaufort du Pape, Gigondas, Vacqueyras, or Cotes du Rhône. In the Languedoc, look for Corbieres, Minervois, or Coteaux de Languedoc. From California, some of the best Grenache and Grenache-based blends are grown in the Central Coast areas and in Paso Robles. The wine will blend its distinctive garrigue character (a mix of wild herbs and earthiness) with the lushness of the meat while the rusticity of the wine offsets the richness of dish. And braised meats actually give a sweetness to the wine it doesn't have by itself or with other foods. Right now, I am debating whether to have a St. Cosme Gogondas or a Beckman Cuvee Le Bec with my short ribs tomorrow night. Either would be delicious.

As I start roasting meat again, I will want some older Bordeaux reds such as the still available 2004s, 2002s, and 2001s or something a bit older that I have kept for a few years. Why? Roast meats have more subtle and developed flavors than grilled meats. A wine that complements a grilled New York strip would overwhelm a slow-cooked roast of beef. Roast beef and lamb and even pork need a subtler wine with more bouquet than aromas and elegance rather than power. Good red Burgundy and Spanish Riojas with some age also fit the bill nicely. Roast pork is the most accepting of all the roast meats; it is fine with elegant red but equally at home with the richest Chardonnays - including white Burgundy - and richer Pinot Gris (think top-end Alsace and Oregon). Whole turkeys are now starting to show up fresh in grocery stores. A perfectly roast turkey (not with stuffing - save that for Thanksgiving) is a great way to show off most any elegant aged red including Bordeaux, California or South American Cabernet, Malbec, Rioja, or Ribera del Duero. If you are picking up a roast chicken or one of Spec's roast ducks for dinner at home (just add salad and maybe some roast potatoes), my suggestion is to stick with Pinot Noir (California, Red Burgundy, or New Zealand) or a fresh and fruity Beaujolais Villages. Oh, OK - you can have a Cotes du Rhône or Zinfandel if you insist but for my money Pinot is the ticket.

In the winter, we eat more pasta and baked dishes with vegetables. To my thinking, this –and Pizza - is where Zinfandel steps in. The more balanced acidity of Zinfandel and Zin-blends provides the perfect foil for Lasagna, Eggplant Parmesan, or almost any sort of Pizza – along with a lot of other pasta dishes. Zinfandel's mix in the same cluster of large and small grapes – what grape growers call “hens and chicks” – provide it with a unique combination of very ripe and slightly under ripe fruit that gives it that special acid balance. We – the missus and I - also tend to drink Zinfandel or Zin Blends with that afore-noted mac & cheese. Ok, Chianti and a bunch of other Italian stuff like Morellino di Scansano and top end Valpolicella works too but Joseph Kemble (aka “Grappa Joe”, Spec's Italian wine buyer) will have to tell you about those.

So as the seasons change, my tastes and cravings change ... which means my grocery lists change ... which means my wine shopping list changes as well. I have been looking forward to this change for the last month or so. Along about Easter, I will be looking forward to the next one – back to spring and summer cooking and drinking - as well. It's all part of the cycle of enjoying good food and good wine.

Stock up wisely on fall and winter appropriate wines that work with the foods you cook in your home and you will be prepared against most eventualities. Properly stocking your wine cabinet or cellar is just as important as having all the ingredients for oatmeal cookies on hand without needing to make a special trip to the store. Speaking of which, have you ever tried an oatmeal and bacon cookie?

Come on in and let one of Spec's wine consultants help you adjust your shopping list to go with the season. While you are in the store, you may want to see what Spec's food departments have that you need in your pantry as well. ✨

