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Organic Wines: A Case for the Allergic

By Robin Barr Sussman

My friend Tracy and I are sitting at our neighborhood bistro conversing over a lovely little vino. Suddenly I notice she is blushing increasingly with each sip. Finally, I ask, "Did you get some sun playing tennis today?" Her heated reply: "No, I think I'm allergic to the sulfites in the wine. It makes me turn bright red every time I drink it."

The solution to her problem? She has switched to organic wines. She says she doesn't get the reaction with the organics. I say, hmmm, interesting.

Apparently, about 4 per cent of the population is highly allergic to sulfites. That's why the FDA is required to label virtually every bottle of wine you buy with the warning "contains sulfites." Ironically, naturally occurring sulfites can be found in a long grocery list of common foods. Here are a few: crackers, pizza crusts, tortillas, frozen lobster, condiments and relishes, beer, wine vinegar, even canned tuna!

More irony: organic wines do contain sulfites. But because apparently they contain only small amounts of natural sulfites (less than 10ppm), they qualify as "sulfite free." In the case of organics, extra sulfites are not added to stabilize the wine. This brings us to the possibility that the bad "reactions" to wines could be from other chemicals (besides sulfites).

If the problems occur with red wine only, it could be a reaction to the histamines in the wine. If the reaction is to any wine, it could be an allergy to alcohol. If the reaction is limited to some wines but not others, it could indeed be sensitivity to sulfur.

What is organic wine, anyway? True organic wines are made from grapes grown without pesticides, fungicides, and processed without sulfur; instead using wild yeast fermentations. In cutting-edge California, the rule of selling anything "pure organic" means it must come from earth believed to be free of pesticides and fungicides for a minimum of three years. Because of the extra labor involved, don't expect to find many bargain organic wines.

So how does organic wine taste? Because the grapes are grown without pesticides, sometimes the wine will taste sweeter, other times it will taste bitter with an intense in-your-face raw fruit flavor; but that varies from vintage to vintage. Even though the wines are organically "pure," the flavor may not appeal to everyone, including the growing niche of organically strict shoppers who are willing to pay top dollar for anything deemed healthy.

If you want to drink organic wine, sample different brands until you find a taste that suits you. In Texas, we couldn't locate more than one or two organic brands at the big wine shops. We had better luck at specialty grocery stores. We discovered about a dozen different brands at Whole Foods and Central Market, with the most widely known winery being Bonterra, an offshoot of Fetzer. Bonterra wines were reliably delightful—very clean and balanced. Unlike many of the other organic wineries, Bonterra produces interesting

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varietals such as Viognier, Syrah and Sangiovese.

Check out our tasting notes:



WHITES:

Bonterra Chardonnay, Mendocino: clean and pale with ripe pear and apple flavors, refreshingly light and void of oak.

Lolonis Estate Fume Blanc, Mendocino: crisp grapefruit and grassy nuances zip through this dry, snappy sipper.

Natural State Chardonnay, South Africa: fruity and bright, free of oak with subtle pineapple notes.

REDS:

Coturri Zinfandel, Anderson Vineyard: huge, peppery and powerful with great body.

Badger Mountain Merlot, Colombia Valley: high alcohol; blackberry and cherry aromas, chewy and a bit brawny.

Fox Brook Merlot, Mendocino "Certified Biodynamic": big fruity bouquet, velvety with good body.

Posted by Production Assistant at May 28, 2002 10:40 AM

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Best Wines with Seafood

By Robin Barr Sussman

March is more than post Mardi Gras. It's also the perfect time, in New Orleans and everywhere, to slurp seafood gumbo, gather for crawfish boils, or throw a little shrimp on the barbie! And a great glass of vino can only improve these celebratory situations. Perplexed by the pairing of wine with anything that swims?

Yeah, yeah, we know. Some wines taste too sweet, some tightly tannic, and others just too big or oaky for your special sea creature. Here are a few guidelines that may take the mystery out of this tricky and sometimes-controversial conundrum.

Most important: no need to stick to one color or varietal. Almost any wine can work with seafood except the heaviest of reds. However, each individual ingredient can play a distinctive role in the correct wine pairing. Fish dishes can be light and delicate or full and powerful depending on the type of seafood and the sauce.

We'll break it down by common types of seafood, and then suggest a wine style and label that could be the perfect soul mate for your fresh catch.

CALAMARI: If it's fried, these sweet, crunchy bites dipped in a mayo type sauce will need a foil. Pair with a contrasting crisp white like pinot grigio. Tomato-based marinara will marry with a light to medium-bodied red with soft tannins such as merlot. Suggestions: 2001 Ecco Domani Pinot Grigio, or 1999 Hope Estate Merlot, Australia.

CRAB: Seafood-friendly Chenin Blanc is an amazing but overlooked choice. Decadent sweet Dungeness or rich pan-fried soft shell crabs both benefit from this brisk, aromatic, honey flavored wine. Suggestion: 2001 Pine Ridge Chenin Blanc-Viognier, California.

CRAWFISH: Whether eaten solo or combined in one of the many marvelous New Orleans dishes, we like to wash crawfish down with something cool and fruity. Pinot Gris from Oregon is a balanced choice with white fruit, spice and tropical notes. Rosé also works with spicy crawfish. Suggestion: King Estate Pinot Gris, Oregon, or La Vielle Ferme Rosé table wine, France.

LOUISIANA GUMBO: This IS a seafood category, right? If your gumbo has a buttery roux with sweet fresh seafood, we suggest a balanced chardonnay, light on the oak. If it were darker and spicy, a zesty red zinfandel would be our choice. Suggestions: Emeril's Classic White chardonnay blend, or 2000 Pezzi King Maple Vineyard Zinfandel, both California.

OYSTERS: The sea-freshness of raw oysters hooks up with an herbal, refreshing Sauvignon Blanc like peanut butter and jelly. Suggestions: 2001 Brancott Vineyards, Marlborough, New Zealand, or 2001 Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough.

SALMON: Although chardonnay may be difficult to pair with most food, it has a way with salmon. Heavily oaked California chardonnay can overwhelm fish, so pour one with enough acidity to cut through any cream

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sauces (if involved) but complement the rich nature of salmon. Pinot Noir can also work beautifully. Go for the younger fruitier versions from Oregon's Willamette Valley. Suggestions: 2001 White Oak Russian River Chardonnay, Ca., or 1999 Van Duzer Barrel Select Pinot Noir, Oregon.



SHRIMP: Shrimp itself is a mild flavor, so don't go too heavy on the wine or you may miss the shrimp. Look for a crisp light white, such as a low alcohol fruity Riesling from Alsace or Germany that complements instead of overpowers. Suggestion: 2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett by J.J. Prum.

Recipe for a marriage made in heaven:

[Oysters Bienville](#)

Pair this elegant, classic appetizer with White Oak 20th Vintage Sauvignon Blanc (California) and let the good times roll!

Posted by Production Assistant at March 21, 2003 03:17 PM

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Cooking with Cranberries, the Crimson Fruit

by Robin Barr Sussman

Cranberries are in! Right now, you'll find bags and bags overflowing the market with this bright winter fruit that is always invited to Thanksgiving dinner.

Good for you and good looking too, cranberries can roll with the flow into other fall and winter meals besides the big turkey holiday. Just in time for a season of greeting and lots of eating, this potent little fruit packs great potential, and not just on your plate.

Here's the health news for holiday over indulgers: Some cranberry compounds may fight the bugs that cause stomach ulcers, and the fruit's anti-inflammatory properties may guard against heart disease. You've heard the one about urinary-tract infections and cranberry juice: no myth! Eight ounces of cranberry juice morning and night can disable many of the antibiotic resistant bacteria behind these pesky infections.

Fresh, cooked, or dried, cranberries are not only low calorie; they burst with a distinctive palate-cleansing tartness not found in many fruits. Dried cranberries are especially versatile. For instance, try oatmeal cookies with dried cranberries instead of raisins. Or, prepare homemade granola with dried cranberries. Toss salad greens with cranberry vinaigrette, dried cranberries, and toasted nuts for a crunchy, tangy and healthful side dish.

Fresh cranberries can be used in a sprightly relish for your bird, with no cooking involved. Pulse whole cranberries, green apple chunks, orange segments, and pecans in a food processor-that's it. And that chic vodka Cosmopolitan will only look prettier with a few whole fresh cranberries floating on top-wow your guests with that holiday party drink.

Emeril takes the crimson fruit to a new level by preparing a cranberry-vinegar reduction sauce for grilled quail, fish scallop salad, and cider glazed sweet potatoes with cranberries. Baking can be deliciously simple with his old-fashioned cranberry crisp, or sophisticated, with a fresh cranberry custard pie. For downright decadence, try the moist Creole Christmas fruitcake with whiskey sauce. This is one fruitcake you will not want to re-gift.

That's our fall cranberry cram. Use up this bright cheery berry before they vanish for the season!

*For more cran-licious recipes, go to the home page and type "cranberries" in the Search box.

[Old-Fashioned Crisp](#)

[Creole Christmas Fruitcake with Whiskey Sauce](#)

[Whole Lotta Nuts Granola](#)

[Seared Quail with Cranberry Vinegar Reduction](#)

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