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Volume 21

Number 3

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SKU 20888

# The Grapevine

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR VINESSE WINE CLUB MEMBERS

## *MMM, MMM MARCH!* Our Wine Recommendations for Corned Beef & Cabbage and Ham

10 Tips for an Amazing  
Wine-Tasting Adventure

5 Great Places to Stay in  
Europe's Wine Country

Do You Like Sauvignon  
Blanc? Are You Sure?

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**EDITOR'S JOURNAL**

**First Impressions Do Count**

By Robert Johnson

***The old saying, "You only have one chance to make a first impression," certainly applies to dating and job interviews.***

But what about wine? Most of the time, a first impression will be identical to the last impression. Not always, though.

First impressions of wine are calculated through one's eyes and nose. Both the color of the wine and its aroma can tell us much about it. Not everything, but a lot.

Let's start with the color. If a wine has a brownish hue, it could be a sign that it's on its last legs or has already gone bad.

In the case of older wines that have been stored properly, the brown color may show up only around the edges of the glass, ringing the wine's natural or perhaps somewhat deepened color. When that's the case, it's time to drink up; each additional minute of air exposure will rob the wine of some of its original, natural flavor.

Among white wines, a transparent or nearly so appearance typically means that the wine is light bodied and possibly not overly flavorful — fine for a refreshing quaff, but not likely to provide a defining culinary moment.

If you want to see what a wine really looks like, hold the glass against a

white tablecloth or some other white background.

Even more revealing than a wine's color is its aroma — also known as its "nose." Smelling a wine can be almost as enjoyable as drinking it, which makes sense since most of a wine's flavors should mirror its aromas.

The nose is one's first line of defense against a wine that's said to be "corked." If you smell sawdust and mold, the wine won't be pleasant to drink.

Among the positive aromas that may waft from a wineglass are various types of flowers, fruit, herbs and spices — all or some of which will go on to be experienced by the tastebuds.

If you drink a bottle's contents quickly, the aromas and flavors should be nearly identical. But patience can be rewarded, because as a wine opens up over several hours, it may reveal even more beguiling nuances. When assessing a wine, we always taste it right after the bottle has been opened, then an hour later, three hours later and six hours later.

Why? Because each successive sampling provides a clue as to how long the wine is capable of aging gracefully.





## Getting to Know Sauvignon Blanc

***Hardly anyone doesn't like Chardonnay. The same holds true for Merlot.***

They may not be one's favorite white or red wine, but they rarely are despised.

Oh, if only the same could be said for Sauvignon Blanc, a variety that people tend to love or hate.

What about you? Are you a Sauvignon Blanc fan? Whether you answered yes or no, the harsh truth is that you may not really know the variety because it has so many different personalities. The key to Sauvignon Blanc's flavor is its place of origin.

Did you ever have a glass of Cloudy Bay during the 1990s or 2000s? That was the real love/hate rendition, defined by its in-your-face, no-apologies flavors of bell pepper and gooseberry.

At the other end of the spectrum were/are renditions from California's Napa Valley, which tend to be much softer in mouthfeel and melony in flavor.

Why such a big difference? The Marlborough growing region of New Zealand, the home of Cloudy Bay, has what

is considered a cold climate for winegrape growing. Napa Valley, conversely, is quite warm. The grapes know the difference.

If you prefer the cold-climate style, the Elgin area of South Africa provides additional bottlings to try. If your palate leans more toward the warm-weather style,

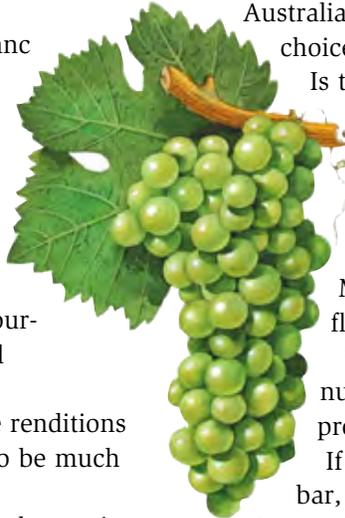
Australia and Chile's Central Valley offer plenty of choices.

Is there a benchmark locale for Sauvignon Blanc?

The answer, of course, is purely subjective, but it's hard to beat the Sancerre appellation of France's Loire Valley. There, the melon-like flavors of Napa are replaced by lip-smacking grapefruit, while the bell pepper impression of Marlborough gives way to less assertive herb flavors.

So, do you like Sauvignon Blanc? Given the number of styles and sources, the real answer probably is, "I don't know."

If you have the opportunity, perhaps at a wine bar, try the various styles side by side. That's the best way to determine the type of Sauvignon Blanc your palate prefers.



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***A***ccording to the website *Just Call Her*, “You don’t go on three dates with just anyone. It’s a milestone. The third date is the end of dating and the beginning of an unofficial relationship, whereby both people involved begin to have expectations of the other.”

Twenty-five years ago, Bart and Barb O'Brien went on their third date, only Barb's last name wasn't O'Brien... yet. Apparently recognizing the significance of the occasion, they did not go to Wendy's for a Frosty or even Denny's for a late-night breakfast.

No, Bart and Barb paid a visit to Napa Valley, where they fell in love with the land and, presumably, each other. By the next year, they were Mr. and Mrs.

The couple's path to winery proprietors could be called circuitous. There were various business ventures, including in the high-tech realm, along with a couple of missed opportunities to cash out for big bucks.

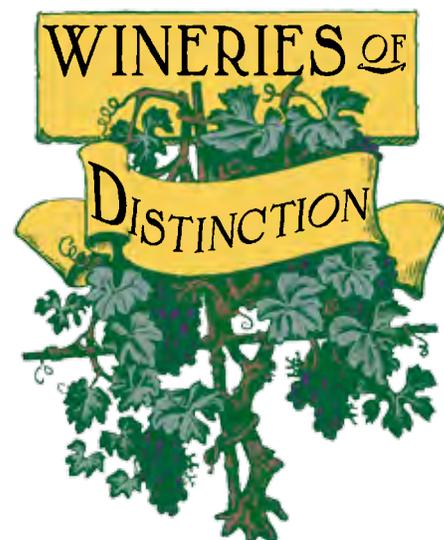
But finally, just after the dawn of the new millennium, the O'Briens had enough cash on hand to purchase the Costello Vineyard. Barb's dream of "owning land in Napa Valley" had come true.

As one fan of the winery pointed out, "Most O'Briens can be found in Counties Clare, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford. Bart and Barb O'Brien can be found in the County Napa." And that is where they make wine that

has been receiving rave reviews from top critics.

It's also where they have raised their family, which includes 21-year-old Emily, now attending Napa College, and 19-year-old Mason, now at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. They also have five cats — Motor, Hobbes, Chicharrón, Malcolm XX and Gemini — and past winery visitors may remember their Hungarian Vizshla named Sasha, who recently passed away at the age of 12.

Of course, the O'Briens have fond





memories of Sasha, who was featured in the book, *Wine Dogs of Napa Valley*. As they like to muse, Sasha “was the only professional model in the O’Brien family, even though everyone agreed she looked like a dog.”

Because theirs is a romantic tale, the O’Briens have selected romantic names for several of their wines, and even include poetry on the back labels of their bottles.

The wine called “Passion of the Soul” is a Cabernet Sauvignon, and “represents the proposal phase of a relationship when you have decided that this is the person you want to marry.”

Imagine opening a bottle with your significant other, pouring a couple of glasses, and then placing the back label in front of him/her so he/she can read this prose: “You are the one I want to become one with / To intermingle our footsteps on the sands of time / Will you join with me?”

Then there’s the Bordeaux-style blend known as “Romance of the Heart,” with this on the back label: “Extend to me the hand of conversation / Twirl me with laughter / Embrace me with kindness / Will you be mine for a moment / or for a lifetime?”

The O’Briens love nothing more than sharing their passion for wine with visitors, and they work hard to

exceed expectations. That’s why they prefer appointments, giving them an opportunity to set up a tasting on one of their back lawn’s picnic tables, weather permitting. Private tours of the winery also can be arranged.

O’Brien Estate winemaker David Yorgensen shares the O’Briens’ passion for wine.

“Every aspect, from the vineyard to the final moment the wine is served and consumed, all give relevance to the perception of the resulting wine,” Yorgensen, a native of Vermont, says. “There are many decisions that need to be made throughout the winegrowing and winemaking processes that independently may seem insignificant, but cumulatively contribute to the culmination of a fine wine.”

Kind of like the progression of a successful, long-term, romantic relationship.

## Winery 4-1-1

### O’Brien Estate

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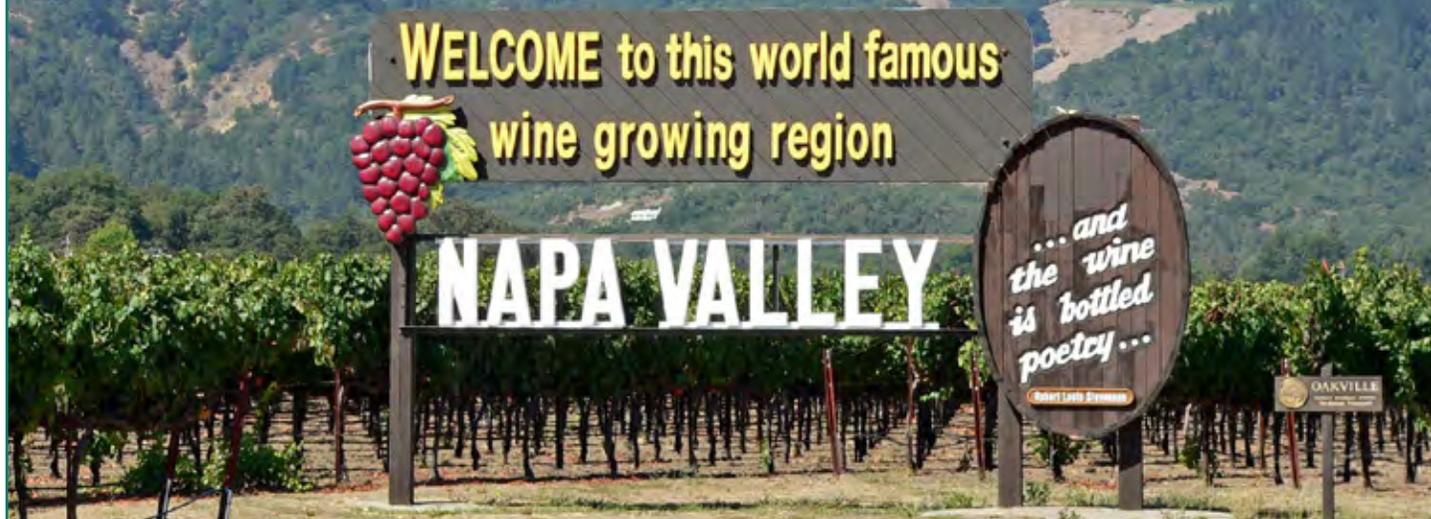
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# 10 Tips for an Amazing Wine-Tasting Adventure



*In most issues of The Grapevine, we take you on an armchair journey to one of the world's great wine regions. This month, we're transporting you to all of them — that is, we're providing you with a “game plan” for a successful wine-tasting adventure, no matter where you go.*

All 10 tips that follow are tried and true. They've been found to be effective from Santa Barbara to South Australia, and from Monterey to Mendoza. Embrace them — particularly tip No. 6 — and you're virtually guaranteed to have a memorable (in a good way) wine country experience

## **1. Do your homework.**

Before you board that plane or hop in the car, take time to do some research on your destination. If you have friends who have been to where you're going, ask them for suggestions on where to stay and eat.

Download maps. Most wine regions of any significant size have their own marketing organization that manages a website packed with information, directions, winery hours of operation and so on. But the most valuable tool such associations can provide is a good map that pinpoints the winery locations.

If you have just one or two favorite types of wine, take the extra time to visit individual

winery websites to see what each specializes in.

## **2. Seek out small producers.**

The large wine companies typically provide the most professional tours, but those tours are fairly similar from estate to estate. Smaller wineries may not offer all the bells and whistles, but there's a pretty fair chance that the person behind the tasting bar is the proprietor and/or winemaker.



## **TOURING TIPS**

## **3. Limit yourself to two or three stops per day.**

There are two reasons for this. First, you're not going on a drunken binge. You're visiting wineries to taste what they make and enjoy new flavor experiences. The more alcohol you ingest, the less able you are to make aroma, flavor and value distinctions.

The second reason is that you're on vacation. That means taking the time to savor the experiences you have, to talk them over afterward, and to cement long-term memories. When you're darting from winery to winery, or trying to adhere to a tight, multi-estate schedule, the qualities that make individual wineries unique become blurred. (And so might your vision.)

## **4. Eat a big breakfast.**

And do so at least two hours before visiting the first winery of the day (which should be no problem since most tasting rooms don't open until 10 or 11 a.m.).

Eating well before tasting wine lessens the impact of the wine's



alcohol. Avoid strong flavors in your breakfast selections, including coffee. The goal is to arrive at the winery with a full tummy and a fresh palate.

#### **5. Do not wear perfume or cologne.**

A big part of the wine-tasting experience involves smelling the wine, because the aroma provides big clues about the wine's flavors.

If you or anyone else in the tasting room is wearing perfume or cologne (or used perfumed soap when showering), that aroma will obliterate the aromas of the wines being sampled.

"Hmm... this Cabernet smells like Chanel No. 9."

"Hey, so does this Chardonnay!"

#### **6. Designate a driver, or hire one.**

This really should go without saying, but with legal blood alcohol levels at all-time lows, it doesn't take as much wine as it once did to find yourself "over the limit."

If there are two in your party and you're planning a two-day trip, the solution is simple: One drives and the other drinks on the first day, and vice versa on the second day.

Otherwise, if you both really want to drink both days, hiring a driver is much, much less expensive than hiring a lawyer.

#### **7. Hydrate... and spit.**

One way to be able to taste more

wine safely is to perfect the process known, romantically, as spitting. Most tasting rooms have "dump buckets" on their bars for this very purpose... and for pouring out wine that is not consumed.

Some people have heard of these practices but shied away from them because they're afraid they'll insult the person behind the counter. Trust us on this one: The winery personnel will not be insulted. They have a vested interest in making sure that nobody leaving their property has been over-served.

It's also helpful to hydrate throughout the wine sampling experience; you should drink at least as much water as wine. Other benefits include prevention of over-imbibing and avoiding a headache later on.

#### **8. Ask questions.**

Yes, you're at a winery to enjoy yourself, but you're also there to learn. "Wine geeks" can be spotted a mile away at tasting rooms because they're the ones who are talking more than the staff. It's very difficult to learn when you're talking.

Asking questions also demonstrates that you've taken an interest in the winery and what it makes. It can be endearing to your host, and it's also just plain polite. But beyond that, your questions and their answers may help you discover a type of wine you've never had before — and love.

#### **9. Take notes.**

Don't trust your memory. Jot down information about the wines that will help you recall more about them later, once you've returned home.

Note-taking also is a great way to help you learn the subtle differences among multiple wines, and to recall those differences later on.

#### **10. Buy a bottle at the winery.**

Unless there was absolutely nothing that you liked during your visit, it's polite to purchase a bottle to take home — particularly if the tasting was complimentary.

You'll also find that most wineries that charge tasting fees will waive those fees if you buy a bottle.

# VINESSE

## Hot LIST

**1 Hot Bordeaux Hotel.** Located in the heart of St.-Emilion, Le Relais de Franc Mayne is a wine lover's dream. The adjacent vineyards welcome bike riders, and tours of the winery served by those vineyards are offered to hotel guests free of charge. There's also an amenity not found in every European hotel: air conditioning, most welcome during the summer months.

<http://relaisfrancmayne.com>

**2 Hot Natural Wine Source.** Sometimes you'll find unexpected treasures in unexpected places. Great Lakes Coffee shines as a bright beacon of downtown Detroit's renaissance. But it's not just about coffee; it's also a source of several obscure natural wines, including the Tendal Tinto Ecologico from, of all places, the Canary Islands. Last month, the coffee bar hosted a wine tasting of three reds and three whites from central Europe, accompanied by a pot of Hungarian pork gulas and homemade pastries.

<http://www.greatlakescoffee.com>

**3 Hot Wine Book.** Would you pay \$175 for a wine book? That's the list price of Jancis Robinson's latest vino tome, simply titled, *Wine Grapes*. The remarkably comprehensive book features information on 1,368 grape varieties, including their origin and flavors. The good news is that with a little shopping, *Wine Grapes* can be found for much less than \$175. [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)



**Unfiltered.** Term used to describe a wine that has not been put through filtration methods that separate it from various microscopic organisms. Most vintners prefer a light filtering to prevent spoilage.

**Vanillin.** A compound in oak barrels that imparts a vanilla-like flavor to wine.

**Whitetail Winebar.** A wine bar in Guerneville, Calif., specializing in bottlings from Sonoma County wineries that don't have their own tasting rooms.

**Xeres.** French word for the wines made in Jerez, Spain. In English: Sherry.

**Yield.** Amount (weight) of grapes produced by a grapevine, vineyard or wine region.

**Zinfandel.** Red variety almost named the "official winegrape" of California in 2006. (The bill was vetoed by Gov. Schwarzenegger.)

## VINESSE STYLE

### European Wine Country Hotels

*Especially for a first-time visitor to a country, one of the more daunting tasks can be one of the most important: determining where to stay.*

*Travel & Leisure* magazine provided a big assist to European wine country visitors in its January issue, recommending five exceptional hotels — four in France and one in Italy.

Hotel Crillon le Brave in Crillon-le-Brave, France, is a Provence property with an 18th century cellar boasting 2,500 bottles of Rhone wines. Imbibers often gather on the

hotel's terrace, soaking in views of olive groves while sipping wine.

You may feel as if you're in Napa Valley when staying at Domaine des Hauts de Loire in Onzain, France. Reason: The hotel coordinates hot air balloon rides over Touraine Mesland and Amboise vineyards for its guests.

For sparkling wine aficionados, Le Chateau Les Crayeres in Reims,

France, is the place to stay. Once each month, guests enjoy a private dinner with bubbly pairings. The rest of the month, a cellar holding 60,000 bottles of Champagne beckons.

Back in Provence, L'Oustau de Baumaniere & Spa in Les-Baux-de-Provence also has 60,000 bottles on hand — more than enough for its 30 guest rooms. One-

sixth of those bottles are crafted by the hotel's owner, Jean-Andre Charial; it's a tasty Grenache-based blend.

Finally, *Travel & Leisure* recommends the Four Seasons Hotel Firenze in Florence, Italy. Described as "over-the-top opulent," it's housed in a former palace, and its concierge happily arranges exclusive tastings at Chianti region estates.



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## APPELLATION SHOWCASE



*Barbaresco*

***In Bordeaux and Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon reigns supreme. In Burgundy and the Russian River Valley, Pinot Noir is the star variety. And in Barolo and Barbaresco, it's all about Nebbiolo.***

Barolo produces many of Italy's most revered wines, but Barbaresco is where the vintners tend to express the true essence of the Nebbiolo variety — floral in aroma (think: roses and violets), fruitful (think: cherry and licorice), and expressive of the earth (think: truffles, fennel and tar). Barbaresco renditions of Nebbiolo bring all of those elements together in powerful yet beautifully balanced wines.

Barbaresco is produced in Italy's Piedmont region, in an area of the Langhe due east of Alba and within the communes of Barbaresco, Treiso and Neive (and also an area of San Rocco Senodelvio that formerly was part of the commune of Barbaresco, and now belongs to the commune of Alba).

Barbaresco was granted Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) status in 1966, and Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) status in 1980.

The soils in the three communes

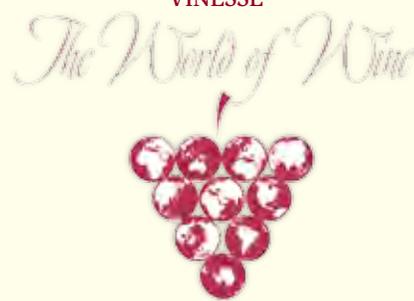
— primarily calcareous marl — are almost identical, which contributes to the consistency of the wines. The Barbaresco zone produces about 45% of the DOC wine, Neive about 31% and Treiso about 20%.

Also contributing to the uniform quality of Barbaresco wines are the strict DOCG rules governing them. Prior to release, they must be aged for at least two years, and at least half of that time must be spent in oak barrels. For a Barbaresco to attain "Riserva" status, it must be aged for at least four years.

But the aging in winery cellars is just the beginning. The best of the best Barbarescos are quite tannic in their youth, and really don't hit their "prime" until at least five years — and as many as 10 — beyond their vintage.

For those with cellar space... and patience... drinking a well-aged Barbaresco can be one of life's ultimate pleasures.

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**Q** I'm seeing more and more bottles of wine with screw caps. Should I be concerned about the quality of the wine?



**A** Far from it. Most wineries that have embraced screw caps use a closure known as Stelvin, which is quickly replacing traditional corks in more and more bottlings. The reason: It provides a dependably reliable seal, something that cork can't do as consistently. A wine bottle sealed with a Stelvin closure can never be "corked."

**S**ommelier Chris Baggetta has come up with an unusual, if not unique, idea for the wine list at San Francisco's Cotogna restaurant. The list leans heavily toward selections from northern Italy, and regardless of the maker, the varietal or the vintage, each bottle costs \$40 and each glass costs \$10. The idea behind the pricing is to encourage diners to try new things by taking price out of the selection equation.



“The purpose of wine is to give people enjoyment — that's it.”



— *New York City restaurateur and former sommelier Joe Campanale*

**T**he collaboration that began in the fall of 2005 between the California Sustainable Winegrowing Program and Pacific Gas and Electric Company led to the development of workshops and educational materials focused on energy conservation and efficiency for California wineries and vineyards. These workshops provided participants with information on best practices for energy efficiency and conservation, and PG&E rebates and incentives, while introducing a variety of PG&E online resources and tools to help reduce energy use and thereby improve the sustainability of winery operations. Topics covered at the workshops have included energy evaluation and planning, energy efficiency, green building design, renewable energy, and climate protection through reduction of

greenhouse gas emissions from energy use. The collaboration between CSWA and PG&E has been effective. Since the fall of 2005, the two organizations have held more than 50 energy management workshops attended by more than 1,400 wine industry members from PG&E's service area. During this period, PG&E recorded an increase in the number of annual energy-efficiency projects at California wineries and vineyards. Since 2001, 520 such projects resulted from 350 California wineries receiving about \$37.6 million in PG&E rebates, saving more than 200,000 megawatt hours of electricity and 4,000 therms of natural gas. This has resulted in eliminating more than 76,990 tons of carbon dioxide emissions, the equivalent of removing 12,918 cars from the road for one year.

57

Percentage of wine drinkers who are considered "core drinkers," meaning that they enjoy wine on a fairly regular basis (daily to monthly). They represent one-quarter of the U.S. adult population. (Source: Wine Market Council)

**I**s there anybody who absolutely despises Pinot Gris? It's one of those wine varieties that is easy to like, and it also is a great companion to appetizers — everything from antipasto to chicken or seafood hors d'oeuvres. It also pairs nicely with Asian cuisine and even veggie quiche.

“Here's to the wine we love to drink and the food we love to eat.”

— *Irish toast, offered in honor of St. Patrick's Day*

## FOOD & WINE PAIRINGS

### *Corned Beef & Cabbage*



**“Clever” wine writers have been asking the same question and providing the same answer for years when St. Patrick’s Day rolls around.**

The question: “What wine goes with corned beef and cabbage?”

The answer: “Beer.”

You can just see them sitting at their keyboards, waiting for the uproarious laughter of their readers to subside. Then they proceed with a list of wines that match well with the St. Patty’s staple.

Because they’re “wine writers,” they typically don’t go on to explain that beer really is a great match with corned beef and cabbage. The first person to pair that dish with a Guinness knew what they were doing.

That said, there are a handful of wines that also pair nicely. You’re not likely to experience culinary nirvana with them, but you’ll have a nice experience and save quite a few calories because Guinness is not a light (or “lite”) beer.

Why is corned beef and cabbage such a pairing challenge? Well, the corned beef is both salty and fatty, while the cabbage lends both sweet and salty nuances. And let’s not forget the vinegar and or the various spices that are added to the boil.

Here are a few wines worth considering:

- **Gewurztraminer** — Find one that’s off-dry or semi-sweet. Most bottlings have a clove-like flavor that really works nicely with this dish.
- **Pinot Gris** — One of the more versatile of all food-pairing wines. (Hey, if the French drink it with sauerkraut — and they do — it’ll match with almost anything.)
- **Sauvignon Blanc** — Its flavor profile works nicely with cabbage, and its acidity helps cut through the fat of the corned beef.
- **Sparkling wine** — The same observation about acidity applies, and its somewhat neutral flavor makes it drinkable with almost any food.
- **Beaujolais or Cotes du Rhone** — These wines typically have the fruitfulness, acidity and impression of sweetness to meet this pairing challenge.
- **Zinfandel** — Select one that’s not too tannic, and its remaining qualities will mimic those of Beaujolais and Cotes du Rhone.

## Light & Sweet

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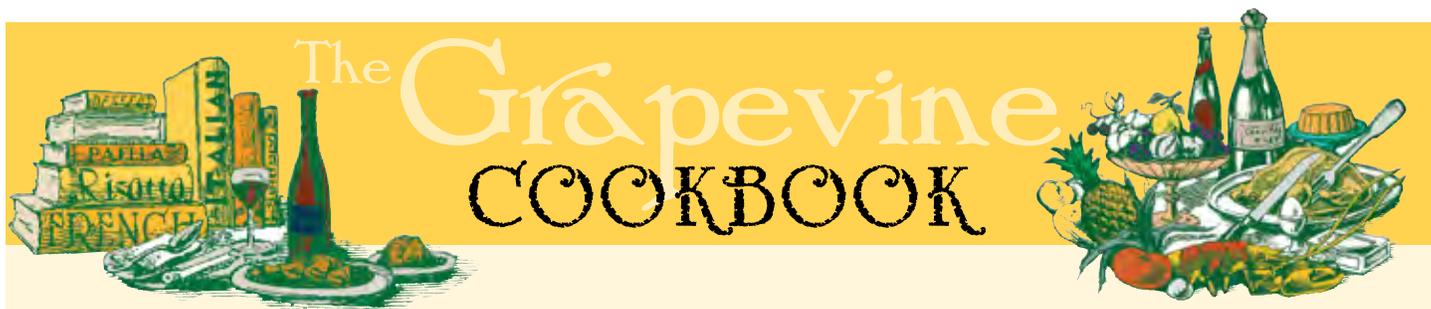
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## CROCK-POT CORNED BEEF AND CABBAGE

This recipe requires a large Crock-Pot because it calls for a 3- to 4-lb. beef brisket. For wine pairing suggestions, turn to page 11.

### Ingredients

- 1 corned beef brisket, 3- to 4-lbs.
- 1 large head cabbage
- 8 peppercorns
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled
- 4 parsnips
- 2 turnips
- 2 bay leaves
- 1-lb. carrots, peeled
- 6 large potatoes
- 1 stalk celery, very thinly sliced
- 3 whole cloves
- ½ tsp. Old Bay seasoning
- ¼ tsp. ground black pepper

### Preparation

1. Wash brisket. Using a sharp knife, cut tiny slits in the meat, and insert garlic and clove pieces.
2. Place meat in a large Crock-Pot and cover with water.
3. Add bay leaves, peppercorns, Old Bay seasoning and celery.
4. Heat on high for 30 minutes. Skim off any foam that surfaces, and re-set heat to low.
5. Meanwhile, quarter the cabbage, and peel the potatoes, carrots, turnips and parsnips. Slice vegetables into 2-inch chunks.
6. Add remaining vegetables and continue to cook for 2 or 3 hours, or until vegetables are tender.
7. Remove bay leaves and discard. Drain Crock-Pot and serve.



## PEACH CHUTNEY

Planning to cook a ham this Easter? This chutney makes a great topping, and also can be used on sandwiches. With the chutney-topped ham, pour a glass of off-dry or semi-sweet Gewurtztraminer or Riesling. This recipe yields 1¼ cups.

### Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1/3 cup sweet onion, finely chopped
- 1 ½ cups fresh peaches, chopped (2 large peaches)
- 3 tablespoons light brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- ½ teaspoon Jamaican jerk seasoning

### Preparation

1. Melt butter in a small skillet over medium heat.
2. Add onion, and sauté 2 to 3 minutes, or until tender.
3. Add peaches and remaining ingredients.
4. Cook, stirring often, for 2 to 3 more minutes, or until thoroughly heated.

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