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Dan Berger: For holiday gatherings, serve two different types of similar wines

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Holiday-time get-togethers, whether with friends, family, or business associates, often entail sharing food and libations with folks of diverse backgrounds.

In such gatherings, there may be wine lovers, casual wine consumers, infrequent but interested wine drinkers, abstainers, and more. Those among us who like wine usually want to pick something they'll appreciate, and for larger crowds we often seek two or three bottles of the same wine.

Assuming you are responsible for the wine choices, to avoid bringing wines that may be disliked, rather than bringing identical bottles, I suggest two (or more) different bottles of similar wines for comparisons.

And those who aren't interested in the contrasts can simply ignore the game and just drink what he or she prefers.

The chardonnay duo is simple: get an oaked version and one that was not aged in any oak. For the traditional, a national favorite is 2008 Kendall-Jackson (\$12), always a reliable choice; for the un-oaked chardonnay, try 2009 Clos laChance (\$10).

An absolutely classic pairing would be two Rieslings with radically different levels of sugar. Diametric opposites are 2009 Trefethen Dry Riesling (\$22), a classic in dry wine, and 2009 Chateau Ste. Michelle Riesling (\$9). The former is steely, citrusy and bone dry, the latter is wildly floral and sweeter.

Sauvignon blanc is a fun pairing, since you can choose almost any of the great sauvignons from New Zealand (such as the terrific 2010 Cupcake, Marlborough, \$10) and then a traditional, milder-scented Californian, such as 2008 Franciscan (\$17).

Aromatic whites are interesting with spicy foods, but rather than try two of one type, try various spicy wines, such as 2009 Fetzer Gewurztraminer (\$9), Colome Torrontes from Argentina (\$15), and **2009 Motos Liberty Moscato (\$8)**. The latter is a bit sweeter than the others, but nicely balanced.

Reds pose a more difficult challenge since many are made in a similar manner, and differences among them are more subtle.

One pairing that's interesting is 2007 Kenwood Merlot (\$14) and 2009 Cono Sur Carmenere (\$9). Carmenere was once thought to be Merlot, but has a bit more weight.

For a gutsy, tannic wine that will work with stews, steaks, and other hearty fare, try a petite sirah, such as 2008 McManis (\$10).

And one way to see which wines ended up to be the overall favorite of a disparate group of guests is simply to determine which bottle was emptied fastest.

Wine of the Week: 2009 J. Lohr Valdiguie, Monterey "Wildflower" (\$9) — Made pretty much like Beaujolais, this light and delicate red wine has a striking aroma and less tannin than most red wines. Easy to consume with a wide array of foods. A match for this would be any 2009 Beaujolais from France.

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