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THE WINEMAKER'S GUIDE TO SUMMER COOKOUTS

By Charles Smith at 12:25pm



James Joiner

Winemaker Charles Smith living up to his motto: "It's only wine, drink it!"

Interviewed by James Joiner

General recommendations:

Red

I'd go with wines that are really easy to drink. Wines where you don't have to think too much to enjoy. For me, I really like this winery from Chianti called Villa Cafaggio. A cookout is about the cookout — it's about your friends and a beautiful day. Wine's just a part of it. Drink wines that are just really easy and enjoyable. I'd go with that Cafaggio — you can chill it down a little bit and it goes great with everything, even fish. If you want to step up and spend a little extra money, they have a single vineyard Sangiovese called San Martino and for another \$15 or \$20 you're going to get something that's just spectacular. I'm a big fan of that winery, and you can find their wines fairly regularly available around the country.

White

For regular whites I'm going to go back to Italy. I like the white wines of Northern Italy, especially something that's got a little bit of richness, a little bit of freshness. I like this little winery called Cantina Terlano. All their inexpensive wines are around \$13, and are absolutely killer for the price. You can get Pinot Bianco, which I think is really fantastic, and if you want to splurge a bit again, you can drink their single vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, and it'll just knock your socks off. It'll be refreshing, rich, and if somebody pours that in your glass at a cookout, you're going to go, "Wow, what was that?" It's just so good. It's important to pick wines that are interesting. They don't have to be expensive, what you're looking for is a broad appeal. Everybody should go, "Wow, that's tasty," and then move on to the conversation and the food.

Pink

Well, for sure you've got to drink Rosé. I mean, summer says Rosé. I hate to say — and love to say, at the same time — my project with (Brooklyn-based winemaker) Charles Bieler, Charles and Charles, is pound for pound the most balanced, tastiest Rosé in America, and once again you can find it anywhere.

Food-specific recommendations:

Burgers

It's kinda hard to beat American Zinfandel. You get a lot of flavor, and a lot of spiciness, and a lot of richness. With a great burger you've got the grilled meat, the crusty bun, you've got added elements of the mustard and onions and the sweetness of the pickle... There's just so many inexpensive California Zinfandels out there. It's a classic. In the summer you can put one of them in the ice bucket, and they'll taste fruity and spicy and delicious, and you don't even have to have the right brand. You just have to have the right varietal, and Zinfandel is the ticket.

Recommended: Montevina. The winery has been around for over a hundred years, and the wine is delicious and older; you can get a kick-ass bottle for around \$15.

Ribs

If I was going for ribs, I'd just go for a nice Cotes Du Rhone. Once again, as long as it's a reliable producer, the wine is going to be fleshy and fruity. It's gonna have a lot of character, and it's going to be able to absorb the sweet and spiciness and the savoriness of the ribs. It's one of those red wines you can cool down — hell, room temperature in the summertime is 80 or 90 degrees, so definitely chill it.

Recommended: E. Guigal. The most common one you can find, it'll cost you about \$15, and you've got a very solid, very reliable bottle of wine.

Chicken

Now, I love Riesling. I'm going to plug one of my own wines simply because in the summertime you want something cool, something refreshing and something that's compelling to drink. You can do chicken savory, with barbecue sauce, all kinds of ways. Nothing tastes better in summer with food than Riesling — it's the most versatile grape in the world. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's sweet, it simply means that it's good quality and good price. The Kung Fu girl always kicks ass. Recommended: Charles Smith Kung Fu Girl, \$15.

Veggie Burgers

Veggie burger sounds challenging. What the fk do you put on a veggie burger? Are they kind of savory? Like stuffing maybe? How about a Gewürztraminer? A veggie burger is probably savory with some spiciness, it sounds like Thanksgiving on a bun. I love Gewürztraminer. Its delicious, super flavorful, drinks really well when ice cold, and there's a winery from California, Navarro, that's delicious. It's really, really good. On the dryer side, fragrant. The people that want a veggie burger probably like different things, and they're probably gonna find the Gewürztraminer to be an exciting choice. Not just another wine, but something special.

Recommended: Navarro Gewürztraminer, \$19.50.

Fish

I really like Sauvignon Blanc. I actually love Sauvignon Blanc. I love it because it has herbal, big, tropical flavors. It can be very, very different, and it's really refreshing. It's one of the nicest beverages as far as wine goes, and it can hold up to a lot. There's a small winery here in Washington State, if you can find it. It's called Chinook. It's really the quintessential Washington Sauvignon Blanc. Utterly delicious. If you can't find that, California's Joel Gott is really reliable and always tasty. It's available anywhere, and the winemaker is fantastic.

Recommended: Chinook, \$17.95 or Joel Gott, \$13.99.

Steak

There are several ways to go. A lot of people say, "Cab is king". But you know, I make Syrah, and I think that's absolutely great. I think you can go with either one. For the spirit of cookouts, you can't go wrong with my Boom Boom Syrah. Again, you want a wine that is really interesting, but you don't want to drink \$50 bottles at a cookout with twenty friends. You're not doing a tasting, you're putting it out to drink.

Recommended: Charles Smith Boom Boom Syrah, \$15.99 or Josh Cabernet Sauvignon, \$14.99.

Spicy Sausage

I think the best wine for that is beer. Nothing's gonna cool your mouth down like an ice-cold beer — it's dealer's choice, pick your flavor.

And most importantly: A cookout is about being outside with friends. It's easy. It's not supposed to be taxing on your wallet. For people with good taste, they choose the right thing to grill and they'll choose the right thing to complement it. Try to remember at the end of the day it's what tastes good that matters. It's just wine, drink it!