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Wine, Food and Fun: Holiday Entertaining with a Twist

Holiday How-To's for a Festive Wine Tasting Party That's Low on Stress and Big on Fun

CHICAGO (June 8, 2004) – As holiday party planning kicks into full swing, hosts and hostesses everywhere are looking for inventive entertaining ideas to make this year's fetes stand apart from the others. Why not take a cue from the surging popularity of wine tasting events and host your own holiday wine tasting party?

Forget about old school images of highbrow events aimed at so-called "connoisseurs" – with a little planning and a sense of fun and adventure, *your* wine tasting party can be the lighthearted and festive event of the season. As natural social events, wine tastings are all about the thrill of discovering something new and sharing old favorites with new friends.

"In order to appeal to a wide range of interests and experience levels, build your tasting party around sampling different wine and food pairings," suggests Wine Market Council President John Gillespie. "That way it's really about each person discovering the wine and food combinations they enjoy." While there are as many different ways to host a wine tasting as there are wines to taste, here are a few simple guidelines for hosting a hassle-free wine tasting party this holiday season:

Plan with the Menu in Mind

Design your tasting event around festive holiday foods. Gillespie suggests selecting four to six foods that will showcase an interesting array of flavors conducive to a lively tasting. Finger foods are ideal because they're party-perfect and they offer a simple way to focus on one

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type of flavor at a time – spicy, rich, delicate, and so on. Suggestions could range from simple (vegetable crudités, different types of cheese, poached shrimp, marinated olives) to more elaborate (tomato bruschetta, teriyaki chicken skewers, roast beef canapés).

For another fun idea that makes preparation easier than ever, choose a menu of all carry-out finger foods. Then provide pairings for guests to sample with each cuisine, starting with the lightest mildest flavors and leading up to the most savory, rich and intense. “Asian vegetable appetizers, zesty curries and spicy salsas all provoke interesting interactions when matched with different types of wine,” adds Gillespie. For more food for thought on menu planning and wine pairing ideas, visit www.wineanswers.com.

Divide and Conquer

If planning the food and wine selections for the whole affair sounds like a daunting task for one host or hostess, don’t hesitate to share some of the planning with your guests. Not only will it ease responsibility and expense, but guests also will feel more involved in the event. For starters, assign some (or all) of the guests to bring a bottle of wine for the tasting. Five or six different wines will offer adequate variety, without risking the palate fatigue that can result from too many choices. For this type of tasting, you should aim for a balance of whites and reds, with a rosé and/or a sparkling wine to round out the mix.

To make your tasting run smoothly, set a few parameters for guests to take the guesswork out of selection. “You also might want to set a price range so no one feels obligated to break the bank for the sake of making a good impression,” suggests Gillespie. Then, depending on how much you want to guide their selections, here are a few suggestions on how to divide and conquer:

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- **Set a theme.** Focusing on wines from a particular country or region is one easy idea. You might also want to use this theme to guide your food selections. For example, ask guests to bring wines from Spain and provide coordinating tapas-inspired foods such as garlicky shrimp, marinated mushrooms or Manchego cheese.
- **Make it an “around the world” tasting.** Distribute wine duties based simply on country of origin and type. For instance, ask Guest A to bring a red from the United States, Guest B a white from Portugal, and so on. This is an especially fun complement to the “carry-out only” ethnic menu option.
- **Assign each guest a particular varietal.** This is a safer way to ensure that you have a well-rounded selection of wines for your tasting. If you prefer to keep it simple and straight-forward, narrowing selections to a range of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon will guarantee an interesting tasting.
- **Appoint guest sommeliers.** Once you have decided on the menu, give guests the opportunity to play “secret sommelier.” Tell each guest which one dish they are responsible for pairing with a wine – but ask them not to reveal their assignment to the other guests. This is a great excuse for your less experienced guests to seek out recommendations from their local wine shop or an online resource such as www.wineanswers.com. Plus, there is an added element of fun and surprise when the least expected pairings turn out to be new favorites!

Tasting Tips

Now that you've got the makings for such a fun and lively wine party, make sure to keep the mood light and festive when it's time to conduct the actual tasting. Involving your guests in

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the tasting set-up will ensure that they're comfortable with the process – even if this is their first time at a wine tasting.

Pour each guest enough of each wine so they will be able to sample a bit with each of the foods you have selected. Two or three ounces each is a good rule of thumb, and will allow you to serve about eight to twelve guests per bottle.

Start the tasting by trying each food with the first wine and sharing reactions to the pairings. Then move on to the next food, working from whites to reds and from lightest to heaviest. Keep the conversation light, have fun passing judgment and encourage everyone to participate. Even the most inexperienced tasters can have great instincts when it comes to wine. The best part is that there are no right answers. If you like beef and Sauvignon Blanc, then it's a good match for you – it's all about the fun of discovering what you like.

Taking Notes

Don't get too wrapped up in elaborate scoring sheets that will make the tasting seem more like work and less like a party. Instead, simply provide each guest with a "Tasting Notes" page that has a section for each wine you'll be sampling, with a list of the foods being tasted. On each sheet, you may also want to include a list of "Wine Tasting ABC's" – common descriptors used to talk about wine tastes and smells. By offering some of these conversation starters, you'll ease the less experienced tasters towards putting their reactions into words more comfortably. For instance, some helpful sensory adjectives would be: buttery, crisp, grassy, smoky, spicy, earthy, smooth, herbal or nutty. Other taste and smell words that might spark associations could include: cherry, oak, vanilla, blackberry, apple, peach, chocolate, toast, pear, plum and coffee.

And while a "Tasting Notes" handout certainly isn't a requirement, making notes will unconsciously encourage each person to make up his or her mind about the reaction they're

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having. By labeling a taste or aroma, you will probably be more likely to better remember it.

Tasting notes also can later become helpful cheat sheets during wine shopping trips.

For more wine tasting tips, as well as wine and food pairing suggestions, entertaining how-to's and party-perfect recipes, visit www.wineanswers.com.

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The Wine Market Council is an independent, non-profit trade association of grape growers, wine producers, importers, wholesalers, retailers and other organizations affiliated with the wine industry.