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Summer sips: A guide to warm-weather wines

Try these suggestions for affordable wines from expert Leslie Sbrocco

By Leslie Sbrocco
updated 2 hours, 47 minutes ago

With summer in full swing, al fresco dining is on everyone's list. From pool parties to beach barbecues, these affordable wines and easy recipe tips will add spice to any soiree.

Warm-weather whites

Make sure the whites you select are refreshing, crisp and light-hearted. Sauvignon blanc, riesling and even Japanese sake are ideal options.

Sauvignon blancs sport a citrusy, herbal character that pairs with salads, grilled vegetables and shellfish while aromatic riesling is just right for spicy fare such as cajun-spiced chicken skewers or blackened catfish. Riesling can range from very dry to sweet depending upon where it comes from and the style in which it's made.

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If you pick a German riesling and like wines dry, look for the word *Kabinett* on the label. If you enjoy a touch of sweetness, look for *Spatlese*. Many rieslings from Washington state, California, and New Zealand have a touch of sweetness lending a juicy, fruity character to the wine. From [Australia's](#) Clare and Eden Valleys come some of the most bone dry Rieslings that will turn any lover of dry whites into a riesling convert.

Sake is another fun option for summertime sipping. This fermented rice drink from [Japan](#) is more akin to wine than beer and your best bet is to search for high quality versions that are served chilled. The key word to look for is *Junmai* meaning "pure rice" sake. Obviously they are

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Celebrate with warm-weather wines

June 25: Wine expert Leslie Sbrocco gives TODAY's Hoda Kotb and Kathie Lee Gifford samples of wines that will taste great with barbecue.

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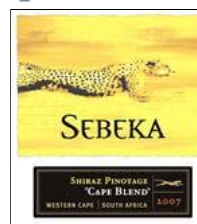


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top-notch with Asian fare but work well with delicate fish dishes.

For a simple recipe to pair with these styles of wine, make a dry rub of ground green tea leaves, sea salt, freshly-cracked pepper and a mélange of herbs such as tarragon, oregano. Coat chicken breast or fish with the rub and grill. The anti-oxidants in the green tea even make this dish a healthy choice.

Pair with these selected wines:

2008 Palo Alto Reserva Sauvignon Blanc, Maule Valley, Chile \$13

A complex yet quaffable white that captures the spirit of sauvignon blanc. Crisp, juicy and with a hint of herbal freshness, this wine might just become your "house" white.

2008 Kung Fu Girl Riesling, "Evergreen Vineyard" Columbia Valley, Washington state \$12

As winemaker Charles Smith says, "This girl kicks ...!" And he's right. This sassy, fruity white with just a kiss (or kick) of sweetness, will make you want to join the riesling fan club.

Saké2Me, Japan \$14.99 (for 4 pack)

Each set of this premium Junmai sake infused with all-natural flavors includes a mini-bottle of Green Tea, Asian Pear, Ginger Mango and Yuzu Citrus. Serve well-chilled and these lightly sparkling, low alcohol (only 7 percent) sakes make delectable warm-weather cocktails.

Pretty in pink (and red)

Rosé is the ultimate summer sipper. These pink wines are made from red grapes crushed quickly to gain only a hint of color. They can be crafted in a sweeter style (called blush or white zinfandel, white Merlot, etc), but many on the market these days are dry. Look for versions from France's Cotes de Provence area and Spain's Navarra and Rioja regions. Australia, Italy, and the U.S. are making world-class dry-style pinks, too.

Affordable red blends are great go-to summer red choices. Shiraz, zinfandel, and cabernet sauvignon are only some of the varieties that can go into these whimsical wines. With burgers, ribs and steaks, the meat-loving cuvees below stand up to even the heartiest dishes.

To dress up a store-bought barbeque sauce, make it "mole" style. Heat two cups of spicy barbeque sauce on the stove and melt in half cup of dark chocolate shavings. This gives it just enough kick and sweetness to pair well with wines that have a dash of zinfandel or syrah. (Hint: if the sauce is a bit too rich, add a teaspoon of red wine vinegar to brighten it up.)

One of my recent discoveries is a new chocolate made specifically for wine called Brix. It comes in appealing shape of a brick (although "brix" is a wine term) and in various percentages of cocoa. Each brick costs around \$10. For more information and recipes check out www.brixchocolate.com.

2008 Yalumba "Y Series" Sangiovese Rose, South Australia \$11

From Australia's oldest family-owned winery comes a watermelon-scented pink that's dry and delicious. Stock up on this for all your summer drinking because it pairs easily with most foods as well as simply being a wine to sip poolside.

2005 St. Francis "RED" Sonoma County, California \$12

A smooth, stylish blend of merlot, syrah, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel from the heralded St. Francis Winery in Sonoma Valley.

2007 Toasted Head "Untamed" Red, California \$14

Powerful, supple and spicy, this blend of syrah, zinfandel and petite sirah pulls some punches. Serve alongside those chocolate-laced ribs



Shia LaBeouf's 'love connection'

June 25: A young fan's encounter with actor Shia LaBeouf on the TODAY plaza led to Meredith Vieira giving up her anchor chair so the teen could interview him in front of a national TV audience. "Do you have a girlfriend," she asked the Transformers' star.

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LeBeouf on 'Transformers' sequel

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and settle in for the night. With a removable back label, it's also a wine you won't forget.

Wine to go

One of the hottest trends in wine is branching out from the standard glass bottle to all sorts of alternative packaging. From plastic bottles, to self-serve cans and tetra packs, it's never been easier to be environmentally-friendly and portable.

2008 Alice White Shiraz , Australia \$5 (500 ml cartons)

Packaged in re-sealable Tetra Packs, this easy-drinking shiraz is ready for [travel](#) (they also make two whites — a Chardonnay and "Lexia" produced from sweeter Moscato grapes).

2007 Hardy "Shuttles," Australia \$3 (187ml)

When you want a glass of wine on the go, what do you do? Reach for a brilliant new package with its own glass attached.

2007 Louis Bernard "Bonus Passus" Cotes du Rhone, France \$13

Though it looks like real glass, this 100 percent recyclable plastic package is kind to Mother Earth. A Grenache-based red that weighs in on the elegant side of the scale, it's a food-friendly wine for grilled sausages and Portobello mushrooms.

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