

For Large Events, Simplify Your Choices

Theoretically, five different wines are needed for a full menu at a graduation party, anniversary celebration or June wedding. These are a red and white wine for the cocktail hour, two reds for the dinner (a light red to go with poultry or salmon, and a heartier one for meats), plus a full-bodied dinner white to go with seafood or cream sauce entrees.

But with everything else you have to worry about when planning a large event, this is too complicated.

Simplify by choosing two cocktail hour wines (a red and a white) with enough body to move over to the dinner table afterward. Then you will need only a hearty red wine — for total of three wines — to complement the red meat dinner entrees.

Guests tend to drink more at late-afternoon and evening celebrations, so such events require more wine than do luncheons. For a late-afternoon or evening wedding celebration with a one-hour cocktail hour followed by dinner, plan on a minimum of three cases of wine, or approximately 36 bottles, per 100 guests. Divide the mix equally among the white wine, the light red and the full-bodied red. Adjust up or down according to the number of guests, whether beer and mix drinks will be served at the bar and the amount of red meat on the menu.

If you decide to buy extra as a safety margin, note that some stores will take back unopened bottles of wine. Take advantage of the opportunity provided by many caterers and banquet facilities to provide a preview dinner to test the wine and food matches. Finally, don't overspend. At a large event, wines are the focus of attention.

The following wines from my recent tastings are great choices for the big event. Even if you are entertaining, these wines are ideal for stock home cellar. Prices are approximate.

WHITE WINES (cocktail hour and dinner)

Mezzacorona 2004/2005 Chardonnay (\$8 Italy; distributed by Washington Wholesale) and **Mezzacorona 2004/2005 Pinot Grigio** (\$8-\$9; Italy; ton Wholesale): Mezzacorona Chardonnay from a rare Austrian clone of chardonnay offers distinctive yellow fruit flavors. The pinot grigio is crisp and fresh, with a soft, round finish.

Louis Latour 2004/2005 Chardonnay Vin de Pays des Coteaux de l'Ardeche (\$9; France; Winebow): This wine, from a famous Burgundy house, offers balanced, lightly oaked fruit and French prestige.

Pepi 2004/2005 Pinot Grigio (\$10; Oregon; NDC): Because it is made from cool climate Oregon grapes, this brisk pinot grigio retains lots of zesty acidity to complement its apple and tropical fruit flavors.

Santa Julia Torrentes 2004/2005 (\$8; Argentina; Henry Wine Group): Intense tropical aromas of mango and melon make for a great match with crudites and first-course salads.

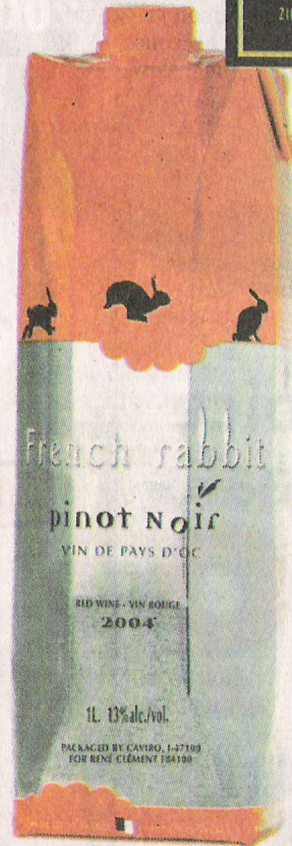
LIGHT- TO MEDIUM-BODIED REDS (cocktail hour and dinner)

Mirassou 2005/2004 Pinot Noir (\$10; California; NDC): Given the rising popularity of pinot noir, this well-made, supple California offering will be a hit with your guests.

Heart Kris 2003 Merlot (\$12-\$13; Italy; Winebow): The delicate fruit of this perfumed red carries through nicely to the finish.

Tortoise Creek 2005 Merlot (\$8; France; Henry Wine Group): An excellent match with salmon or light poultry in the

>> French Rabbit Pinot Noir and French Rabbit Merlot (\$10 for one liter; France; Wine Partners): Packaged in an innovative, environmentally friendly box and using grapes from Languedoc vineyards employing sustainable vineyard practices, the smooth merlot and the berry-accented pinot noir are both tasty and socially responsible.



FULL-BODIED REDS (meat entrees)

Rosso Classic 2004 "Francis Coppola Presents" (\$9; California; NDC): This delectable blend of zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon and syrah has a full-throttle bouquet of spice and vanilla, a voluptuous, velvety texture on the palate and finishes with harmonious tannins. You won't want to return leftover bottles.

McWilliam's 2004 Shiraz "Hanwood Estate" (\$9; Australia; NDC): Offering an assortment of plum and red fruit flavors on the palate, this finishes with enough tannins to stand up to red meat without being at all harsh.

Frescobaldi Castiglioni Chianti 2004 (\$12-\$14; Italy; Bacchus): This seductive young Chianti offers a lovely bouquet of violets and berries, followed on the palate by layers of black cherry and tart strawberry fruit. Thoroughly sophisticated.

Ben Giliberti, The Post's wine critic since 1987, can be reached at food@washpost.com.