

Good wine crosses party lines

By MICHAEL LONSFORD
Houston Chronicle

In these days of political skirmishing and frontal assaults, the oft-repeated line "The first casualty when war comes is truth" keeps coming to mind.

A cynic could apply that to salesmanship, as well. For example, a

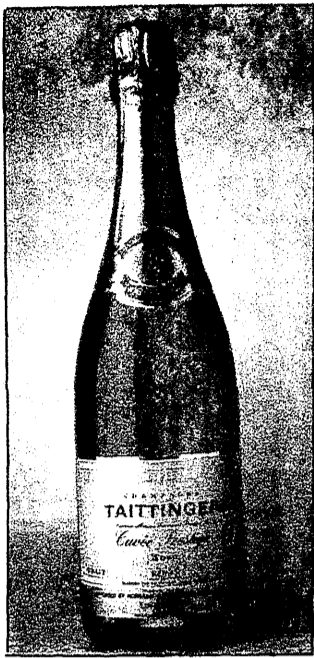
Wine

wine salesman here of my acquaintance used to sell Brand X from California, and he sold it well, calling it one of the best wines from California. Unfortunately, because of lagging sales elsewhere in Texas, Brand X moved to another distributor. The next day this particular salesman was heard to say, "Well, (Brand X) never was any good."

Proprietary partisanship is not limited to wine, of course. The same could be said about selling anything, from cars to computers. In other words, don't say anything good about the opposition; that amounts to aiding and abetting the enemy.

So you can imagine my astonishment last week when I received a fax from a wine salesman (never mind who) for one distributor (never mind which one) who touted a great bargain being sold by a competing distributor. If the wine made this impressive bipartisan impression, I had to try it.

Fortunately for my budget, this wine retails for \$4.99. It's the 1991 Liberty School "Three Valley Select" — ★★★★★ — a white-wine blend of chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and muscat canelli that's very fruity, light and — when served well-chilled — terrific with grilled or spicy food, or very quaffable as an aperitif.



The "three valleys" referred to on the label are the Napa, Sonoma and Alexander valleys of California's North Coast. Liberty School is a second label of Napa Valley's well-known Caymus Vineyards. With its floral, slightly pungent quality, this reminded me of the great Pat Paulsen "Refrigerator White" that is no longer made.

It isn't inexpensive, but it is good. The 1988 Chateau Montelena Cabernet Sauvignon — ★★★★★(?) — is a ripe, viscous, chewy bottle of red wine that tastes fine now and should improve over the next few years. It is the best Montelena cabernet I've had in years — possibly ever. Some '88 Napa Valley cabernets

have tended toward the lighter, slightly herbaceous style, but this dense, blackberry-flavored wine isn't one of them. Purists might note the relative low acidity, but that simply makes it more accessible at an earlier age. Suggested retail price is a hefty \$30 a bottle.

If you like the heavier (or "British") style of champagnes, then you're likely to reach for a glass of Bollinger or Pol Roger. If you like the lighter, more delicate style, then Taittinger often comes to mind.

There are a number of rose-style champagnes on the market, and almost by definition — because they're made with a large amount of pinot noir, which is a "heavier" wine than chardonnay — they can be cumbersome and heavy.

So how do you make a delicate rose? Very carefully.

If you're Taittinger, you blend pinot noir and pinot meunier (the oft-forgotten grape of Champagne), age it three to four years with no wood contact, and blend only the best lots from available vintages. The result: the non-vintage Taittinger Cuvee Prestige Rose — ★★★★★ — which is indeed a delicate rose with an assertive strawberry color.

New to this market, the wine retails in the \$37.50 range.

Grappa is a distilled beverage made basically from the leftovers in the winemaking process. It used to be akin to "white lightning," but in recent years, because more juice was used instead of just the crushed stems, skins, etc., the spirit has improved remarkably. And it's become something of a cult beverage.

A really smooth grappa (almost a contradiction in terms) comes from the famous Italian concern that makes Sassacaia, the Marchesi Incisa della Rocchetta of Tuscany. The Sassacaia Grappa — ★★★★★ — is very, very smooth, and the alcohol, for once, doesn't overwhelm your taste buds.

But alas, like the wine Sassacaia itself, this is very expensive. Retail: around \$100 for a single bottle.

If you'd like to sample a very well-made, but much less expensive, grappa, try any of the three made by California's Sebastiani Vineyards. There are three Sebastiani grappas: Zinfandel (★★★★½), Barbera (★★★★½) and Muscat (★★★★).

The first two are heavier, while the muscat is lighter, spicier and more floral, true to its grape of origin. These may be hard to find, but for \$18 or so (suggested California retail price), they're well worth seeking out.

Light grilled meats such as chicken or turkey go well with the spicy, smoky taste of well-made pinot noir. And there's one on the market now that should be on every pinot lover's must-try list.

It's the 1990 Sterling Vineyards "Winery Lake" Pinot Noir — ★★★★★(?) — with plenty of the requisite strawberry-cinnamon-earthly flavor you want, and just enough tannins and angular acidity to hint that it might be even better in a year.

Seagram's, which owns Sterling, bought the well-known Winery Lake Vineyard in the Carneros region of southern Sonoma-Napa in 1986. This is, I believe, the fifth vintage of pinot noir from Winery Lake made by Sterling's winemaker, Bill Dyer. It's also, far and away, his best effort.

Retail price is about \$15.99, not inexpensive, but certainly not one of those \$30-plus overpriced pinots from a certain producer south of San Francisco.

How we rate the wines:

- ★★★★★ - Outstanding
- ★★★★ - Fine
- ★★★ - Good
- ★★ - Fair
- ★ - Poor
- (★) - indicates ageability

Spicy

Continued from Page 1G.

conut chips, gingerbread, cornbread and any kind of green bananas or plantains, including fish and green banana stew or boiled green bananas.

Choose hard green bananas, peel, boil and substitute for potatoes in your favorite potato salad recipe, McGann said.

In the Caribbean, people also would typically "throw a bread fruit in the fire to bake, remove it and peel before eating," he said.

Ruth Terry and her husband, Rob, recently opened the Bird of Paradise Bar and Grill at 6025 Westheimer. Their cross-cultural menu mix of Mexican, Caribbean and Southwestern is inspiration for a Labor Day cookout.

Red Chile Couscous

From *Hot!* by Judith Choate (Crown, \$25).

- 2 dried hot red chilies
- 1½ cups whole-grain or refined couscous
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 8 cups mixed fresh vegetable chunks (such as onion, carrot, cauliflower, broccoli and squash)

Soak dried chilies in boiling water to cover 20 minutes, or until soft. When soft, stem, seed and cut into thin strips. Set aside.

Soften couscous according to package directions. When softened, drain off any excess liquid. Stir in chili strips, olive oil, cinnamon and salt. When well combined, scrape into top half of a large steamer lined with cheesecloth. Arrange vegetables and beans over the top. Cover and steam 20 minutes or until couscous is cooked and vegetables are tender. Remove to a serving platter and serve with Tomato Sauce. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Tomato Sauce

- 2 cups peeled, cored, seeded and chopped tomatoes
- ¼ cup minced cilantro
- 2 tablespoons minced green onion, including green tops
- 1 tablespoon each: minced garlic and minced pickled hot peppers

Combine tomatoes, cilantro, green onion, garlic, peppers, oil, lemon juice, cumin, pepper flakes and salt in a non-metal bowl. Cover and marinate at room temperature at least 2 hours before serving.

Bird of Paradise Margarita Cheesecake

- 1 (9- or 10-inch) graham cracker crust (see note)
- 2 (8-ounce) packages cream cheese, softened
- 1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
- Juice of 2 large or 3 small limes and grated rind of 1 lime

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Pat graham cracker crust over bottom and up sides of a 9- or 10-inch springform pan.

In large bowl of a mixer, combine cream cheese, sweetened condensed milk, lime juice and rind, egg yolks, vanilla, tequila and orange-flavored liqueur; blend well.

Beat egg whites to stiff peaks (but not dry) and fold into cheese mixture. Pour into prepared crust and bake about 35 minutes. Center will be firm. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Serving suggestion: At the restaurant, a wedge of cheesecake is served on a plate with fresh peach and fresh strawberry purees. The purees are squirted from a squeeze bottle onto the plate in a decorative pattern. Whipped cream is piped onto the side as a garnish.

Note: To make graham cracker crust, crush 1½ (wax paper-covered) packs of graham crackers and mix with 1 stick melted margarine or butter in a bowl. Use as directed above.

Make popular menu items such as Avocado Tequila Dip or the mixed grill (beef filet, shrimp and chicken) your own. Pasta salad made with fresh pesto can be prepared ahead of time and served at room temperature as a side dish.

Ruth Terry makes a Margarita Cheesecake with fresh lime juice, sweetened condensed milk, cream cheese, tequila and Grand Marnier.

For a traditional appetizer, serve Jamaican meat pies (beef patties) or Spicy Chicken Wings.

If you don't want to get into deep-frying, buy the meat pies from Calypso or Reggae Cafe (another new Caribbean spot in our midst at 6100 Westheimer).

Or pick up a bucket of spicy wings from Wings 'N' More, voted Best Wings in Houston in 1991, and grand champion this year at the Buffalo Wings Over Houston Cook-Off.

Tropical Fruit Salsa

From *Sauces: Classical and Contemporary Sauce Making* by Jim Peterson (Van Nostrand Reinhold, \$39.95), winner of the 1992 James Beard Book Awards for Cookbook of the Year in a single subject category.

- ½ small pineapple, peeled and cored
- 1 Hawaiian papaya, peeled and seeded
- 2 kiwis, peeled
- 1 mango, halved, pit removed and skin cut off
- 1 medium-sized red onion, finely chopped

Combine pineapple, papaya, kiwis and mango in a food processor and pulse to a semiliquid consistency (fruit should still be chunky). Combine chopped fruit with onion, peppers, lime juice, cilantro and salt in a mixing bowl. Cover and chill in the refrigerator. Makes about 4 cups.

Caribbean Pork Ribs

From *Hog Wild!* by K.C. McKeown (Warner Books Inc., \$9.99).

- 2½ cups pineapple juice
- 1 large onion, sliced
- 2 tablespoons orange-flavored liqueur
- 2 tablespoons dark rum
- 6 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons Jamaican hot pepper sauce, or to taste (see note)

For marinade, combine pineapple juice, onion, liqueur, rum, honey, pepper sauce, garlic, salt, nutmeg and curry powder in a medium-sized bowl. Reserve ½ cup marinade and refrigerate. Place ribs in a rectangular baking dish and add remaining marinade. Cover and marinate ribs overnight in the refrigerator, turning the ribs several times to coat them evenly with marinade.

Prepare a charcoal grill or barbecue. Cook ribs over the hot coals, turning occasionally and brushing with the reserved marinade until ribs are cooked through and crisp on the outside, about 15 minutes. Serve with Jamaican hot pepper sauce on the side. Makes 4 servings.

Note: Jamaican hot pepper sauce consists mainly of crushed Scotch bonnet peppers. Most grocery stores carry this kind of sauce, but if you have trouble finding it, a habanero pepper sauce will give the recipe the same flavor and fire.

Avocados With Bacon & Shrimp

From *Cooking Caribe* by Christopher Idone with Helen McEachrane (Clarkson N. Potter, \$25).

- 4 bacon slices, finely chopped
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 4 large shrimp, peeled, deveined and chopped
- 2 teaspoons chopped cilantro

Render the bacon in a small skillet over medium heat until golden. Remove and drain on paper towels. Add the onion to the bacon fat and saute until wilted but not browned. Add shrimp and cook 2 minutes. Add bacon and cilantro; remove from heat and set aside to cool.

Halve avocados, remove pits and scoop out the flesh; reserve avocado shells. Place the pulp in a small mixing bowl; add lime juice and pepper and whisk until smooth. Fold in the bacon and shrimp mixture; adjust seasoning. Fill avocado shells with the mixture, garnish with lime wedges and serve immediately. Makes 4 servings.

Lighten up: Use turkey strips, only 2 bacon strips or omit bacon.

Bird of Paradise Avocado Tequila Dip

This is Ruth Terry's recipe for the dip served at the new Bird of Paradise Bar and Grill.

- 2 ripe avocados, peeled, seeded and cut into chunks
- 3 Roma tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 2 tablespoons chopped red onion
- 1 tablespoon chopped cilantro
- ½ jalapeno, seeded and minced

Combine avocado, tomatoes, onion, cilantro, jalapeno, garlic, tequila, sweet-and-sour mix and lime juice in the bowl of an electric mixer; beat on medium speed until creamy. Season with salt and pepper. Makes about 4 servings.

To serve, dip rim of serving bowl in lime juice, then in margarita salt. Fill with dip and garnish with a fresh lime slice.

Note: Sweet-and-sour mix can be found in the cocktail beverage aisle of most grocery stores.

Reader hungry for Hungerford Fudge

Recipes are from the sources indicated. None has been tested by the Chronicle staff unless noted. If you have a recipe request, a question or an answer to one of today's requests, write to Recipe Quest, Houston Chronicle, P.O. Box 4260, Houston, Texas 77210. Please include your address as well as daytime and evening phone numbers.

Second call: Hungerford Fudge or similar recipe — Betty Ray, Brae Burn

Recipe Quest

Country Club used to serve Hungerford Fudge on its pecan ball with vanilla ice cream and pecans in the '50s, Ray wrote.

Creamed or Creamy Peach Pie made with sliced fresh peaches; the recipe was printed about two or three years ago — Joanne Troyer.

Cafeteria Mexican Macaroni

We hope this tried-and-true recipe from the Los Angeles Times' employee cafeteria might please the reader who asked for an easy casserole that children would like.

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| 1½ cups elbow macaroni | 1 tablespoon chili powder |
| ¾ pound ground beef | ½ teaspoon dried crushed oregano |
| 1 onion, diced | ¼ teaspoon ground cumin |
| 1 green or red sweet pepper, diced | Dash each of: cayenne and white pepper |
| 3 (14½-ounce) cans diced tomatoes, with liquid | |

Cook macaroni according to package directions and drain. Set aside. In a large skillet, saute beef, onion and green pepper until tender. Add tomatoes, chili powder, oregano, cumin, cayenne and white pepper to meat mixture. Bring to boil; cover, reduce heat and simmer 30 minutes, or until liquid is shiny and smooth. Add drained macaroni.

To reheat, pour mixture into lightly greased 2-quart casserole. Cover and bake at 350 degrees 15 minutes or until bubbly. Makes 8 to 10 servings.

Each serving: 208 calories, 229 milligrams sodium, 24 milligrams cholesterol, 7 grams fat, 26 grams carbohydrates, 10 grams protein, 1 gram fiber.

Crescent Cream Coffee Cake

A reader asked for a reprint of a weekly Favorite Recipe contest winner from 1990.

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| ¾ cup sugar | 1 egg, separated |
| 2 (8-ounce) packages light cream cheese, softened to room temperature | 2 (8-ounce) packages refrigerated crescent dinner rolls |
| 1 teaspoon each: vanilla and fresh lemon juice | Powdered sugar |

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream sugar, cream cheese, vanilla, lemon juice and egg yolk on low speed with electric mixer until thoroughly creamed.

Unroll and spread one package of rolls on the bottom of a 13-by-9-by-2-inch pan that has been greased or coated lightly with non-stick vegetable spray. Press perforations together to seal. Spread cream cheese mixture over the bottom layer.

Unroll and arrange second package of rolls on top of cream cheese. Whip egg white slightly and brush over top. Bake 25 minutes. When cool, sprinkle with powdered sugar.

Nic-nac Nutcracker Pie

This former weekly Favorite Recipe contest winner from September 1985 is reprinted by request.

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| 3 egg whites | 1 pint whipping cream, whipped |
| 1 cup sugar | Brown sugar, cinnamon, fruit slices for garnish |
| 1 tablespoon real vanilla extract | |
| 1 cup pecan pieces | |
| 22 round buttery crackers, crumbled (recipe tested with Ritz) | |

Beat egg whites until slightly stiff. Add sugar gradually, beating constantly. Add vanilla. Beat just to mix. Fold in nuts and cracker crumbs. Pour into well-greased glass pie plate and microwave 4½ to 5 minutes at high power. After pie is cooled, slather with whipped cream and garnish with brown sugar, cinnamon and fruit slices if desired.

ESCAPE

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Houston Chronicle



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