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## exploring wine with tim fish

### A Smokin' Good Fourth of July

Break out the grill, mix up the spice rubs and sauces, and open some barbecue-friendly wines

Posted: Jun 29, 2011 11:00am ET



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Memorial Day weekend is a blur in our house, with the end of school and other various craziness, so it's not until the Fourth of July that I really feel like I can kick back and do some serious cooking in the backyard.

I went to college in the South and returned with a persuasive hankering for barbecue. While any gas or charcoal grill can be rigged into a decent smoker, I bought a Weber Smokey Mountain, which is considered an almost idiot-proof smoker. Notice I said "almost." My first summer, I was in the 90th percentile of "almost," but I'm handy with the smoker now.

As I've tried to master various recipes and cuts of meat—whether it's baby-back ribs, chicken or beef brisket—I've experimented with different wines to drink with these slow-cooked creations.

The flavors of barbecue are intense: smoky and zesty, spicy, greasy and sweet. You might think you need a powerful wine for its equal but that's not necessarily the case. Sure, most hearty reds will do fine with those big flavors, but if you're going to the trouble of slowly grilling or smoking something for hours, why drink just any wine?

For me, the best barbecue wines have a distinctive personality, yet have a sense of proportion and balance, plus a refreshing quality. That's especially true if there's a rich, red barbecue sauce involved. You know how your fingers and face get so messy that you have to stop and tidy yourself before digging back in? Well, your palate needs the same treatment.

Here's an example. Say you're eating pork ribs lathered with a sweet and spicy Kansas City-style sauce. You might think of opening a jammy Zinfandel or a Châteauneuf-du-Pape or Côtes du Rhône from a warm vintage like 2007.

The problem is that the sweetness and alcohol from those wines accentuate the burn and heat of the sauce. Afterward, your tongue feels like it needs a bandage, like the pole-licking kid from *A Christmas Story*, you start looking for alternatives.

Better choices are wines such as **Ruffino Chianti Classico Ducale Gold Label Riserva 2006** (\$40) or the California kitchen-sink blend **Sean H. Thackrey Pleiades XX NV** (\$25), two reds that are distinctive yet lively enough to balance the rich sauce.



#### Tim Fish

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Barbecue chicken can be a wine nightmare depending on the rub or sauce. The chicken begs for a white or delicate red, but if it has a burly, full-flavored crust, it's a challenge. If the chicken isn't too spicy, you could try a Beaujolais or light but zesty California Pinot Noir such as [Buena Vista Carneros 2007](#) (\$25) or [Robert Mondavi Carneros 2008](#) (\$28).

A favorite barbecue recipe of mine is Smokin' Chicken from *Barbecue America*, which was co-written by Jack Bettridge, a colleague at *Cigar Aficionado* who frequently writes about spirits for *Wine Spectator*. It's a crowd-pleasing recipe, with a no-brainer marinade of apple cider, barbecue sauce and zesty Italian dressing, followed by a rub of savory spices, then a few hours of sweet and smoky wood.

With Smokin' Chicken, I like a white wine that has character and lots of zestiness. Recent favorites include [Feudi di San Gregorio Falanghina Sannio 2009](#) (\$16) from Italy and [Alamos Torrontés Mendoza 2010](#) (\$13) from Argentina, which are both crisp yet a touch exotic.

Rhône whites like [E. Guigal Côtes du Rhône White 2009](#) (\$15) also work well, as do California whites that balance a supple texture with bright acidity, such as [J Pinot Gris California 2009](#) (\$15) and [Mer Soleil Chardonnay Santa Lucia Highlands Silver Unoaked 2009](#) (\$24).

What's your favorite barbecue-and-wine match? What are some of your rules for a successful pairing?

## Member comments 3 comment(s)

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**Brian Loring** — Lompoc, CA — June 29, 2011 1:09pm ET

Great suggestions, Tim! I'd also add sparkling wine to the list, since it's probably my favorite match for BBQ :)

**Morewine Bishar** — Del Mar, California — June 29, 2011 2:11pm ET

Oh man! You are takin' me right back to a fantastic pig-roast I attended in Cabin John, Maryland a few years ago. A big Spatlese Rhinegau Riesling went mighty fine with that moist pork falling off the bone!

But your Kansas City scenario puts me in mind of a Ripassa method Valpolicella Superiore. For best results at this time of year, try chilling the bottle down a bit first, into the cool lower end of the sixties. I think it will be fine with that heat of the spice. Guess I'll just have to try it out myself and see how it goes. That doesn't sound too tough!

David Clark  
for The Wine Connection

**Mosen Defrawy Md** — Orange County, CA — June 30, 2011 8:03am ET

Excellent suggestions . . . and I agree with the bubbly . . . a great companion to some of those sweet BBQ sauces!

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