

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

At-home, themed wine tastings offer a chance to travel without the steep price tag.

BY KELLY MAGYARICS

PHOTOS BY JON VAN GORDER

While a trip around the world might not be in the cards right now thanks to the sagging economy and the headaches involved with airline travel, resourceful oenophiles needn't leave the comfort of their living rooms to travel to the world's best wine regions. We've compiled six assorted themes that transport you to Europe, South Africa and South America, and even one that explores different styles of a popular variety. Best of all, we've thought of all the details, from wine and food to decorations and tunes. So call your wine-loving friends, uncork a few bottles and consult our handy party-planning guide. Your memorable wine tasting soirée will have guests buzzing long after the last drop is poured.

Theme: Wines of the Loire

Often overshadowed by the attention-grabbing bottles from Burgundy and Bordeaux, France's châteaux-rich Loire Valley produces incredibly food friendly, versatile wines. The whites are crisp and refreshing (sometimes with a touch of effervescence), most reds are ready to drink with no cellaring required, and the dessert wine offerings are decadently scrumptious.

Wines: Select light, quaffable **Muscadet**, a white with crisp lemon notes; compare zesty and zingy **Sancerre** with smoky, mineral-tinged **Pouilly-Fumé**, different styles of Sauvignon Blanc produced in villages across the river from each other; add in a slightly sweet, pink **Rosé d'Anjou**, made with a blend of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvi-

gnon and Grolleau; and remember Loire's signature red wine—**Chinon**, made from the Cabernet Franc grape with aromas of strawberries and violets. For dessert, pour **Bonnezeaux**, a rich and luscious botrytized wine made from the Chenin Blanc grape.

Food: Take a cue from the locals, who enjoy the area's crisp whites with shellfish, by serving freshly shucked oysters, mussels à la marinière, and scallops with beurre blanc (the sauce actually originated in the Loire.) Visit murrayscheese.com to purchase a selection of the tangy goat cheeses for which the area is famous, like Chevrot, Sainte Maure du Touraine, Chabichou and Bucheron—which not coincidentally all pair with the high acid, Sauvignon Blanc-based Pouilly-Fumé and Sancerre. End the evening with an upside-down, caramelized apple tarte Tatin.





Décor: Cover the buffet table with cheerful, floral French Country table linens from frenchcountrylinens.com; and set out small vases filled with cut wildflowers.

Music: For l'esprit de France, play Patrick Brogière's "Châteaux de la Loire;" Putumayo Presents: French Café;" and the expressive and melodic Pauline Croze.

Theme: South Africa

Along with its stunning scenery, tumultuous past, and legendary wildlife, South Africa is fast gaining a reputation for its diverse and stellar wines. Historically, the country produced mostly fortified wine

and Brandy over the past 350 years. More recently, the locals have discovered that their Mediterranean coastal climate is well suited to dry wines made from single and blended varieties. Take your guests on safari to hunt for some exotic new specimens from this far-off land.

Wines: Opt for **Chenin Blanc** (locally called Steen)—off-dry bottles have a lovely floral nose, and melon and apricot flavors; **Sauvignon Blanc** is similar to New Zealand bottles, though some are softened with oak; peppery, jammy, easy-drinking **Shiraz** will remind guests why the grape is so popular in Australia; **Red Cape** blends with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and local grapes bring a touch of Bordeaux to Africa; the rustic and smoky notes of funky signature red grape **Pinotage** make it the go-to

in favor of inexpensive glass stemware from wineenthusiast.com, ikea.com or crateandbarrel.com. Set out pitchers of water for thirsty guests to sip in between wines, or use to rinse out glasses. Place thoughtful pour-out buckets around the room so guests don't feel pressured to finish a wine they didn't enjoy. Wine aroma wheels from winearomawheel.com or wineenthusiast.com help when you just can't verbalize how to describe what you are smelling and tasting.

Hand out pens and tasting note sheets. Formatted tasting sheets are available for purchase, but are not necessary.

Taste the wines. Start with any sparkling wines, then move onto whites and reds in the order listed. Point out and pass around any foods that pair with specific wines, explaining why they partner so well. In between wines, offer wine crackers from premiergourmet.com to cleanse the palate.

Compare notes and favorite bottles. While socializing and enjoying more food and wine, of course.

PHOTO LEFT: IMAGE SOURCE/CORBIS

choice with local game; Grapey Muscat d'Alexandrie, also labeled Hannepoet, ends the tasting on a sweet note.

Food: Make the common South African fast food called bunny chow, which is vegetarian or meat curry stuffed into a loaf of bread; order Biltong, dried jerky made from various indigenous animals, from biltongonline.co.za; grill lean, succulent ostrich steaks from pokanoket.com; to offset the protein, toss a green bean salad with lemons and olives, and rice with turmeric, cinnamon and raisins; download a recipe for traditional melktert (milk tart) for dessert.

Décor: Go wild with animal print cocktail napkins from thejunglestore.com. Place colorful African bowls and woven baskets from africabydesignimports.com around the room.

Music: Fill the MP3 player with Ladysmith Black Mambazo (who worked with Paul Simon on his *Graceland* album); reggae star Lucky Dube; and dinner party compilation "Taste of South Africa."

Theme: Spain Beyond Rioja

While Tempranillo and Garnacha reign in Rioja, wander around the rest of the country and you'll find ample alternative options. Spain's

rich winemaking history, coupled with low yields due to vine age and a dry climate (there actually isn't much rain in Spain) all spell a full-flavored, turn-up-the-volume wine tasting experience. And the modern method of winemaking—less time in oak and less ageing in general—offer more approachable and fruitier bottles sooner.

Wines: Offer flutes of Cava, the Penedès bubbly that's Spain's answer to Champagne, as guests arrive, Albariño from Rías Baixas produces light, peachy white wines; White Verdejo from Riuda is aromatic and elegant; up-and-coming Mencia from Bierzo makes light and fruity reds; Priorato has the title of Spain's trendy wine region, and red blends made with Garnacha, Cariñena, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah have powerful tannins and brambly fruit; Grapes are sun-dried on mats for dessert wine Pedro Ximénez (or PX), with intense flavors of raisins and dried figs.

Food: Prepare some of the most famous Spanish tapas, perfect for casual gatherings. Tortilla de patata (potato omelet) and sautéed garlic shrimp will have you reaching for the Cava; head to a gourmet market (or laespanolameats.com) for an assortment of cured meats like Chorizo and jamón Serrano to nibble with a glass of red; and never underesti-

WINE TASTING 101

Regardless of what you may think, wine isn't (and shouldn't be) esoteric. It's grape juice, after all. So if you prefer the "pour, sip, repeat" method, by all means have at it. However, if you care to elevate your wine-tasting experience by incorporating all of your senses, here is a primer:

SEE: Take a good peek at the wine against a white background like a tablecloth or sheet of paper. White wine colors can run the gamut from clear, to greenish, to light yellow, to gold, and bottles tend to lighten and brown as they age. Reds tend to morph from purple, to ruby, to garnet as they age. As a general rule, the darker the wine (and in the case of reds, the more opaque), the fuller its body (for more on body, see the "Savor" section below.)

SMELL: Swirl the wine around the glass—with the glass in the air if you are feeling particularly dexterous, or stem on the table if you're not—and then take a whiff. This sense is crucial in enjoying wine. Notice any aromas that jump out of the glass, keeping in mind that not all

wines are particularly aromatic.

SAY "CHEERS:" Propose a toast, and hear the lovely sound of clinking glasses. Wine is about good friends, good food, and good conversation. In other words, it's about pleasure and joy. Cheers!

SIP: Finally, if you've been able to hold off this long, taste the wine. You can keep it in your mouth for a few seconds, and let it fall back on your tongue. You can also suck air into your mouth to aerate the wine and release aromas and flavors like the pros do. Remember not to judge a wine too prematurely—go back for another taste.

SAVOR: As you taste and enjoy, think about the wines. Here are some of the elements to consider:

•**Body:** Light-bodied wines are thin and watery, like skim milk. They tend to have a short finish and be lower in alcohol. Medium-bodied wines are thicker and richer, like whole milk. They seem to coat your tongue, with a lingering after-taste. Full-bodied wines are thick, dense, and unctuous, like heavy cream. These

wines cling to your palate, and can have a long finish that remains for several minutes or more.

•**Taste:** Taste includes sweetness, bitterness, acidity and fruit, sometimes working in harmony, sometimes vying for your attention.

•**Texture:** Texture includes a lot of tactual sensations, but perhaps none is as noticeable in a wine as tannin. Tannins are found in some red (and a few white) wines, and originate from the skins, seeds and stems of the grapes, along with any oak treatment like fermenting or aging in oak barrels. In the mouth, tannins can be astringent—similar to the dryness you feel when drinking really strong tea—or silky. Tannins give a wine structure, and can contribute to aging.

•**Flavor:** Flavor encompasses fruits you may taste (like berries, apricots or pineapple), along with other identifiable components like spice, flowers and leather.

•**Balance:** In a balanced wine, no individual component overtly stands out, but instead exists in harmony with all others.

•**Overall assessment:** More important than anything else is whether or not you like the wine. Does the wine get tiresome after only a few sips, or does it keep drawing you back for more?



WINE BOARD GAMES

For an alternative wine party suggestion, there are literally dozens of wine board/card games on the market. These take players through winemaking, wine dynasty building, wine mystery or wine tasting scenarios, or are intended merely to test knowledge or expand the player's wine tasting abilities. Here are some of the top releases over the past few years.

Bouquet: The Wine Board Game (winevine-imports.com; \$47)

The Cork Jester's Wine Teasers Game (funwinegifts.com; \$20)

Foodie Fight (amazon.com; \$19)

Karafe Wine Tasting Game (karafe.com; \$46)

Murder Mystery Party—A Taste for Wine and Murder (wineenthusiast.com; \$25)

Vino! (amazon.com; \$20)

Wine Enthusiast Wine Tasting Party Kit (wineenthusiast.com; \$30)

Winenerd (winenerdgame.com; \$34)

Wine-opoly (amazon.com; \$27)

Worldwide Wines Trivia Board Game (amazon.com; \$18)



mate the power of a well-assembled platter of large marinated green olives, cornichons, roasted red peppers and local cheeses like Manchego, Cabrales and Mahón; sip figgy PX while enjoying Spanish fig cake.

Décor: Serve the food on glazed terracotta or painted ceramic serving plates from latienda.com; and decorate with bullfighting prints and figurines from flamencoshop.com.

Music: Flavor your fiesta with the flamenco guitar of Ottmar Liebert; the sultry and romantic sounds of Enrique and Julio Iglesias; and the rock/rumba duo Estopa.

Theme: Off-the-Beaten-Path Italy

If you always gravitate towards Italian Pinot Grigio and Chianti, it's like giving other Italian wines the boot! Italy is described as one large vineyard, with grapes growing everywhere. Typically low in tannins, and high in acidity and sheer drinkability, Italy's wines just scream to be enjoyed (with or without food). Take the road less traveled, and face your fear of unfamiliar or unpronounceable regions and grape names.

Wines: Begin with Veneto's white Garganega-based Soave Superiore, with delicate almond flavors and a touch of floral; fennel-flavored Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi from Marche is traditionally sold in an easy-to-spot green amphora-shaped bottle; move to the reds with quaffable Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, (not to be confused with the Tuscany town); Nero d'Avola from Sicilia will please fans of peppery, plummy Shiraz; those who prefer dark and rustic wines will crave Puglia's Negroamaro; end the tour with Piemonte red sparkler Brachetto,



filled with mouth-watering strawberries and raspberries.

Food: The acidity in fresh tomato basil bruschetta will pair nicely with most of the wine offerings; salmon poached in fennel is a match made in food heaven for the Verdicchio; grilled baby lamb chops with rosemary will stand up to the Negroamaro; and a plate of luscious cheeses guests may not have had before like Bra Tenero, Castelmagno, Piavo, Taleggio, Robiola matches the "off the beaten path theme;" strawberry Zabaglione is sublime with a flute of Brachetto.

Décor: Serving trays and table linens decorated with olive, tomato or basil motifs will have guests dreaming of the romantic Italian countryside; place lemons in bowls and vases for a fragrantly attractive touch.

Music: Pick classics like Andrea Bocelli; as well as Italian pop from Laura Pausini and Zucchero.

Theme: Chardonnay around the World

Chardonnay is the chameleon of the wine world—it's mind boggling how one single grape can produce so many different wine styles. When grown and produced in a cooler climate, you may notice crisp apple and pear; in a warmer climate, you can taste tropical fruits like pineapple and mango. And Chardonnay is as dependent on what happens inside the cellar as what occurs under the sun. The use of oak and malolactic fermentation can lower acidity while adding toasty, buttery notes. Play private detective and investigate the grape's many disguises.

Wines: Start with a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé from southern Burgundy's Mâconnais region,



typically unoaked; contrast that with oaky Chassagne-Montrachet, a white Burgundy from further north; head Down Under for some Chards from the Adelaide Hills and Hunter Valley regions of Australia—check the labels and select both an unoaked (or "unwooded") and an oaky bottle; finally, look to the Left Coast for Chardonnays from California's cooler regions like Carneros, Russian River Valley and Monterey, which are elegant and restrained; and those from warmer areas like Napa, which are bigger, bolder and more voluptuous.

Food: For oaky Chardonnay, you'll fare well by selecting accompaniments that match the wine's toasty, spicy notes. Set out a tray of smoked gouda, mild cheddar and gruyere, and chicken thighs grilled with wood chips; try serving butter poached lobster with an especially buttery bottle; leaner, racier unoaked bottles go nicely with simply grilled fish.

Décor: Hang flags from France, Australia, the United States and other countries where Chardonnay is successfully made; set out Chardonnay appetizer plates for guests; pay homage to the grape by hanging large Chardonnay posters from allposters.com.

Music: Since Chardonnay is so changeable, play tunes from versatile artists who are known for reinventing themselves, like Madonna, David Bowie and Elton John.

Theme: South America

If you've yet to discover vino from our South American neighbors, run to your nearest wine store immediately. These wines are bursting with flavor and are often incredibly good bargains. You'll find familiar varieties like Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah, as well as predominantly local

grapes like Torrontés and Tannat, ready to be uncorked right when you bring them home.

Wines: Look to Chile's Casablanca and Central Valleys for Sauvignon Blanc done in a California style, with crisp grapefruit and occasional oak; fans of floral Viognier and grapey Muscat will love exotic Torrontés, a full-bodied, dry white from Argentina; Chilean Carmenère was long sold as Merlot until DNA testing proved otherwise; big and bold, yet so easy to drink, Argentinean Malbec will have guests firing up the grill to cook a rib eye; Uruguay's signature Tannat has blackberry flavors and soft tannins; a late-harvest Sauvignon Blanc or Gewürztraminer from Chile can be hard to find but so worth the search.

Food: Pay a visit to your most reputable fishmonger, make ceviche, and enjoy it alongside the Sauvignon Blanc; for heartier fare, stuff empanadas, slow cook flavorful carne asado, and pour Malbec and Tannat; order a few South American cheeses from igourmet.com, like Reggianito, Sardo, Chilarti and Panquehue; whip up super rich Dulce de Leche for the grand finale.

Décor: Evoke a South American party vibe by hanging brightly colored streamers and a vibrant wall textile from textileoflife.com; download and display some photos of tango dancers, Brazilian Carnival and Spanish churches; stuff a piñata from piñatas.com with quality dark chocolate and small wine-related tools and gadgets.

Music: Get moving with high-energy Samba Brasil; nuevo/electronic Tango from the Gotan Project; and classic bossa nova and jazz from Antonio Carlos Jobim.