

# A Match Made in Texas

*Develop your knack for pairing wines with wild game and fish*

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY **SUSAN L. EBERT**

The French term *au terroir* (oh tehr-WAH) simply means that the environmental conditions — particularly soil and climate — in which grapes are grown influence the character of the final wine; hence, “of the earth.” As hunters know, the same applies to wild game: an East Texas mallard that’s feasted on acorns has a different flavor than a Panhandle one feeding on the playas. Venison, as well, picks up the flavors of what deer feed upon in different regions around the state. Texas itself is imbued with a Spanish flavor, with our shared cultural history dating back to 1519, when Spanish explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda and his men first laid eyes on the Texas coast.



Stuffed venison flank from Jesse Griffiths' Afield, served with rustic mashed potatoes, flash-fried kale and a Becker Vineyards Malbec.



Denton-born Jesse Griffiths' *Afield: A Chef's Guide to Preparing Wild Game and Fish* has sold more than 20,000 copies since its debut in 2012. Photo courtesy of Jesse Griffiths.

Not ones to let the grapes go uncrushed beneath their feet, Spanish missionaries commenced producing wines near present-day El Paso in the 1650s — most likely paired with local wild game and fish from the Rio Grande. The commercial production of Spanish wine grapes arrived here a good deal later — only taking foothold in the late '90s after Texas' forays into French, German and Italian winemaking. Today, the Spanish Tempranillo grape has now sprinted to the forefront and is poised to overtake both cabernet and merlot as Texas' signature grape.

*Bienvenido de vuelta, España!* Welcome back.

"As a UT Austin undergrad, I spent the summer of 1999 in Spain," says Ron Yates, President of the Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association. "I was struck with the similarities between Spain and Texas ... the fierce independence ... the sense of place and pride ... the fish- and game-based meals ... the big varieties of terroir. It changed my life. I finished law school at St. Mary's, and determined to become a vintner."

With so much of our culture and food drawn from our state's five-century-long history with Spain, pairing our natural fare with Spanish wines is a match made in heaven-on-earth — Texas.

Yates, whose Spicewood Vineyards won



Spanish Tempranillos and Albariños are proliferating in Texas both in quantity and quality, while the introduction of Texas Malbecs gives this Argentinian star a Lone-Star twist.

a Gold Medal for their 2012 Tempranillo Rosé, a Silver for their 2012 Albariño and a Bronze for their 2011 Tempranillo Red at the 2013 San Francisco International Wine Competition, is bullish on the future of Texas wines. "We're growing as an industry," he says, "with more than 300 wineries and all the grape growers. Texas is a lot more like Europe than we are like California."

The soaring popularity of both Spanish wines and Argentinian Malbecs, first predicted by acclaimed wine critic Robert Parker in 2004, further establishes Texas' emerging role in the production of these popular wines, with many regional winemakers predicting that Texas will surpass California in Tempranillo acreage, and with Malbecs taking root from Sunset Winery in Bureson to Becker Vineyards and Texas Legato Winery in the Hill Country and on down to Haak Vineyards and Winery in Galveston County.

This uniquely Texas guide to wine pairings with wild game and fish features the Spanish Tempranillos and Albariños that are garnering both international awards and legions of new fans, as well as the Argentinian Malbecs now being successfully grown in Texas. These Spanish and South American grapes share a natural affinity with wild game and fish, and with Texas itself. "Keep in mind," advises Yates, "that

Mother Nature is temperamental. This isn't like a Starbucks cup of coffee, where every cup is identical to the one before; find the producers whose wines you like, then follow them to see what's going to be best about that particular year."

Because even those adept at pairing wines with farmed meats, poultry and fish often stumble when it comes to pairing wines with wild game and fish, here are a few basic tenets to consider in selecting wines to complement your prized game and seafood.

### Sorting through the Reds

When choosing a red wine to accompany venison, duck or other red-fleshed game, go with medium- to low-tannin wines. "Wild animals are athletes with little body fat," says Austin-based chef Georgia Pellegrini. "So it's best to stay away from the very high-tannin wines such as the cabs and merlots, that pair better with marbled beef. Fats and tannins work well together, as the fats minimize the astringent effect of tannin and since tannin dries out the mouth, it cuts through the oily mouth-feel and cleanses the palate. With game, go with a red that's lighter and crisper."

To the delight of his devotees, 2013 James Beard Foundation Award Finalist Jesse Griffiths is (*finally!*) opening his honest-to-goodness, brick-and-mortar Dai Due



Austin-based chef Georgia Pellegrini's third book, *Modern Pioneering*, is scheduled for release on March 4, 2014.

Butcher Shop & Supper Club in 2014, after several years of the butcher shop being only at farmers markets and the "secret" Dai Due Supper Club moving from location to location since its inception in 2006. Lately, Jesse's been experimenting with pairings of traditional Tempranillo reds and whites from Spain's famed Rioja region and single varietals from Pacific Northwest along with other Tempranillos, Albariños and Malbecs.

Bryan Caswell, a two-time James Beard nominee for "Best Chef in the Southwest," is co-owner and chef at Houston's Reef, named "Best Seafood Restaurant in the U.S." by Bon Appétit magazine in 2008, and a lifelong hunter and angler. "Houston is a town with really big tastes," he tells me. "Folks lean toward the robust wines – the cabs and zins – so I try to manipulate the protein by heightening the flavors; say, for example, by adding a pomegranate reduction that would pair well with a Malbec."

Malbecs – robust, but not to the point of an inky/oaky cab or merlot – tend to be medium- to high-tannin wines, and pair well with game with added fat (such as bacon-wrapped and cheese-stuffed dove or duck breast poppers, and the pork-stuffed venison flank recipe shown here). Look to Haak Vineyards & Winery, Newsome Vineyards

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A Hemingway-esque summer in Spain inspired sixth-generation Texan Ron Yates to forgo a law career to make Spanish wines in the Hill Country.

and Sunset Winery for some choice Texas Malbecs. The lovely, soft Tempranillos in the mid-tannin range is a go-to wine for most all duck and venison dishes, as they will enhance the flavor of lean meats without robbing your taste buds of moisture, and can be found pretty much throughout the state: consider Alamosa Cellars, Inwood Estates, McPherson Cellars, Pedernales Cellars and Spicewood Vineyards. For a low-tannin Texas Spanish wine — say, for more delicately flavored game such as dove, teal or squirrel, try Alamosa Wine Cellars' El Guapo (a blend of Tempranillo, Graciano and Garnacha) or McPherson Cellars' El Sueño (a blend of Tempranillo, Graciano, Mataro and Syrah).

### Real Men Think Pink

"Rosés aren't 'coming back;' they *are* back," says Dean Schlabowske of the esteemed 22-year-old Austin Wine Merchant. "It's Americans who have created the perception that rosés are sweet, with the introduction of such wines as pink Zinfandel and pink Chablis. The European rosés have never been that way."

The new Texas Spanish-style rosés are a phenomenal hit, as evidenced by Spicewood Vineyards' 2013 gold medal for their

Tempranillo Rosé. "Rosés are one of my favorite things in the world," says Yates. "My dad and I — a couple of burly fifth- and sixth-generation Texas ranchers — love to sit around and share a bottle of rosé." Woodrose Winery's White Tempranillo is another nicely balanced rosé.

Caswell, at a muscular 6' 4", also fits the

"burly" description. "I drink the \$#1+ outta rosés," he tells me. "Growing up, we called the pink wines 'Pasadena Punch' as they were just one step above Boone's Farm. But my first cooking job was in Barcelona, Spain at Via Vienteto in 2000, and that's when I discovered the Spanish rosés. I love 'em, especially the Catalan ones."

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Native Houstonian and avid outdoorsman Bryan Caswell's first cooking job was in Barcelona, where he discovered Spanish rosés. Photo courtesy of Bryan Caswell.

These dry rosés — with just a hint of tannins, aromas of ripe berries and watermelon/white peach flavors — give you a broad range of pairing choices. “I’d go for a rosé with quail or pheasant,” says Caswell, “even chukar.” Think pink with anything from pork tenderloin to wild turkey and other game birds ... even red snapper, tuna and wahoo.

### The Inside ‘Dirt’ on Whites

While red wine’s “backbone” comprises the tannins found in grape skins, white wine’s structure is dictated by its acidity, with the winemaker being able to tweak the wine by choosing to age it in either oak or stainless steel. “The oak adds flavor, and the stainless steel keeps it the same,” says Yates, “so it depends on what the winemaker wants the final result to be.” The oak-aged wines tend have a more golden color and more complex flavor profile, while the stainless-aged ones are more delicate and bright. Albariños are traditionally stainless-aged; and considered to be one of the easiest wines to pair with food. McPherson Cellars, Pedernales Cellars and Spicewood Vineyards all produce Albariños with crisp citrus brightness; spot-on when paired with speckled trout, redfish, flounder or shellfish.

And lest this all seems too complicated, heed Caswell’s sage advice: “At Reef, we work with 87 species of seafood and our menu changes daily,” says Caswell. “Plus,

this being Texas, we’ll always have beef and pork as well. My partner Bill Floyd is the oenophile who’s responsible for our more than 400 different labels here at Reef — including three pages of ‘Bin 713’ — Houston’s area code — a tribute to Houstonians

who have ventured into the wine business. Some people like to go with similarities when pairing food and wine; bold with bold, and so on. Others — and I’m one of those — prefer contrast and variation. Go with what you like.” ♣

*¡Buen provecho! ¡Viva España y Tejas!*

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