

Drinking Out Loud

25 Ways to Leave Your Wine Love

Just one new wine every other week



Photo by: Jon Moe

Matt Kramer suggests breaking out of your wine rut with 25 new wines to try.

Matt Kramer

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That we live in an age that seeks the solace of the simplistic is hardly breaking news. Still, the close of 2016 brought with it a small science news item in *The New York Times* that I, anyway, thought was a champion example of the simplistic. Here it is:

"A handful of nuts a day may be enough to reduce the risk for death from heart disease and other ills. In a review combining data from 20 prospective studies, researchers found that compared with people who ate the least nuts, those who ate the most reduced the risk for coronary heart disease by 29 percent, for cardiovascular disease by 21 percent and for cancer by 15 percent. There was also a 52 percent reduced risk for respiratory disease, 39 percent for diabetes and 75 percent reduced risk for

infectious disease in those who ate the most nuts. Most of the risk reduction was achieved by eating an average of about one ounce of nuts a day, the amount in about two dozen almonds or 15 pecan halves." (The New York Times, Dec. 6, 2016)

So there we are: A mere handful of nuts a day, and the risks of the likes of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, respiratory disease and infections are reduced by dramatic percentages. Frankly, it sounds too good to be true. But who am I to say it isn't so?

This got me to thinking about an equally simplistic way to combat the epidemic of wine complacency. Such a diagnosis was offered by Charles Chambless, who manages a wine shop in Ohio. In my last Drinking Out Loud column, "The Greatest Gift," Mr. Chambless commented: "I manage a wine shop. I can tell you that I love esoteric wines. I carry many ... including Lagreins, Teroldegos, Moschofileros, Bonardas and many more. The only people who buy these wines are the wine geeks like me. The general population isn't interested. When I do tastings with such wines, people are amazed. But they go right back to their usual suspects: the 25 or so wine types that are familiar when they do their shopping."

That's it, isn't it? "The 25 or so wine types that are familiar when they do their shopping."

Can anyone doubt the truth of Mr. Chambless' assertion? I sure don't. If anything, I was surprised by the figure of 25 wine types. That seems awfully high. Myself, I would have thought it was just three or four wine types—you know, Chardonnay, Cabernet, Merlot, maybe the odd Pinot Noir. But I take him at his word, as he's on the front lines and I'm not.

Anyway, it got me to thinking about what sort of simplistic "handful of nuts" prescription would break us all out of our wine ruts. Suitably inspired, I concluded that all we need to do is vow to try just one new-to-us wine only every other week.

That's just 25 new wines a year. The rest of the time we can wallow happily and guilt-free in our usual wine-complacency.

Now, just which 25 wines is the question. Obviously, the horizons are vast and will vary with every drinker. For some, it might include trying almost any Italian wine. For others, such as myself, it requires just the opposite—weaning myself from an inordinate intake of my beloved Barbera. Ditto for Beaujolais, I might add.

So, without wishing to foist flagrantly esoteric wines on newly resolved wine lovers sincerely desiring to escape the gravitational pull of the familiar, allow me to offer the following "25 ways to leave your wine love" (with apologies to Paul Simon):

1. Lambrusco: The good ones are a delight, especially with rich, hearty fare like sausages or anything cheesy.
2. Gewürztraminer, Alsace; Anderson Valley; Oregon; Italy: Try it with onion soup or an onion tart. You'll be wowed.
3. Any Greek Wine Other than Retsina: The "new" Greek whites and reds are a revelation. Forget everything you ever thought about Greek wines.
4. Petite Sirah: California's perennially unsung, workhorse red. Nothing better with a good burger (except maybe Zinfandel).
5. Any New Zealand Wine Other than Sauvignon Blanc: After all, you already know New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. Try the Syrah and the Pinot Noir. Impressive stuff across the board.

6. Cabernet Franc: The Cinderella grape just waiting to be asked to the ball. All sorts of possibilities—from the Loire, Napa Valley, Bordeaux and elsewhere. Always seems to need food, unlike some stand-alone Cabernet Sauvignons.
7. Austrian Red Wines: Never mind the white Grüner Veltliner. Try the reds Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch. Latest vintages are much less oaky and heavy-handed than those of five or 10 years ago.
8. Pretty Much Anything from Portugal: Hard to go wrong with the latest reds and whites from Portugal's new wine revolution, especially at the modest prices still being asked.
9. Ventoux: This large district in France's Southern Rhône Valley delivers striking red wine value.
10. Santa Lucia Highlands: The star district in California's Salinas Valley. Pinot Noir is the main attraction but don't overlook Syrah.
11. Cru Bourgeois Bordeaux: Everybody's go-to red 30 years ago. Due for a comeback, n'est-ce pas?
12. Dry Tokaj Furmint: A new dry white in wine history, created in centuries-old Tokaj for the first time in the 1990s. Don't miss it.
13. Chianti Classico: After decades of fumbling with "international" grape varieties and excessive oak, the latest Chianti Classico wines are purer and better-made than ever. Seriously underpriced at the moment.
14. Sparkling Wines Called Crémant: Looking for reliably good bubbly at the \$20 mark? France's "crémant" category is an answer.
15. Chardonnay from Australia's Margaret River: OK, Chardonnay at last! But Margaret River Chardonnay is unlike any other in the world. That's not something you can say very often about Chardonnay, which tells you something right there.
16. Any Red Wine from Argentina's Salta Zone: Mendoza is the big district. But smaller Salta is a jewel, with vineyards starting at 5,000 feet elevation. Mostly Malbec.
17. Anything Involving Pinot Meunier: The "unknown" grape of Champagne. A little research will reveal those Champagnes with significant Pinot Meunier in the blend. Also, there are a few still Pinot Meuniers produced in California and Oregon that are impressively good.
18. Anything from Sicily Over \$20: Sicily is hot, in the best sense. There's still a lot of junk wine, hence the \$20 marker. But once across the 20-buck line, you're not likely to go wrong with Sicily; quite the opposite.
19. Chenin Blanc from South Africa: The best are stunners. This is a category to actively pursue. And don't be surprised to find expensive, sought-after cult Chenins cheek-by-jowl with very good but much lower-priced workaday Chenins. Though the word is getting out, it has not yet been broadcast widely.
20. Montepulciano d'Abruzzo: Another example of the "very good but not expensive" available side by side with the "exceptional but expensive" versions. Take your pick. Tough to go wrong with this reliable red.
21. Sierra Foothills Zinfandel: California's famous Gold Rush continues in this classic Zinfandel area (where the 1849 Gold Rush actually occurred). Yes, there are other good wine types produced in Sierra Foothills, such as Syrah. But Zinfandel is still the gold in them thar hills.
22. Aglianico: Southern Italy's benchmark (and great) red wine grape. If you're a fan of big reds, you want the Aglianico variety. Price is only a rough guide, as a good number of inexpensive Aglianicos deliver tasty goods.

23. 6 Puttonyos Tokaj: If you want to try one of the world's most seductive sweet wines, this is it. And be sure to sip some while watching what is arguably the greatest wine and dog movie ever made, *Dean Spanley* (starring Sam Neill and Peter O'Toole).

24. Any Spanish White from Rías Baixas: If there's seafood, especially shellfish, on the menu, you want the white wine from the Rías Baixas zone, in the northwestern corner of Spain. Prices are reasonable and the overall standard across producers is impressively high.

25. Any 2015 German Riesling Under \$30: Whoever says vintages don't matter hasn't been to Germany. The 2015 vintage is a knockout year, so much so that it's hard to go wrong even (and unusually) at the lower price range.

So there you have it. Any other nominations—and surely there are many more possibilities—are warmly welcome.

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