

Corkheads: Ten great BBQ wines

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In my world, there are few occasions for big, tannic wines. Even with a thick steak, I prefer sparkling rose, or at most, a California syrah.

But when it comes to the smoky grill marks and chipotle-spiked sauces of barbecue season, you can bet I'll be in the backyard swirling something rich and inky.

Luckily, I got to experiment with several big wines at a pre-summer barbecue wine tasting last month. My editor hosted, her husband grilled, and my colleagues cooked the side dishes. And I brought 28 bottles of zinfandel, petit sirah and malbec.

I chose these varietals, particularly zinfandel and petit sirah, because their ample fruit, spicy flavors and monster tannins stand up to the boldness of grilled foods. In fact, one reason big red wine is such a natural pairing with steak is because the puckery tannins help to balance out the fat in beef.

For almost three hours, my colleagues and I focused our taste buds on how these wines behaved with bites of saucy ribs, slow-cooked beans and nibbles of warm, grilled vegetables.

As the evening progressed — and with many a water break — 10 wines stood out to us, including the 2007 Cupcake Vineyards Central Coast Petit Sirah (\$12). The wine's boysenberry aromas continued on the palate, where they evolved into flavors of spicy Mexican chocolate. I liked this wine because it lacked the harsh tannins often associated with the tight, pea-sized berries of this variety.

Those who liked richer wines were struck by the 2008 August Briggs "Old Vines" Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$35) for its aromas and flavors of coffee, mocha and dark berries. As our savvy and youngest taster — age 22 — scrawled in her notes, "This is the wine all the others are trying to be."

The group's overall favorite — by a landslide — was the 2007 Grgich Hills Napa Valley Estate Zinfandel (\$35), a plummy, lighter-style zinfandel made from organic grapes. One gent in our group called it "zinfandel that tastes like California pinot noir," and I agree.

Balanced and smooth with medium tannins and red berry flavors, the wine was lovely with the least heavy fare on the table, like the grilled red and yellow bell peppers, and a layered, salad-like polenta dish. For a handful of us, including me, the malbecs were most memorable. In Argentina, grilled meat is the national food and Argentines wash it down with this complex, velvety wine. The affordability (the majority are \$10 to \$15) of malbec also makes it a great value.

In Mendoza, Andeluna winemaker Silvio Alberto (in collaboration with Bordeaux superstar Michel Rolland) crafted the 2007 Andeluna Tupungato Malbec (around \$10) with 11 percent cabernet sauvignon. The resulting wine is elegant with flavors of red and black currants and a lovely, vanilla finish.

We also liked the 2008 Diseno Malbec (around \$12), fleshy and ripe with black tea, tobacco and violet notes. As one zinfandel aficionado wrote in her notes, "It's slightly musky, but very thick, rich, and satisfying."

Ultimately, that's what most people seek in their barbecue food wine — a rich and satisfying glass that doesn't weaken the wallet.