

Kosher Wines Come Into Their Wine

Observant Jews and non Jews alike can enjoy quality fruit of the vine

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This Passover, as you search for the perfect matzoh pairing, remember that kosher wines have reached a level of quality and prestige that is closer to Beaucastel than it is to cough syrup.

Every established winemaking region, including Spain, Italy and even New Zealand, where Jews are relatively scarce, now churns out impressive kosher expressions of your favorite varietals and blends. In fact, this segment of the wine market has grown 20 percent annually for the past two years, according to Royal Wine Corp., a leader in kosher wine distribution. There is little conflict between good winemaking and kosher law; the most important requirement is that the processing must be handled by Sabbath-observant Jews. Kosher law also calls for harvesting from vines more than 4 years old, leaving the vineyards fallow every seven years, and growing no fruits, vegetables or grains between the vines.

So, all wine is basically kosher, says Jeff Morgan, who makes Covenant and Red C, brisket-loving Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons. And, he says, the Jewish winemaking tradition is as old as time.

"When they were still drinking water out of Macedon horns in Bordeaux, the Jews were making some of the greatest wines in the Mediterranean," Morgan says.

Embracing food and drink of those regions for a Seder, or Passover meal, is somehow more fun, more alive. Think harissa-flecked sea bass, Syrah-braised lamb chops and cumin-spiked gefilte. Or make charoset with figs, naturally pasty and therefore closer to the Jews' mortar it's supposed to represent. That leftover meat and matzoh pie will be rejuvenated against a kosher Barolo. And because Sephardic food is lighter, it pairs with a wider range of wines.

Chef and Jewish cookbook author Joyce Goldstein of San Francisco "sexes up" gefilte fish with toasted, ground almonds and almost always defies her Ashkenazi, or Eastern European, roots by making Turkish lamb, either with prunes or green garlic. Both would be gorgeous with the spicy, black fruit flavors of Barkan Wine Cellars Shiraz from the Judean Hills of Israel.

Goldstein is quick to remind that Passover is a spring festival, and should be commemorated with dishes loaded with seasonal fruits and vegetables, such as Carciofata di Trieste, an Italian Jewish stew brimming with artichokes, asparagus tips, baby carrots

and mint. To match: S'forno Pinot Grigio from the Veneto, a crisp, veggie-loving, citrusy wine.

As chef at the upscale kosher restaurant Tierra Sur at Herzog Wine Cellars in Oxnard, Todd Aarons creates rustic, Mediterranean-inspired pairings for Passover, such as pomegranate-marinated lamb and Herzog's Reserve Syrah. "The Syrah has hints of spiciness and balances out the richness of the lamb," says Aarons, a veteran of Zuni Cafe in San Francisco and Savoy in New York.

His philosophy on kosher wine is similar to his approach on kosher cooking: great ingredients that just happen to be kosher. "Same grape. Same process," Aarons says. "It's the same terroir." And if you're going to down four cups during that long Seder, it might as well be a fine wine.

With a Spanish Rioja, like the Ramon Cardova Crianza — allspice and roasted meat flavors — Aarons favors grilled beef. In fact, grilling is the way he and his family get through the entire week of Passover, washing down cumin-and-dried-mint lamb burgers with peppery Weinstock Cellar Select Lodi Zinfandel, chicken kebobs with Herzog's Vin Gris, a powerhouse of acidity, and grilled salmon with New Zealand's Goose Bay Sauvignon Blanc.

"We end up barbecuing all week and like to put out all the kosher wines and just experiment," says Aarons, who throws the winery's leftover wine-soaked oak chips on the grill to impart depth and flavor. He has observed Jewish dietary laws for 10 years, and recalls drinking Bordeaux wines regularly during his nonkosher days at Savoy.

"For me to have a kosher one, like the Barons de Rothschild Haut-Medoc, allows me to feel like I can drink the good stuff and not compromise my values," he says. "There's a market for people like me who are exploring their spirituality and looking for the same product they had before."