

The great turkey test



Just what is the best wine match for the festive turkey? Fiona Beckett and her panel of tasters went back to basics to put a selection of bottles to the test – and their favourite just might surprise you...

OF ALL THE meals of the year, picking a wine to go with roast turkey is probably the hardest to get right. Do you pull out a treasure from your cellar or serve a younger, bolder wine that will stand up better to the plethora of sauces and veg that typically accompany the festive bird? Do you aim to please yourself or your less wine-savvy guests who may not want to feel pressured at what should be a relaxed family get together?

We decided to see if we could find a definitive answer, inviting along a high-powered panel of tasters who bravely volunteered to eat Christmas dinner on a hot August afternoon.

Our venue was the ultra-traditional but now hugely fashionable Goring Hotel, which hosted the Middleton family on the eve of the royal wedding earlier this year. Chef Derek Quelch, 'the most serious English revivalist', according to admiring fellow chef Rowley Leigh, laid on a lavish set of accompaniments that included chestnut stuffing, chipolata and bacon rolls, cranberry and bread sauces, a deeply savoury gravy, roast potatoes, sprouts, carrots and roast parsnips.

Surprises and disappointments

The wines we chose were the kind we thought wine lovers would be most likely to field – seven reds and one white, which included two mature and six more recent vintages. We had two Burgundian casualties: a corked bottle of Frédéric Magnien's Les Baudines 1er Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet 2008 and a curiously vegetal bottle of Domaine de L'Arlet's Clos des Fôrets-St-Georges 1er Cru, Nuits-St-Georges

'The biggest disappointment was that Pinot Noir in general fared so badly'

2004 that we decided we would not have served our guests, so they were not included in the tasting.

In fact the biggest disappointment was that Pinot Noir in general fared so poorly. The Volnay (a replacement for the Nuits-St-Georges) proved overwhelmed by the food with which it was confronted, and the Felton Road tasted overpoweringly sweet; a slightly older vintage might have fared better. We also expected better of the Beaujolais, Zinfandel and young St-Emilion whose exuberant fruit we thought would be able to handle the cranberry sauce. Instead they got knocked sideways by the stuffing and gravy.

Obviously there were some differences in individual palates – Peter Richards MW being more sympathetic to the New World wines than other tasters – but there was an intriguing division on two of our favourite wines. Sarah Jane Evans MW and I particularly liked the Châteauneuf, while the men were more taken with the older Château Branaire-Ducru, which disproved the notion that you should think more in terms of young, fruit-driven wines for turkey dinner.

But our shock conclusion was that it was not one of our reds but the sole white that went best with



Right: your turkey may be the star of the show on Christmas Day, but do you have the right wine to match it?



Above: Fiona Beckett consults her notes while Nicolas Clerc MS (left) and Rowley Leigh ponder the wine matches



Left: the winning wine – and the only white

Right: our judges tuck into their Christmas dinner at London's Goring Hotel



the bird – brown meat as well as white: the elegant Jean-Noel Gagnard's Les Chenevottes 1er Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet 2004 not only held its own but brought a refreshing lift to what is always an incredibly rich meal.

The crucial question is: will you be able to persuade your nearest and dearest to abandon red wine for Christmas lunch? Well, maybe not, but you can – and should – at least offer them a choice.

The wines we tasted and how they fared

Note: scores are for the wine and food match, not the quality of the wine itself

Jean-Noel Gagnard, Les Chenevottes 1er Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet, Burgundy, France 2004 ★★★★★ 19pts/20

£30.17 (2008) **Justerini & Brooks**
Tasting this fine, mineral Burgundy on its own, it was hard to believe it would stand up to the turkey but it burst into life with it – the wine that was most transformed by the food match. Our top pairing, by a whisker. 'Classy and elegant' (NC). 'Gets better and better' (RL). **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alcohol:** 13.5%

The judges' usual wine picks for turkey

Fiona Beckett (FB) is a *Decanter* contributing editor and author and wine columnist for *The Guardian*: 'A Rhône or Languedoc red – often a local Faugères if we're in France.'

Nicolas Clerc MS (NC) is head sommelier and wine manager at Le Pont de la Tour in London: 'A white wine that's generous in alcohol - Châteauneuf or Condrieu.'

Sarah Jane Evans MW (SJE) is a wine and food writer, author and

broadcaster: 'Something generous and fun – it's not the time for your most impressive or geeky bottle.'

Rowley Leigh (RL) is owner and executive chef of Le Café Anglais in London, and cookery writer for the *FT*: 'Burgundy or Italian red – maybe Barolo. Something young and forceful.'

Peter Richards MW (PR) is a wine writer and broadcaster, and runs the Winchester Wine School: 'A New World Syrah/Shiraz or Pinot Noir.'

Château Branaire-Ducru, St-Julien, Bordeaux, France 2000 ★★★★★ 18.5

£61.67–£75 **Goedhuis, Solent Cellar**
Everything you want from a mature Bordeaux – and it almost pipped the Chassagne at the post. Again it showed much better with the food, which evoked a much richer, autumnal fruit character in the wine. 'Elegant texture and balanced palate' (NC). 'Flies through. Lovely' (RL). **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 13%

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Bosquet des Papes, Chante le Merle, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Rhône, France 2007 ★★★★★ 18

£34.62 **OW Loeb**
I'd have put money on a Châteauneuf doing well, and so it proved. Warm, generous and spicy, it sailed through the meal, though a few tasters were conscious of the alcohol. 'A bit spirity; doesn't work for me' (PR). 'Sweet and racy sunshiney fruit' (RL). 'A crowd-pleaser' (SJE). **Drink:** 2015–2023. **Alc:** 14.5%

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir, Central Otago, New Zealand 2010 ★★★★★ 16.5

£26–£32 **Averys, Jeroboams, Les Caves de Pyrène, Secret Cellar, Slurp, Solent Cellar, Stone Vine & Sun, Swig**
Another wine that was too young to show at its best. Rich and lush, it seemed a likely candidate but the intense savouriness of the stuffing and gravy threw its balance out of kilter. The panel were divided, some appreciating its 'charming ripe berry fruit' (SJE), others finding it 'a little jammy' (FB). 'Could be a modern choice, but not for the claret clan' (SJE). **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 14%



Domaine Marquis d'Angerville, Champans 1er Cru, Volnay, Burgundy, France 2003 ★★★ 16

£42.17–£44.55 **Goedhuis, OW Loeb**
Wheeled in as a substitute for the corked Domaine de L'Arlet Nuits-St-Georges. Lovely, elegant fruit but a little delicate. 'Not a typical Volnay – you expect scent and silk and you get brawn and rustic muscle here' (PR). 'Acidity works, but it softens and loses the battle' (RL). **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 13.5%

Château Grange-Cochard, Côte du Py, Morgon, Beaujolais, France 2009 ★★★ 15.5

£17.88–£21.28 **Amps, Berry Bros & Rudd, The Wine Shop**
We felt this bright, fruity Beaujolais should work, but the strongly flavoured accompaniments stripped most of the charm and life out of it. 'Youthful, juicy fruit, fresh acid and structuring tannins – but could do with softening' (PR). **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 13.5%



Château Fleur-Cardinale, St-Emilion, Bordeaux, France 2008 ★★★ 15

£29.20 **Millesima**
Is it better to drink a younger, softer claret? Not on the basis of this tasting. An attractive fleshy Bordeaux but simply overwhelmed by the food. 'Tasted dry, bitter and hard with the turkey' (SJE). 'A sound, if rather unexciting match' (FB). **Drink:** 2017–2025. **Alc:** 14%

Seghesio, Zinfandel, Sonoma County, California, USA 2009 ★★★ 14.5

£19.35–£30 **Widely available via Liberty Wines**
We had high hopes of Zinfandel and this was certainly a classic example. But with its high alcohol it was never going to be an easy choice, and with a plateful of competing flavours it was just too much. 'Thick luscious fruit but sweetness is accentuated by the food' (RL). 'Just too Party' (FB). **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 15.5%

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