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Journal

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## Uncork Lighter Summer Libations

By **Jim Hammond**

*For the Journal*

WINE COUNTRY: If you have been second-guessing when summer was really here, there should be no doubt now. Even by high desert standards, it's hot out there.

In this kind of weather, our tastes often run to fruit punches, beer and lemonade. Our food often includes barbecues, seafood, finger foods and fruit salads. So where does wine fit into this picture?

The easy answer is white wines, but that leaves barbecues to beer and sodas. Not bad choices either, but variety demands room left for wines.

What doesn't work as well is a big tannic red or an oaked and buttery chardonnay. The big reds can taste furry on the palate, and an over-oaked chardonnay— trust me, they're out there— can leave splinters on the tongue.

Fruity wines with good acidity and lower alcohol work much better during the dog days of summer, and by that I mean days your dog refuses to go out to play. Many white wines fit this profile, particularly sauvignon blancs, pinot grigios and dry rieslings in the German style. French sancerres and pouilly fumés are good examples of the sauvignon blanc grape that are crisp, clean and ripe for summer sipping. New Zealand sauvignon blancs are also unoaked, letting the fruit flavors come to the fore.

Unoaked or lightly oaked chardonnay also can work well. Heavily oaked versions using malolactic fermentation add too much sweetness, vanilla and butter for a clean summer wine. A French chablis, which is typically made with little or no oak, has the tartness and high acidity a chardonnay needs to work well in summer. Many Italian whites also work well, including the ubiquitous pinot grigio, but also try lemony soaves and moscato d'Asti, a light fruity wine made with the muscat grape.

### **A bit of the bubbly**

Sparkling wines work any time of year, and summer is no exception. However, you might save the vintage-dated rich and yeasty champagnes for cooler weather. Many Spanish sparkling wines are better-priced and lighter on the palate. We also have one of the best domestic sparkling wines here in New Mexico. (No points for guessing which winery.) You may even induce a few beer drinkers to switch. (OK, I'll give it up: I'm referring to Gruet Winery, which won a gold and best of show at Jerry Mead's New World

International Wine Competition, among other awards, according to the Web site at [gruetwinery.com](http://gruetwinery.com).)

Rosés provide a bit more backbone, but choose a French rosé or a domestic crafted in the French style. French rosés from Provence, Tavel or Languedoc are sure bets. Blush wines such as white Zinfandel are usually too sweet for most summer foods, even though they dominate wine sales. When a red wine is called for, look for one with lighter body and lower alcohol. Sometimes described as crafted in a lighter style, these wines receive less contact from the grape skins and therefore less tannin.

Another choice for red wine is sangria, but better to make your own than to buy it. Store-bought sangria can hide a lot of bad wine in a batch of fruit. There are several recipes available— all easy to make with fruits, sodas and other additives. You can even slip in some brandy for those friends who think sangria is "wimpy."

### **Think in the box**

When convenience is a priority and you're hosting a large party or a family picnic, you might even try "boxed" wines. OK, before you start booing this choice, consider a few facts. Boxed wines have evolved from the 5-liter jug wines of the past. Many better- quality wines are now finding their way into this format, but in a 3-liter size. While the older 5-liter boxes are still out there, most wine experts recommend the newer 3-liter versions.

Australia is ahead of us in this market, with nearly half of all wine down-under sold in boxes, or wine "casks," as they are sometimes called.

The reasons for wine-in-a-box are many. The wine bladder, hidden from view in the cardboard box, contracts as wine is drawn from it, eliminating the introduction of air that oxidizes and ultimately compromises a wine's taste.

Most producers claim a four-week window from when the wine is first opened. That includes both whites and reds. You'll have plenty of time to finish it, and no pressure to indulge in more than you need. Right, that'll help us be more responsible drinkers, won't it?

The packaging also saves the producers money, and that savings is passed on to the consumer. A glass bottle and real cork add a lot to the cost of wine. The transportable and nonbreakable containers are big benefits when taking wine on the road for a picnic. So what if you forgot the corkscrew— you don't need it.

However, these wines are not meant to be laid down; the permeability of the bladder means a shelf life of less than a year. So look for the freshness dating. Yes, you read that right, check the expiration date. And you thought that only applied to milk cartons.

Also bring a carafe in case you have a few wine purists in your midst. I have stayed away from boxed wine myself because of their jug wine reputation, and the fact that one glass usually gave me a headache, but I may

try one of the 3-liter boxes and get back to you. Unless I have a raging headache that day. Salut!

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