Summer is right time to slip into a lighter wine

by Maureen Clancy

Yeah, yeah. We all know the bit about springtime thoughts turning to love. But, trust us, there are plenty of other pressing issues to think about at this time of year. Like how you're going to look in that bikini and what intriguing white wines we're going to drink with the bright, fresh-from-the-garden food of the season.

That means time to expand our horizons. Forget heavy, oaky chardonnays. For kicks, let's even forget all the crisp, delicious sauvignon blancs washing ashore from New Zealand and the Italian Pinot Grigios that remain so popular.

Instead, we'll focus on the arrivistes of the marketplace - wines with names that are hard to pronounce but crisp, fruity flavors that are easy to drink - as well as the many refreshing, unoaked chardonnays that are out there.

These are versatile quaffs that pair well with a vast variety of foods (especially fruits and vegetables) and can celebrate a variety of occasions, from elegant wedding showers to simple TGIF meltdowns.

Most of these sippers are the color of pale straw and have a gentler alcohol content - between 8 percent and 12 percent. And, they're quite affordable, with many available for about $10.

ALBARINO

Fans of Spain's most fashionable wine praise its "salty sea-spray character." Made from grapes grown along the Atlantic coast, albarino is crisp, dry and highly aromatic. Its bright citrus flavors make it a perfect match for seafoods, especially tuna - raw, seared or in salade nicoise. However, Albarino's luscious tropical fruit undertones - peach, passion fruit and melon - make it a perfect partner for pork kebabs, grilled chicken with fruit salsa, and avocado salads as well.

- Albarino Burgans 2005: An elegant wine with an intoxicating fragrance. Minimal "sea-spray" character. Instead, the tropical fruit is front and center, making it delicious with grilled fish, chicken and pork, even with barbecue-sauced meats. About $10.

- Valminor Albarino 2005: Fresh, fruity flavors - think lemon, peach, pineapple - and a slightly grassy aroma characterize this refreshing wine. Do you detect a hint of white pepper? Possibly. Terrific with grilled fish, but push the envelope with a lusty paella or spiced-up crab cakes. About $12.

GRUNER VELTLINER

SUMMER SIPPERS - Light and bright wines stand alone or pair nicely with garden-fresh foods. CNS Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott.

Known by aficionados as Gru V, this newcomer to the U.S. market is hip, young, fresh and, yes, groovy.

(Not to get picky, but the proper pronunciation is GROO-nur FELT-lee-ner, not VELT-lee-ner.)

It's a medium-bodied wine, with a hint of fruit and a bit of spice working together to create vibrant flavors. Swirl a glass and you'll find peach, mango, melon and citrus. Gru V has a naturally high acidity level that makes it a refreshing choice for a warm summer day.

Gruner Veltliner is the principal wine of Austria. In the mid-80s, that country's wine industry was nearly decimated by a scandal (winemakers were adding a dangerous chemical to wines to make them taste sweeter). Since then, the industry has imposed and enforced tough regulations and now produces some excellent wines.

Some folks will probably seek out Gru V because it's cool. But serious fans like the way it pairs with many types of food, including those notoriously difficult veggies, artichokes and asparagus. It's an ideal partner for modern California cooking, which emphasizes fresh vegetables with minimal tinkering.

- Loimer Lois Gruner Veltliner 2006: Everything about this wine is edgy - the bright, limey color of the wine; the cool packaging right up to the lime-green screw top; and the delicious, in-your-face, I'm-different flavor. Expect plenty of citrus along with a zippy hint of white pepper. Enjoy with a great sunset, or at the table with fish, spicy guacamole or Asian stir-fries. About $13.

- Hirsch Gruner Veltliner 2005: The goofy "African-safari" label and bright lime-green color are all part of the racy image this wine cultivates. The taste is lively and refreshing; the texture is especially pleasing; the alcohol is just 11.5 percent. Try it with an herby tuna tartare or just hunker down with a bottle and some sweet-spicy pecans. About $14.

RIESLING

Long overlooked by wine fans focused on chardonnay and sauvignon blanc, this delicate varietal is now a hip quaff. Modern Rieslings come from several countries around the globe, but it's the traditional German wine that's prized for its purity and elegance. A subtle mineral quality and restrained fruit combine to make Riesling an exceptionally food-friendly wine.

- Saint M Riesling 2005: Made in Germany's Pfalz region for Washington state's Chateau Ste. Michelle winery, this is the ultimate in fresh, light, summery white wines. The alcohol is low (11 percent); the flavor is that of ripe peaches and apricots. It's ideal for sipping alone as an aperitif, and it's nearly impossible to find a food or dish that it doesn't go well with. About $12 at Barons, BevMo and Harvest Ranch.

- Dr. L Riesling 2005: Crafted in the Mosel valley of Germany by the same Riesling specialist (Dr. Ernst Loosen) who makes Saint M, this lovely, low-alcohol (8.5 percent) wine is a great summer sipper. Pleasing, juicy fruit flavor and the fresh scent of ripe pears. Good with ginger and garlic-spiked dishes as well as with poultry in citrusy marinades. About $12.

- Jacob's Creek Riesling 2006: This Aussie version tastes and smells more like the traditional German Riesling than many modern German Rieslings do. Meaning, there's plenty of natural mineral acidity at play with the vibrant lemon-lime flavors. Particularly good with summer entree salads and grilled fish. About $9.

VIOGNIER

Who can resist a wine that smells like the "breeze-blown perfume of springtime orchard flowers?" The Web site www.enjoyingviognier.com rhapsodizes thus about this varietal (pronounced vee-oh-NYAY), which has come on strong in the last five or 10 years.

Forty years ago, there were about 35 acres of these grapes planted in France. Today the grape is cultivated in California, Colorado, Washington and Virginia as well as France, Australia and Italy.

Viognier's biggest claim to fame is its aroma - a no-holds-barred combo of ripe apricots, peaches, orange blossoms, lime and mango. It's full-bodied with a creamy mouth feel. Viognier tends to have a higher alcohol level than our other under-the-radar summery whites. However, a well-made Viognier is a lovely, fruity thing that matches well with grilled fish and chicken (especially topped with fruit salsa), as well as spicy Asian dishes.

- Yalumba Y Series Viognier 2005: Medium- to full-bodied, with a hefty 14.5 percent alcohol content, this is not a wine for casual sipping.

However, its floral nose and fruity flavor are very appealing with food. Try it with mushroom-phyllo turnovers or lettuce wraps made with chicken or duck. About $10.

- Rabbit Ridge Paso Robles Viognier 2005: Prepare yourself for a wild ride. This is one big wine - 14.6 percent alcohol and robust flavors of flowers, fruit and spice. Sip it by itself and contemplate its complexity, or enjoy it with grilled chicken or mildly spiced dishes. The Rabbit Ridge Web site suggests pairing it with chilled cucumber-avocado soup. About $14.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

- Torrontes (tor-RON-taze) is Argentina's principal white wine. Similar to Viognier, it's medium-bodied, with a flowery aroma and the powerful flavors of peach pits, orange and pear. The big flavors of Crios de Susana Balbo Torrontes 2006 beg for big flavors on the plate. Try it with grilled pork, grilled fruits, Thai cuisine or barbecued chicken pizza. About $13 at BevMo.

- Gewurztraminer (guh-VERTS-truh-MEE-ner) is a highly aromatic wine best known for its spicy characteristics. Some versions are overwhelming in their heady scents and exotic flavorings. However, Jekel Monterey Gewurztraminer 2005 delivers pleasing ripe fruits and a flowery aroma while remaining light and lively. It pairs well with fresh fruit and ripe cheeses, as well as dishes made with hot peppers and curry blends. Also ideal for Asian and fusion fare. About $10.

- Vermentino. The Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino di Sardegna is a bright, fresh-tasting wine with the aroma of citrus, pears and a hint of spice. Its well-balanced, slightly grassy flavor marries well with grilled fish and shellfish, especially oysters. About $12.

SIDEBAR

Chardonnay lightens up

By Maria C. Hunt

Copley News Service

Say the word "chardonnay" and the wine that most often comes to mind is a rich and mouth-filling blend of butter, vanilla and custard.

Those flavors aren't in the chardonnay grape - the vanilla comes from aging in oak, and secondary fermentation can yield buttery notes. As much as some people like drinking this popular American style of chardonnay, it's hard to pair with food.

"When you have the overly oaked and butter characteristic of a chardonnay, it tends to kill your taste buds," said Ben Kaephart, general manager of Laurel Restaurant and Bar in San Diego.

Just in time for summer, a new, lighter breed of chardonnay - made sans oak like the famous wine of Chablis - is entering the market. Freed from the confines of oak, chardonnay offers light floral aromas, cleansing acidity and notes of fresh green pear and tropical fruits more associated with other white wines.

"I think as the sales of sauvignon blanc and Riesling have started to skyrocket, and with Pinot Grigio going strong, their popularity has opened up the American palate to the idea of a more crisp wine driven more by acidity and refreshment," said master somelier Andrea Immer Robinson, the first woman ever to named a master somelier in the United States.

American producers ranging from Domaine Chandon and St. Supery to Iron Horse Vineyards and Kunde Estate Winery & Vineyards are all making unoaked chardonnays.

Winemaker Michael McNeill of Keller Estate in Sonoma County said he found that he and his wife liked sipping Albarinos, Grenur Veltliners and sauvignon blancs with dinner. He decided to make a similar wine from chardonnay.

The result is his Keller Estate Oro de Plata ("gold from silver"), a reference to the stainless steel the wine is aged in. McNeill said they also pick the grapes at slightly lower brix, or ripeness, and use a chardonnay clone known for its floral qualities.

"I wanted that crispness and the bright acidity and that freshness," McNeill said.

Like white Burgundy and Chablis, these unoaked chardonnays are superior with food, said Joy Sterling, CEO of Iron Horse Vineyards in Sonoma County. The winery recently released a 2006 UnOaked Chardonnay that she loves with everything from spicy Asian cuisine to green salads.

"It's bone-dry, but there's a freshness and fruitiness to it that marries well with fresh vegetables," she said. "It's the ultimate California wine."

Meagan Burgess, corporate sommelier for the Ladeki Restaurant Group, said the unoaked wines are a "hand-sell," meaning they require some explanation because they can catch a diner expecting a traditional chardonnay off guard. But those who do try the wines like them.

"For those who love the length and flavor components of chardonnay but want to taste that instead of oak and butter, unoaked chardonnay is the solution," Burgess said.

SOME UNOAKED CHARDS TO TRY

2005 Brancott Gisborne Unoaked Chardonnay: Mouthwatering acidity and a blend of green mango, pear and young stone fruits make this an intriguing wine. $10.

2005 Four Vines Santa Barbara County Naked Chardonnay: This uncomplicated wine yields crisp notes of pear and citrus balanced by a hint of earth. $13.

2005 Iron Horse Vineyards Green Valley UnOaked Chardonnay: At once lush, supple and crisp, this wine offers flavors of pears, green mango and citrus. $26 at www.ironhorsevineyards.com.

2006 Keller Estate Oro de Plata Sonoma Coast Chardonnay: This is an engaging and lithe wine with notes of green pear and a hint of richness. $18 at Vintage Wines and The Wine Bank.

2005 Kim Crawford Marlborough Unoaked Chardonnay: Lively acidity lends a spritzy feeling to this floral wine with notes of golden apple and melon. $12.

2006 Domaine Chandon Unoaked Chardonnay: This wine strikes a balance between body and lightness with notes of citrus and green pear that linger. $20.

OTHERS TO TRY

2005 Kunde Chardonnay Nu. $13.

2006 St. Supery Oak Free Chardonnay. $20.

2005 Mer Soleil Silver Unoaked Chardonnay. $28.

2006 The Wishing Tree Unoaked Chardonnay. $8.

2004 Scarpantoni Unwooded Chardonnay. $12.

2004 Gravitas Unoaked Chardonnay. $13.

2005 Saint Clair Unoaked Chardonnay. $12.

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