

Bears' return to playoffs means parties

January 11, 2007 – As published in *The Beacon News*

The Chicago Bears and the playoffs, now that is what I call a perfect pair!

It's that time of year to plan your playoff football parties, whether you are tailgating at Soldier Field or celebrating at home with friends. This month's column will be devoted to tailgating party food and wines that both complement these spicy dishes and stand up to those bold flavors.

The Bears are "in" and so is California "Zin." Other wines that also work are France's southern Rhones and Australia's Shiraz. I will discuss all three of these reds, as they are fairly interchangeable and pair well with this menu. One of my goals with this column is to introduce readers to new wine experiences. So, I would encourage you to try something new at this year's football party.



Wine speak

Nothing beats the combination of a great grilled steak and California's Cabernet Sauvignons or France's Bordeaux wines.

However, football party menus tend to consist of chili, beef stew, braised meats and ribs. These flavors tend to be bold and spicy. To counter this, wines with loads of jammy fruit work well.

The following three wines, each worthy of its own column, will be briefly discussed today.

California (red) Zinfandel

Zinfandel is as unique as California. Its origins are European, but its exact lineage is the subject of much debate. Zinfandel tends to be loaded with fruit, has soft tannins and offers peppery spice notes. It is the second most widely planted red varietal in California, behind Cabernet Sauvignon. Key growing regions include Sonoma Valley and Dry Creek Valley, Napa's Spring Mountain District, Mendocino's Anderson Valley and the Paso Robles region of Central California.

France's Southern Rhone (syrah-based) wines

The Rhone Valley of France is divided into two regions, northern and southern. The southern Rhone's warmer climate, influenced by the Mediterranean, tends to produce wines with more fruit that are softer in nature. While the northern Rhone only uses syrah grapes in its reds, the southern Rhone's reds are primarily a blend of grenache and syrah, with small amounts of mourvedre, carignan and cinsaut. As syrah in the south does not have enough character on its own, these other varietals are blended to add complexity to the wine. Key appellations in the southern Rhone region include Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas and the Cotes-du-Rhone.

Australia's Shiraz

The southern coastline of Australia is home to this country's wine industry. The sunny Mediterranean-like climate on this coast ensures a quality grape crop most every year. Shiraz is Australia's leading red grape varietal, and makes up 40percent of its red grape production. Its origin is France's syrah grape. Shiraz has been grouped into two styles, cool climate and hot climate wines. The cooler climate tends to produce a more elegant style while the hotter climates tend to produce wines that are bolder and "more in your face." Key growing regions include South Australia's Barossa Valley, Clare Valley, McLaren Vale and the Coonawarra region. New South Wales' Hunter Valley, Victoria's Yarra Valley and Western Australia's Margaret River region round out this list.

Food and wine pairings

What these three full-bodied, dark red wines have in common are loads of jammy fruit, lower tannin levels and peppery spice notes that work well with football party menus. While any of the three wines will complement your football food, there are subtle differences for optimal pairings.

- Zinfandels: Great with chili, hamburgers, ribs, beef teriyaki.
- Southern Rhones: Great with ribs, beef stew, braised meats.
- Shiraz: Great with char-grilled steak au poivre, BBQ ribs, braised meats, beef stew.

Wines that I recommend that should be available by your local wine shop include (retail pricing may vary):

\$10 range

St. Francis "Old Vine" Zinfandel (may be closer to \$15)
Shenandoah Vineyards "Special Reserve" Zinfandel
Cycles Gladiator "Central Coast" Syrah
Twin Beaks Shiraz
Rosemount Estate Shiraz
Palandri - Western Australian Shiraz

\$25 range

Ridge Vineyards "Three Valleys" Zinfandel
Tobias Zinfandel
Domaine due Trapadis Cote-du Rhone
Pesquier from the Gigondas region of Rhone
Mr. Riggs "The Gaffer" Shiraz
Possum's Vineyard Shiraz (may be more difficult to find, but worth hunting down)

Until next month, happy tailgating and Go Bears!

Bill Garlough is an Aurora resident, Level 1 Master Sommelier and owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville. He can be reached through his website at www.mychef.com or by email at winepairings@mychef.com. Perfect Pairings/ Bill Garlough