



WHAT DO YOU, MATT DAMON, AND MILLIONS OF OTHERS HAVE IN COMMON?

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Wine

Reds, Whites and Prices That Won't Make You Blue

By Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg
Wednesday, August 13, 2008; Page F05

We marked the Fourth of July by setting off on an evening river cruise in view of the [Statue of Liberty](#), snacking on hors d'oeuvres of miniature hamburgers as we sipped glasses of Beringer zinfandel. This all-American celebration took place in Paris. The Statue of Liberty was the 35-foot-high version on the [Seine](#), a replica one-ninth the size of the 305-foot statue that graces New York's harbor.

The occasion was the kickoff of the Gastronomy by the Seine festival, held July 4-6, a first-ever celebration of New American cuisine in Paris. American and European experts on food and wine convened to meet one another and discuss issues related to global gastronomy.

Wine was a central topic: its role in creating flavors (during the "Flavors of Tomorrow" panel that we participated in), its contributions to the bottom line ("Business & Gastronomy") and plans to meet greater market demand ("Expansion of the Champagne Label").

After a day of presentations, we enjoyed the first sips of Andrew's pick this week: the NV Pommery Pop Champagne (\$15/175 ml), which can be found wrapped in a red, white and blue foil version of the American flag. This well-established, high-quality house's elegant prestige Cuvee Louise can fetch upward of \$300 a bottle for its 1998 vintage cuvee and 1999 rosé. We admire its efforts to make its champagne more accessible via this hip quarter-bottle size.

An even bigger surprise than finding ourselves drinking American wine in Paris was the wines' price points, which we learned later. For example, a 2004 Beringer Stone Cellars California Cabernet Sauvignon we'd sipped retails for \$8 (\$5 at Total Wine).

In a study widely released this year, participants' brain activity showed they experienced greater pleasure when drinking a wine they thought was more expensive. For us, the belated knowledge that the wines we had enjoyed so much in France were so inexpensive caused us to second-guess our judgment: Had we been seduced by the beauty of Paris and the good company of our fellow culinarians?

When we returned home, we put those wines to the real test, retasting them and others from the same wineries, both on their own and paired with food.

The NV Stone Cellars by Beringer California Cabernet Sauvignon (\$8; \$5 at Total Wine) is a light-to-medium-bodied berry bomb with a chocolate finish and just enough tannin to remind you it's a cabernet. The fruit flavors of the NV Stone Cellars by Beringer



(By James M. Thresher For The Washington Post)

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KAREN PAGE AND ANDREW DORNENBURG

KAREN'S PICK

2005 Beringer Founders Estate California Merlot

RATIONALE	This red wine might not be ready to solo, but it can play a standout lead in the chorus. Its pleasing, consistent performance won't let you down with red meats or red-sauced dishes.
COUNTRY	United States
REGION	California
WINEMAKER	Mary Sullivan
PRICE	\$11
GRAPES	merlot
COLOR	deep purple plum
AROMAS	plums, with the slightest hint of smoke and tobacco
FLAVORS	medium-bodied with plum and blackberry fruit; little to no tannin, but a light tartness that keeps the wine in balance
ALCOHOL	13.9 percent
PAIRS WITH	grilled hamburgers, sausages, lamb chops, steaks; pastas, eggplant and other dishes with red sauce
DISTRIBUTORS	District: Washington Wholesale Maryland: Reliable Churchill Virginia: Republic National

ANDREW'S PICK

NV Pommery Pop America Champagne

RATIONALE	This ultra-hip champagne with an American twist is an ideal size for individual sipping and goes with just
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California Merlot (\$8; \$5.60 at Total Wine) are reminiscent of a pie filled with blueberries and cherries, making this a wine not unlike a decent summer movie: pleasant enough while you're in the midst of it but not necessarily memorable.

But tasting the Stone Cellars and Founders' Estate merlots side by side yielded Karen's pick this week: the **2005 Beringer Founders' Estate California Merlot** (\$11; \$6.49 at [Calvert Woodley](#)), a tart, medium-bodied red with blackberry fruit that was a pleasant substitute for Chianti when paired with eggplant Parmesan with meatballs.

On our July 4 cruise, we also shared a glass of **2005 Gallo Sierra Valley California Chardonnay** as an aperitif.

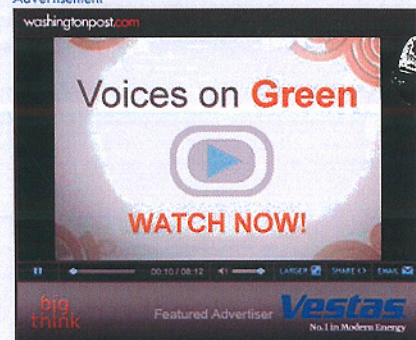
That led us to check out other Gallo offerings, including the **2006 Gallo Family Sonoma Vineyards Reserve Chardonnay** (\$9), a light-bodied white with notes of lemon and butter. We liked it on its own, and we appreciated it even more paired with roasted or grilled chicken. The **2005 Gallo Family Sonoma Vineyards Reserve Pinot Noir** (\$13) is a light-bodied red with tart cherry and strawberry flavors, notes of herbs (including bay leaf) and a slight licorice finish; its fruitiness stood up to mildly spicy pork chimichangas.

[Ernest Hemingway](#), in "The Sun Also Rises," rightly argued that fine wines deserve contemplation: "This wine is too good for toast-drinking, my dear. You don't want to mix emotions up with a wine like that. You lose the taste." But there is something to be said for well-priced, consistently pleasant wines made in sufficient quantity so they are easy to pick up for weeknight dinners or to buy for a crowd, especially for large-scale events that are informal and social and include toasting.

"Every bottle of wine has something to teach me," winemaker Brad McCarthy of Blenheim Vineyards in Charlottesville told us last year. "There is always something to learn. You know how it is: You go to a party and your friends say, 'I am so sorry, I have this wine. . . .' Don't worry about it: Even if I've never had it before, I will appreciate it. I don't care if it is Gallo Hearty Burgundy. They make a million-plus cases of the stuff and manage to make it the same every year. Brilliant!"

Michel Cloes, the 49-year-old chief executive of CCN-World who has organized high-profile gastronomy events in New York, San Francisco and Paris in the past two years, has "absolutely" seen interest in wines rise during that time.

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"It stems from a true revolution in the winemaking process all geared to a more consistent quality of wines year after year," he says. "Let's not forget that in France, as in other winemaking countries, people drank mostly bad table wines year in and year out. Only unexpected, exceptional harvests brought on good wines to the market."

Who'd have thought it would take a trip to France to remind us of the bounty of good-value American and American-themed bottles that we typically sail past at home? It's about time we stopped to take a closer look.

Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page, authors of "What to Drink With What You Eat" and the forthcoming "The Flavor Bible," can be reached through their Web site, <http://www.becomingachef.com>, or at food@washpost.com.

	about anything except red meat
COUNTRY	France
REGION	Champagne
WINEMAKER	Thierry Gasso
PRICE	\$15 for 187 ml
GRAPES	90 percent chardonnay, 10 percent pinot noir and pinot meunier
COLOR	golden straw
AROMAS	apples and toasted brioche, with a whisper of vanilla
FLAVORS	apples and pears with a hint of vanilla-like sweetness and lots of active tiny bubbles
ALCOHOL	12.5 percent
PAIRS WITH	a wide range of lighter dishes: popcorn, sushi, chicken, turkey (and turkey burgers), pork or veal
DISTRIBUTORS	District and Maryland: Bacchus Importers Virginia: Virginia Imports

Note: Prices are approximate. Check WineSearcher.com to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through the distributor.

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