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BARBECUE WINES

So here we are in the middle of summer, eating—and often cooking—outdoors whenever possible. It's not exactly a time of year for fine wine or expensive wines; the emphasis instead is on solid, lively flavors that will stand up to warm weather and cuisine from the grill. Here are a few ideas that will perfectly suit your lifestyle this time of year. We'll start with a pair of whites, one from each hemisphere.

2003 Maculan Pino and Toi \$12

The Maculan family produces some of the very best wines of northeastern Italy, specifically the region around Verona and Venice. Their 2003 Pino and Toi is a delicious, dry white crafted from tocai, pinot bianco and pinot grigio grapes. The combination results in a refreshing wine, unadorned by oak and, thus, emphasizing citrus, melon, pear and peach flavors. It's rich—2003 was a notoriously hot year—yet delightfully balanced with acidity and a lingering finish.

2003 Pegasus Bay Riesling \$25

From the other end of the world comes a truly delicious Riesling, the 2003 Pegasus Bay. It was the big hit at a recent blind tasting of Rieslings

from around the world, knocking off a number of much more famous and more expensive examples. It featured a wonderful balance between scents and flavors of flint and steel on the one hand and fresh fruit laced with light floral notes on the other hand. There was a hint of sweetness, but it was poised against racy acidity—no wonder so many connoisseurs will tell you that Riesling is the finest grape of all!

With the ongoing excess of wine grapes in most of the world, we're seeing more and more new labels on grocery and wine shop shelves. Most of these are not really wineries at all, but marketing exercises designed to get rid of the overabundance of wine without damaging the pricing structure of better-known and established wineries.

Usually, there are more money and effort put into eye-catching label design, expensive or unusual bottles, and creative, amusing names than there is into the wine itself—hence, the quite attractive pricing on most of them. And while most of these wines are pleasant at best, a few of them do stand out.

2003 Rabid Red \$14

The memorably-named Rabid Red is a mix of several different grapes—what did they leave out? The result is fruity in the extreme, with a lush, juicy character that entices. There's a sweet touch of oaky spice in the background, and the texture is mouth-filling and soft with barely perceptible tannins. A more crusty critic than I might find it a bit on the simple side, but for me it's too pleasing to complain about such niggling details. I'll just enjoy another glass.

2003 Lengs and Cooter Shiraz "The Victor" \$18

At the same trade tasting where I discovered the Rabid Red, I had the opportunity to taste the newest vintage of a wine I've quite liked in the past. The only slightly less curiously-named 2003 Lengs and Cooter Shiraz "The Victor" is a mouthful in both senses of the word. Typically dark and showy, it offers up the jammy fruit flavors of warm-climate Syrah—ripe berries and pepper spice with a hint of smoke and game; its very sexy and satisfying.

How can you have an article about barbecue wines without including at least one Zin?

2003 Bogle "Old Vine" Zinfandel \$12

To maintain tradition I offer you the 2003 Bogle "Old Vine" Zinfandel, a classically ripe and brambly example of this most American of wines. Rich and full, but with soft tannins that make it very drinkable, even without food, the plum and berry fruit on display also show a light touch of earth and spice. Very pleasing!

2002 Muculan Brentino \$18

We'll come full circle with the 2002 Maculan Brentino, a Bordeaux-style blend from the same folks whose white I recommended earlier. While Maculan has long been thought of as a fine producer of whites, especially of dessert wines, they are just now gaining a reputation for their reds. This combination of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes shows the sweet, spicy influence of oak aging, along with its ripe fruit flavors and hints of dried leaf. It's a fine value at this price, probably in part because all of the \$80 Maculan red called Fratta was declassified and blended into this Brentino. The 2002 vintage was a cool one and they decided not to release their showcase red because it didn't measure up to their standards. But it's clearly helped make their modest red a great buy.

There you have it, the wines I'll be using to toast summer this year—*à votre santé!*