

washingtonpost.com

Suited for the Super Bowl

By Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg
Wednesday, January 30, 2008; F05



If the two teams competing in Super Bowl XLII were wines, what would they be? Gary Vaynerchuk, host of a popular wine webcast, is as passionate about football as he is about wine, so the question we asked him wasn't rhetorical.

The New England Patriots? "Classic Bordeaux, 1982." The New York Giants? "Cava, which is a major underdog in the sparkling-wine world," Vaynerchuk told us, adding, "But I would root for cava, while I'd never root for the Giants."

Vaynerchuk, 32, is a die-hard Jets fan, as he has made clear to anyone who has tuned in even a handful of times to his groundbreaking weekday webcasts on Wine Library TV (<http://tv.winelibrary.com>), of which Episode 400 is due to play this month. "If WLTV aired on television instead of the Web, I would now have the longest-running show of all time," he jokes.

Besides hosting the webcasts, Vaynerchuk is director of operations at Wine Library, a New Jersey store that also sells wine online. Though many in the traditional wine world have never heard of him, his unorthodox yet undeniably entertaining way of describing wines (think less "cassis" and "tobacco" and a lot more "Cocoa Puffs" and "Big League Chew") has created a passionate army of a reported 40,000 regular viewers known as Vayniacs, one of whom even created Episode 125 as a tribute to WLTV. Their ranks continue to swell after Vaynerchuk's recent appearances on National Public Radio, "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," "Ellen" and "Nightline."

Vaynerchuk has been called "an underground phenomenon" by Doug Stewart, owner of Breggo Cellars in California's Anderson Valley, whose staff had to work overtime after a rave review on WLTV led to 200 e-mails and 20 orders in less than 24 hours. Rob Newsom, owner of Boudreaux Cellars in Leavenworth, Wash., went a step further and called Vaynerchuk "outside of Robert Parker, probably the most influential wine critic in the United States." And lest anyone think Vaynerchuk is interested in selling wine above all else, one viewer analysis had him slamming two-thirds of the wine on the show -- including some sold by Wine Library.

He's definitely the biggest football fanatic of any wine professional we've ever met. Attending 10 or more NFL games every year, Vaynerchuk knows he's not the only fan who's also passionate about wine. "Fifteen years ago, I would walk past tailgaters and wonder, 'When am I going to see wine instead of beer at tailgates?'" Vaynerchuk recalls. "In the early 1990s, I started to see boxed wines, and by the late '90s, I noticed bottles of Kendall Jackson, Clos du Bois and Meridien."

The real turning point was a 2003 visit to FedEx Field when the Redskins and his beloved Jets opened the season. "I finally saw someone with a bottle of Pride Cabernet," a cult wine, he says. "And last season was out of control: I saw rows of tailgates with nothing but wine. Yes, there were some magnums of Yellow Tail and Woodbridge, but also lots of intriguing Barbera d'Astis, dolcettos and even a Rhone Rebel. It looked just like a wine tasting."

On Super Bowl Sundays, Americans do more home entertaining than on any other day of the year and eat more food than on any day other than Thanksgiving. "Wine has been around since the beginning of time to bring people together. With the Super Bowl being the major social event of the year, the two belong together," Vaynerchuk says.

He is partial to white wines -- "The occasion calls for a raucous time and sudden interceptions, and you don't want to get red wine on your friend's carpeting" -- and recommends white Rhone blends, high-end Albarios from Spain and whites from Greece. He's a fan of the **2006 Leitz Dragonstone Riesling** (\$15) for its "great fruit and spritz action" that is "very driven by the apple and pears that make this wine a home run."

Among reds, he's keen on New Zealand pinot noirs "that are like the love child of Burgundy and California pinots" and even more passionate about the quality of reds coming out of Portugal's Douro and Dao regions at "ridonkulously low prices."

With ham-and-cheese subs or cheese pizza, you might want to grab a light-bodied pinot, such as one of two light-fruited ones designated Vin de Pays d'Oc: the **2006 Domaine Brunet Pinot Noir** (\$10) or the **2005 Heron Pinot Noir** (\$12), which Vaynerchuk and we recommend, respectively. Or as a match with your homemade chili, you could try a riper, spicier **2005 Penfolds Koonunga Hill Shiraz** (\$12).

However, our main picks this week are both carpet-friendly whites. Both do such a great job of cutting through the fattiness that marks the day's typical fare -- spicy chicken wings and snack foods galore -- that we easily could have flipped a coin to make either one our own favorite.

Karen swears by the **2006 Quara Cafayate Valley Torrontes** (\$9), which, with the fruitiness of juicy, ripe peaches and its crisp, dry finish, was a perfect match for guacamole and even held its own against steak-topped nachos.

Andrew is equally keen on the lively **N.V. Segura Viudas Aria Estate Brut Cava**, lush with ripe-pear flavors, made in the traditional methode champenoise and a steal at \$12, plus a great match for virtually everything on your Super Bowl buffet. Yes, Vaynerchuk calls cava an underdog wine, but this one is a champ, in a league of its own.

TIP: Down These

Here's what to drink with some of the most popular Super Bowl fare:

Chicken wings: sparkling wine; or Riesling, syrah/shiraz or zinfandel

Chili: Beaujolais, Cotes du Rhone, syrah/shiraz or zinfandel

Guacamole: Champagne, unoaked chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, Torrontes

Nachos: sparkling wine, Torrontes (with white meat), zinfandel (with red meat)

Pizza (pepperoni or sausage): Barbera, Chianti, lighter-bodied zinfandel

Popcorn: champagne or other sparkling wine

Fudge brownies and chocolate chip cookies: Banyuls, muscat, port or PX sherry

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