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Entertaining: Wines under \$20 that taste great with pork shoulder

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With nippy November days ahead, the wine panel sought wines to match with a rustic fall dish: Cider-Braised Pork Shoulder with Caramelized Onions. This tender pork dish boasts several practical advantages. It's incredibly simple, inexpensive and can be made ahead.

Best of all, it requires only 30 minutes of prep time, after which you just ignore it for two to three hours as it braises. The result is a savory, fork-tender pork shoulder. It's even better made a day in advance and reheated. We found ourselves passing the salt grinder at the dinner table, so be bold and salt the meat liberally before cooking.

As with previous dishes tasted by our panel, matching wine to the sauce proved the key to successful pairing. Although the braising liquid is apple cider, plentiful pan juices render the sauce only slightly sweet. And although it's loaded with meltingly tender caramelized onions, the sauce retains a fairly light character. As for the juicy, garlic-studded pork, it's a relatively neutral meat that welcomes the sauce's light apple sweetness and a wine that's not overbearing.

Finding the right wines proved more difficult than we thought. We sampled 16 wines under \$20 and one wine outside of our budget. More than a few were too heavy-handed for the sauce. Out of 13 whites, which included chardonnay, viognier, riesling and pinot gris, only three made the cut. And although half the wines sampled were in the \$10 to \$15 range, all of our winners were closer to \$20.

Our panel favorite was a citrusy chardonnay – from New Mexico, surprisingly. Only one of four reds sampled had the right soft, fruity profile to mesh with the dish. Just for grins, at the suggestion of guest panelist and master sommelier Barbara Werley we tried an elegant craft beer that came out a winner.

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The Dallas Morning News Wine Panel tastes with roast pork shoulder with caramelized onions.

Here's what we learned from this tasting:

- Overly oaked whites delivered a bitter finish when tasted with the dish. A light amount of oak worked well in two of our fruity white selections.
- We passed on whites that were too light in weight compared with the heft of the dish.
- We had high hopes for a German riesling kabinett, but it lacked the acidity to stand up to the dish.
- Among reds, we dismissed wines deemed either too grapey, too oaky, or too earthy. The winning red had ripe pure fruit, and a hint of oak.

THE TASTERS

Blythe Beck: executive chef, [Hector's on Henderson](#)

George Howald: Serendipity Wine Imports

Paul Pinnell: Owner and general manager, [Dali Wine Bar & Cellar](#)

James Tidwell: certified wine educator and sommelier at [Café on the Green](#), The Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas at Las Colinas

Barbara Werley, master sommelier; wine director, [Pappas Bros. Steakhouse](#)

Cathy Barber: Taste, editor

Misty Bailey: Assistant Taste editor

Tina Danze: freelance writer

THE WINES

Marqués de Cáceres Crianza, La Rioja, Spain



(\$18.99. Widely available)

Crianza isn't a varietal; it's a term referring to the amount of time a Spanish wine has been aged one year in oak, and another year in the bottle for those from the Rioja region. Made of 85 percent tempranillo, this wine's ripe cherry, strawberry and raspberry flavors laced with cinnamon notes proved an ideal partner for the pork. "It's simple, soft and fruity, with no bitter finish," said Barbara Werley. "It's the best of the reds [sampled]." James Tidwell noted that unlike other reds, it's "not gushy-fruity, not bubble gummy grape-y. It's ripe pure fruit without a lot of oak." Blythe Beck liked the way the wine "meshes well with the fat" in the pork and the mashed potatoes. George Howald hailed this as "a balanced wine that integrates nicely with the dish."

2006 Gruet Chardonnay, New Mexico



(\$18.99. Central Market; Pogo's; Winestyles; Sigel's, Greenville and Inwood locations)

Made by the same French-owned winery acclaimed for great, inexpensive sparklers, this delightful chardonnay was the panel favorite. It's a complex, fruity wine with pear, citrus, apple and vanilla flavors, and a whisper of oak. "It's got a citrusy note that highlights all the flavors in the dish," said James Tidwell. "The brightness of the citrus refreshes the palate, and actually heightens the impression of the dish," added George Howald. Blythe Beck hailed the wine's acidity, noting that it "brings out all the flavors and marries them together. It's my favorite by far." Paul Pinnell praised the wine's complexity.

2007 Paco & Lola Albariño, Spain



(\$18.99. Pogo's; Costco in Plano and Lewisville)

Crisp and fruity, this lively, refreshing white made a fun match. "It's a good introductory albariño for people who might be scared of it," said Barbara Werley. "It's not a serious wine, but it goes well with the food. You could use it as an aperitif before dinner, and then go into dinner with it." Paul Pinnell pronounced it a fun wine, adding that the "hints of apricot in the nose go with the hints of sweetness in the caramelized onions." James Tidwell praised the wine's "forward and ripe flavors," that worked especially well with the onions. "It doesn't have the weight of the pinot gris we chose, but it has very developed flavors and doesn't shy away from the dish," said George Howald. "Going back and forth between the dish and the wine makes a very pleasing sensation."

BUDGET BUSTER: 2007 Riefle Pinot Gris, France



(\$22.99. Pogo's; Veritas; Perry's Beverages; Cork; Central Market, Southlake; Crush in Flower Mound; and Devine Cellars, a new wine market in Coppell)

This Alsatian wine would have tied for panel pick had it been within our stated budget. Given its quality, it's worth the extra few dollars. It's a full-bodied wine with rich concentrated fruit, hints of apricot, and a silky mouthfeel. Barbara Werley called it "the best of the bunch," citing its "nice rich mid palate that bounces off the onions," and its "nice finish." James Tidwell called it "a well-made wine, with enough finesse," adding that the wine showed "ripeness of fruit," rather than a sugary fruit quality. "It has acidity, but it's not a sharp, piercing acidity; it's just enough to cleanse the palate." Paul Pinnell felt the wine had the requisite complexity to stand up to the dish. "It gives an impression of sweetness and oiliness." When compared with the bitter finish of another pinot gris sampled, George Howald felt this wine scored points for having a more subtle finish.

BONUS: BEER PAIRING

Éphémère, Canada



(750 ml., \$6.99. Central Market; Whole Foods Market; Market Street; Hall's Grocery; Kegs & Barrels; and most major liquor stores)

This apple-based white ale from Unibroue brewery in Montreal is amazingly elegant, and proved a fun, alternative pairing for our cider-braised pork.

Like sparkling wine, the lightly effervescent beer comes in a corked bottle, sized for sharing. It's a refreshing Belgian-style ale, with green apple flavors laced with coriander, orange zest, and just a hint of sweetness. "It has a richness in the mid palate, and a simple finish that's not overdone – and the fizz doesn't hurt," said Barbara Werley.

Blythe Beck called it "a fun pairing." She liked how the beer's flavor profile "mirrors the flavors in the dish." At \$7, the ale makes a terrific budget alternative to wine for this dish.