

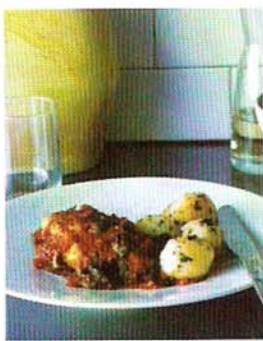
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Gourmet

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Wine advice for this month's menus and beyond. BY GERALD ASHER

**DINNER IS IN SESSION**
PAGE 172

When demand for Armagnac began to decline some years ago, the local growers found a new use for the white grapes from which it is made. They modified the way they handle Colombard and Ugni Blanc to produce crisp, aromatic dry wines that make the palate tingle. The newly arrived '07 of Colombelle, perhaps the most widely

available of them, is both mouth-filling and refreshing, its hints of lime, lemon, and mango offering a stimulating partner for the Sydney dish of pasta with crab and preserved lemon that starts our cooking-school menu.

My alternative wine for this dish, for those who might prefer something in a lower key, is made from another grape once used extensively in the production of Armagnac. Folle Blanche, or Picpoul, is grown in the Languedoc, close to the Mediterranean, where it is known as Picpoul de Pinet, taking its name from one of the villages there. Hugues Beaulieu's Picpoul de Pinet '07 is milder than the Colombelle, its aroma and flavor offering notes of grapefruit rather than lime. It is also fleshier and softer. But, in its different way, it works just as well with this dish.

The garlic and tomato of the *sauce provençale* accompanying the chicken calls for a red wine from the hilly country where the lower Rhône Valley and upper Provence merge in the high sweep of the Luberon, the slopes of Mont Ventoux, and the ancient villages below and around them. The Côtes du Luberon Rouge '05 of Domaine de Fontenille is reserved on the nose but substantial on the palate. It's a wine in which Syrah lends lively elegance to the plush depths of Grenache with a brusque touch of Carignane to give it just the right amount of refreshing astringency. A combination of the plump fruit of Grenache and the elegance of Syrah is the basis of most wines of this region, but the role of Carignane, though decreasing, is still significant. In the Mountagniero Côtes du Ventoux '04 of Domaine Les Terrasses d'Eole, a high-altitude estate exposed to the winds that scour the Rhône Valley (hence the reference to Aeolus, the mythical god of the wind), there is less Grenache and more of both Syrah and Carignane. Though the wine is more intensely fruity, it is structured on the palate—an advantage with the tomato sauce. The St. Maurice Côtes du Rhône Villages '03 of Domaine de Deurre, from a vineyard farther north, is made from Grenache and Syrah alone. Its longer time in barrel and bottle comes across as a little creaminess of oak on the nose, a subtly evolving flavor, and a smooth texture. A red wine of Gigondas, equally appropriate for this dish, has rather more weight and structure than my other recommendations (though neither is heavy) thanks to a proportion of sturdy Mourvèdre supporting the usual Grenache and Syrah. Mourvèdre gives backbone to a wine, and, as it ages, a velvety depth. The Cuvée de Beauchamp '05 of Château de Montmirail, made with fruit from the oldest vines on the estate, has appealing finesse on the nose, deep flavor, and a broad structure.

LEARNING JAPANESE
PAGE 188

Chenin Blanc has the right texture for the subtleties of Japanese food. It is silky, with silk's discreet strength, but it also has an appropriate aroma, suggestive rather than assertive, and a flavor in which one can find strains of mineral, citrus, and peach. Some of the best of California's Chenin Blanc is produced from grapes grown in Clarksburg, a small and unusual grape-growing region in the cool delta of the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers, where they join together in a web of islands and wetlands before escaping into San Francisco Bay and the Pacific. At one time, several California wineries offered a Clarksburg Chenin Blanc, but the Clarksburg growers increasingly plant Chardonnay instead (popular demand for this variety makes it more profitable for them)—our loss. Now I can find only two, and both are worth seeking out for this menu. Baron Herzog's Clarksburg Chenin Blanc '06 is bright and lively, with exactly the shimmer of aroma and flavor the food's medley of tastes and textures needs. The other Clarksburg Chenin Blanc '06, from Dry Creek Vineyard, has an added buttery quality. Sadly, there is no Clarksburg fruit in Bogle's Chenin Blanc '06, even though the winery is in Clarksburg, but it has a refreshing citrus emphasis with a mineral finish, as does the ForestVille '06—which also has honeysuckle notes. For a touch of barrel and a little age, try Foxen's Ernesto Wickenden Vineyard Chenin Blanc '05. Grown on old vines in the Santa Maria Valley and fermented partly in French oak (that's where the creamy texture comes from), it has hints of mineral and fresh bread.

**RECOMMENDED WINES****DINNER IS IN SESSION****WHITES FROM SOUTHWEST FRANCE**

Colombelle, Vin de Pays des Côtes de Gascogne '07	\$9
Hugues Beaulieu, Picpoul de Pinet, Coteaux du Languedoc '07	\$10

REDS FROM RHÔNE-PROVENCE

Château de Montmirail, Cuvée de Beauchamp, Gigondas '05	\$27
Domaine de Deurre, St. Maurice, Côtes du Rhône Villages '03	\$18
Domaine de Fontenille, Côtes du Luberon '05	\$14
Domaine Les Terrasses d'Eole, Mountagniero, Côtes du Ventoux '04	\$12

LEARNING JAPANESE**CHENIN BLANCS**

Baron Herzog, Clarksburg '06	\$9
Bogle, California '06	\$9
Dry Creek, Clarksburg '06	\$12
ForestVille, California '06	\$6
Foxen Vineyard, Ernesto Wickenden Vineyard, Old Vines, Santa Maria '05	\$20