



Epicure's Delight

Navigating and choosing from 2012's food and wine festivals.

By Scott Jones

★ | Some go to rub shoulders with their favorite celebrity chefs. Others attend for the opportunity to sample a rare, first-growth Bordeaux. Then there are those who unapologetically confess it's simply an opportunity to treat themselves to a leisurely weekend. Whatever the motivation, there's no denying the popularity of food and wine festivals. And with cold weather in the rearview mirror, there seems to be one happening almost every weekend.

As you might imagine, these festivals come in all shapes and sizes — running the gamut from laid-back afternoon affairs to high-end multiday

events complete with all the glitz and glamour of a big-city bash. (Then again, some chefs and wine-makers are bona fide superstars). You're as apt to find a wine tasting geared for casual enthusiasts as you are cooking demonstrations aimed at true aficionados.

Before you grab your favorite linen shirt and panama hat, check out these tips to ensure you choose and navigate your next outing like a pro.

Consider the Location

Never underestimate the power of a beautiful setting to make everything seem a bit more special. Whether near a body of water, on the grounds of a resort, or atop a mountain, a festival's location will likely be easy on the eyes. A desirable location is a component of the overall experience, but there are other considerations. Look over the festival's layout. Don't want to be on your feet all day? Pick one with a few sit-down events. Determine the layout (and event size) beforehand so you can structure your time to suit your travel style and physical needs. Also think about the time of year. If it's midsummer, say, choose a festival with a mix of

The best play is to have something light to eat before you get there, then have only a nibble or sip while sampling. This doesn't mean you can't go back for seconds — but it's wise to explore rather than gorge soon after arriving. If possible, try light foods before heavier fare. Likewise, sample white wines before reds, reds before fortified (i.e., port, Madeira) or dessert wines. Another mission-critical step is to stay hydrated. My rule: a glass of water for each glass of wine. If it's hot and humid, make that two glasses of water. Those in the know

carry a refillable bottle. Also, don't be afraid to use the spit or dump bucket when sampling wine. Those tiny one-ounce pours can add up before you know it. If you're in for a multiday event, pacing is even more important — take advantage of naps and exercise to keep you match-fit.

Be Adventurous

Here's a chance to step (or baby-step) outside your culinary comfort zone. Follow up a familiar food or wine with something that's not on your radar

screen. This is how gems are found. You don't like it? No sweat. Move on. What's more, festivals are by their very nature convivial gatherings, so don't hesitate to chat with those around you. Have a question for a chef or wine-maker? Ask away. There's no telling what you'll learn or what insider tips the conversation will yield. ✕

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Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta

SEPTEMBER

September 6-9

Hawaii Food & Wine Festival

Besides the not-to-be-missed "Girls Got Game" Sunday brunch featuring women chefs and farmers, there's an excursion through an 800-year-old agricultural area that ends at a picturesque mountain stream with a seated, multicourse lunch. hawaiifoodandwinefestival.com

September 13-16

GrapeFest, Texas

This popular festival — held in Grapevine, about 20 miles from Dallas and Fort Worth — hosts the People's Choice Wine Tasting Classic, the largest consumer-judged wine competition in the nation featuring more than 100 Texas-produced wines. For the adventurous, there's a grape stomping competition with a chance to capture the coveted Purple Foot award. grapevintetexasusa.com

September 26-30

Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta, New Mexico

While it has steadily grown in popularity and size, this laid-back event is still all about celebrating the local

New Orleans Wine & Food Experience

community. The weekend culminates with the Grand Tasting at the Santa Fe Opera, where 75 of the city's top restaurants serve their very best alongside 90 wineries from across the country. santafewineandchile.org

September 28-November 11

Epcot International Food & Wine Festival, Florida

Lasting more than a month, this festival offers an impressive diversity of food and wine with an international flair — everything from wine seminars by specific wine-growing regions to themed food-and-wine pairing dinners. Plus, you have access to all the Epcot attractions.

NOVEMBER

November 1-4

Seeing Red Wine Festival, Florida

A special reserve wine tasting geared for the true enthusiast highlights this festival, which is held in the picturesque beach town of Seaside, where the beaches are consistently voted some of the most beautiful in the world. There's also a more casual



Hawaii Food & Wine Festival



Grand Tasting featuring domestic and international wines, as well as live music and food. seeingredwinefestival.com

November 11-18

Music to Your Mouth, South Carolina

This Lowcountry festival drips with Southern charm and features everything from wine dinners pairing the South's top chefs and sommeliers in a course-for-course battle to a moonlit oyster roast along the May River. The festival is held at Palmetto Bluff, where attendees can explore more than 20,000 acres of biking and hiking trails. music toyourmouth.com

DECEMBER

December 7-11

Palm Beach Food & Wine Festival, Florida

Don't miss the Grand Tasting, where you can sample wines from around the world while noshing on food from James Beard award-winning chefs. A must-see event is the Grand Chef Throwdown, a spirited, head-to-head cooking challenge hosted and judged by Food Network personalities. pbfwf.com