



JOHN WILSON

That Friday feeling

Mark the end of the working week by opening a special bottle or two

I LOVE FRIDAY nights. Both I, and She Who Must Be Obeyed spend much of the working week outside of the home. Like many in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, weekdays involve heated debates on child-minders/crèches/who is home on time/is there any dinner? But come Friday, we have rules. No going out, nobody invited in, no answering the phone. We push the boat out a little and try to have a nice civilised meal, something special, but simple to prepare, and a nice bottle, or two, to drink alongside it.

Generally, we have something to nibble – dry-roasted sunflower and pumpkin seeds, roasted almonds, sometimes just cheese and onion. Around this time, the first bottle is uncorked. A good aperitif will stimulate and refresh both palate and mind. In recent years, we have come to drink more low alcohol wines, but this is crucial before a meal. On an empty stomach, a glass (or two) of a monster wine with 15 per cent alcohol will have you reeling before you even sit down.

Low alcohol means wines from cooler climates. We usually drink something at around 12 to 12.5 per cent, and there are plenty of options once you start thinking, including: much of France, for example, the Loire, southwest France, Alsace and even parts of Languedoc; Galicia and Rueda in Spain; most Italian whites; Sauvignon from Chile, New Zealand or South Africa; and Riesling or Semillon from Australia.

In recent months, we have taken to slurping down a half-dozen oysters each, served simply with lemon juice and black pepper – a wonderful treat, made even better with a glass or two of Champagne. My all-time favourite starter, however, is crab. I love the salty sweetness of this crustacean and much prefer it to lobster. I like it served cold in a salad, and pride myself on my crab salad, which can be put together in less than 10 minutes. As a general rule, I do not go overboard on food and wine matching, but crab and Riesling is a match made in heaven. The other wine to go for is Rías Baixas, or a Godello from Galicia. Both seem to accentuate the natural richness and flavour of crab, while lifting it with their crisp acidity.

The main course will usually consist of a roast (not quick, but very easy), or steak, or a piece of tuna or other fish grilled, served with salad in a wine-friendly, vinegar-free dressing. The choice of meat determines the wine. There is something very soothing about chopping vegetables, and I love nothing more than dicing peppers, onions, tomatoes and herbs for a salsa, while my eight-year-old commis chef sits on the counter beside me “testing” the various vegetables.

One firm favourite is roast chicken. Stuffed with a lemon (pricked all over with a fork) and half a dozen peeled cloves of garlic, this requires very little work. The chicken should be free-range, and preferably organic. To drink alongside, I sometimes go for a full-flavoured white wine (a Chardonnay is perfect), but a light to medium-bodied red is even better. In fact, just about any red wine will do, so long as it doesn't overwhelm the chicken. Wisdom has it that steak requires a robust red wine; in fact, I often find a medium-bodied red such as a Cabernet Sauvignon or lighter Syrah does the trick. Or, as any Italian will tell you, a good Chianti is perfect with grilled beef.

A word about price. I do not spend a vast fortune on expensive bottles of wine. However, if we were eating out, we would probably be paying €20 to €30 for a fairly average (if we are lucky) bottle of wine. I prefer to spend the same amount on something that will really raise our homecooked meal out of the ordinary. Generally, that means a €15 to €25 bottle of wine, but occasionally I will splash out, and crack open something really special, costing up to €40 a bottle.

BOTTLES OF THE WEEK

Val de Sil Godello Sobre Lias, Valdeorras 2006, 13.5%, €20. This wine goes against all the criteria mentioned above. It is oaked, and weighs in at 13.5 per cent alcohol. However, the oak is imperceptible, and wine is so perfectly balanced and fresh, it went brilliantly with a starter of scallops with herbs and lemon. This is a delicious plump rounded wine with succulent, juicy canned pears and a touch of pineapple, too. Worth every penny. **Stockists:** Liston's, Camden Street; 64 Wine, Glashule; Dunnes, Donnybrook; The Wicklow Wine Co, Wicklow; Ennis Butchers, South Circular Road, Dublin.

