



## *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

## Wine & Dine |

indoor and outdoor activities (or at least opportunities for a shady break).

### Have a Plan

You don't have to go all Clark Griswold here, but it does pay to do some online reconnaissance. Visit the festival's Web site to review the list of events and order advance tickets. (Many sites provide a downloadable schedule and map.) A little preparation is a must if you're attending a big multiday festival where celebrity-driven seminars, marquee demonstrations,

## ANOTHER MISSION-CRITICAL STEP IS TO STAY HYDRATED. MY RULE: A GLASS OF WATER FOR EACH GLASS OF WINE.

and off-site dinners often fill up fast and require tickets above and beyond the general admission price. In addition, creating a "must do" list provides a general game plan that keeps you focused on the fun with the flexibility to adjust on the fly. Social media can also get you headed in the right direction before your arrive and while on-

site. Most festivals have a Facebook page and Twitter hashtag, both of which are terrific ways to ask questions and get the inside scoop.

### Slow and Steady

Even experienced festivalgoers have to remember to pace themselves. This is particularly useful advice for first-timers.

## WHERE (AND WHEN) TO PLEASE YOUR PALATE



New Orleans Wine & Food Experience

### MAY

May 22-26  
**The New Orleans Wine & Food Experience, Louisiana**

In celebration of its 20th anniversary, the festival has added the Big Gateaux Show, an international cake competition and tasting. Pastry chefs from around the world will create a signature anniversary cake to be paired with Nicolas Feuillatte Champagne. [nowfe.com](http://nowfe.com)

May 31-June 3  
**Auction Napa Valley, California**

This is the playground of real wine aficionados. After taking in parties hosted by the folks behind some of the world's most recognized wines, you can watch big spenders bid on mind-blowing wine lots and exotic getaways (with proceeds going to local charities). Fun for all. [auctionnapavalley.org](http://auctionnapavalley.org)

### JUNE

June 15-17  
**Food & Wine Classic in Aspen, Colorado**

Now in its 30th year, this is the place to see and be seen. Although the price is as steep as the Rockies, attendance is capped at 5,000, allowing you to rub shoulders with the who's who in food and wine, including practically every celebrity chef on the planet. For the truly inspired, there's even a 5K race hosted by Bobby Flay. [foodandwine.com/classic](http://foodandwine.com/classic)

### JULY

July 5-8  
**Park City Food and Wine Classic, Utah**

With more than 100 food artisans, wineries, and locally made products to sample, this is the ideal spot for the culinary enthusiast with a taste for the outdoors — with everything

from a bike tour of Park City and Deer Valley to an off-road Bald Mountain ride finished off with a wine lunch by the St. Regis waterfall. [parkcityfoodandwineclassic.com](http://parkcityfoodandwineclassic.com)

July 19-21  
**California Wine Festival: Santa Barbara, California**

Showcasing more than 300 wines from around the state, this lively event also includes a healthy dose of live jazz to complement the beachside setting. Additionally, there are seminars and rare wine tastings for those eager to learn more. [californiawinefestival.com](http://californiawinefestival.com)

### AUGUST

August 31-September 2  
**Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, California**

The must-experience event of the weekend is Taste of Sonoma, which features more than 100 wineries and the area's top chefs. After a full day of sampling, cool your heels in the Gloria Ferrer Bubble Lounge with small bites and exquisite bubbly. [sonomawinecountryweekend.com](http://sonomawinecountryweekend.com)



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. ✕

*Scott Jones, former executive editor of Southern Living, is the president of Jones Is Hungry (jonesishungry.com), a culinary media company.*



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](http://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. [grapevintexasusa.com](http://grapevintexasusa.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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://pbfwf.com)