

2009 A time to eat, drink and be frugal

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For thirsty Canadians, the big question for 2009 will go something like this: What pairs with meat loaf?

I don't know about you, but I find it a small consolation in this recession to see former trophy-wine hunters jostling with the plebes for \$8 screw-cap reds in the South American aisles of the liquor store. Statistics show that during downturns people drink just as much because they want to drown their sorrows (or, as I like to say, gin makes a good tonic). But they spend less, trading down to cheaper stuff no matter what sipping bracket they used to be in.

"It's already started: People are looking for more value products at lower price points than they have in the past," says Shari Mogk-Edwards, vice-president of merchandising at the Liquor Control Board of Ontario.

If recent patterns are any indication, we are about to ring in the Year of Mugs and Malbec. One of the most conspicuous trends tracked lately by the LCBO is a flight to beer. Indications are that the suds have not suffered as badly as liquor or wine, traditionally the retailer's mainstays. Ms. Mogk-Edwards says the shift is unusual given the onset of cooler weather, when beer sales usually drop off sharply.

Within the beer market, growth continues to favour craft brews, premium brands made typically by the small, independent brewers that have sprouted up across the land over the past 20 years.

The economic malaise is playing into another trend, bargain wine from Argentina. Ms. Mogk-Edwards says the trend is exemplified by the Fuzion phenomenon. That's a reference to Zuccardi Fuzion, a smooth, well-crafted shiraz-malbec blend that sells for \$7.45 in Ontario (\$8.20 in Quebec). Already a bestseller for two years in Quebec, it was released this past summer by the LCBO and instantly set cash registers ringing. Ms. Mogk-Edwards says many discerning customers who normally shop at the

province's Vintages fine-wine stores started scooping it up by the case. For choosy wine drinkers, recession may never have tasted so good. The wine is available in some other provinces and may soon be rolled out in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and British Columbia.

Malbec, Argentina's signature red, has become the go-to choice of a generation of consumers with exacting palates yet frugal dispositions. Count on 2009 to be the year a lot of people discover other varieties emerging from the southern hemisphere's largest wine producer, such as cabernet sauvignon and bonarda. Hot tip for white- and pink-wine lovers in Ontario: The Fuzion chenin blanc-chardonnay blend and a shiraz rosé are slated to be released in April at the same \$7.45 price. A different Fuzion white and the same rosé are already available in Quebec.

Spain, Portugal and the southern regions of Italy, such as Sicily and Puglia, and France, such as the Languedoc, also are likely to play into the new value imperative. In short, the Mediterranean will be hot in 2009.

And so will Canada. More Canadians will almost certainly drink a lot more Canadian wine next year. The numbers have been trending that way for some time, but many consumers in 2009 also will get their first exposure to barrel-aged reds from the much-hyped 2007 vintage, widely hailed as the best ever, particularly in Ontario.

Expect a handful of wineries in Nova Scotia to make a splash, too, notably Benjamin Bridge, which specializes in sparkling wines and this past year released - and quickly sold out of - a magnificent Moscato d'Asti-styled off-dry white wine called Nova 7.

Domestic wineries will hone their marketing skills, too, encouraged by the success of brands such as Girls' Night Out, a line of value-priced wines from Ontario aimed at women. Made entirely from domestic grapes (and thus qualifying for the Vintners Quality Alliance seal of approval), they feature silhouettes of dainty party dresses on the label. "They're going after the female consumer, which I think is fabulous and long overdue," Ms. Mogk-Edwards says. "And they're good value and they're VQA. So, to me, it's a home run."

The drink-local movement won't be limited to wine and craft beer. Canadian whisky, long overshadowed by the boom in premium vodka sales, has started to rebound. New ultra-premium brands such as Canadian Club 30-year-old, Crown Royal Cask No. 16 and Forty Creek have invigorated the category. And let's not discount the effect of *Mad Men*, the hit TV series set in the early 1960s whose main character, a U.S. advertising executive, knocks back Canadian Club in the afternoon the way, well, ad executives knocked back Canadian Club in the afternoon in the sixties.

And speaking of spirits, yes, all the cool people will continue drinking vodka all the time in 2009. Yawn.

Red will continue to be the preferred wine colour of Canadian drinkers, but among the snob set, white will make a well-deserved comeback. "The wine people are swinging back toward white now," says Mark Taylor, owner of Cru, a chic wine bar in Vancouver. Mr. Taylor says it's getting easier to tell who the wine geeks are in a crowd because they're ordering gruner veltliner, Vouvray and marsanne-roussanne blends, all white wines unpopular with the chardonnay- and pinot grigio-sipping masses. His own bestseller among 35 wines by the glass is the excellent Burrowing Owl Pinot Gris from British Columbia.

The B.C. liquor board foresees continued growth in riesling and dry rosé (as opposed to sweet, pink zinfandel), two categories once shunned by Canadians because of misperceptions about sweetness.

A few shopping trends are emerging. Next year look for more high-end domestic wineries to jump on the "futures" bandwagon. Modelled after a tradition among the Bordeaux chateaux, this system of advance sales gives customers the opportunity to buy wines, usually by the case, at a guaranteed price months and in some cases years before they're released to wholesalers and distributors. Among the wineries already offering futures are Laughing Stock Vineyards in British Columbia and Stratus in Ontario.

And in 2009, more Canadians will discover the home-delivery joys of shopping for wine and spirits online. They'll log on to winery websites or to independent retailers/shippers in their respective provinces, such as Wineonline.ca.

The LCBO's Vintages department recently launched an online shopping site, Vintagesshoponline.com, featuring a selection of rare products, including Balblair 1989 Scotch, Château Haut-Brion Blanc (a \$795 Bordeaux that some collectors consider the world's best white wine) and Mission Hill Oculus and Burrowing Owl Cabernet Franc, two trophy reds from British Columbia.

In the West, the B.C. Liquor Distribution Branch, like most other provincial retailers, does not permit online shopping but says it is monitoring the LCBO initiative.

The Internet will also continue to shift the power balance away from pretentious experts toward average consumers. Ms. Mogk-Edwards says today's new wine shoppers aren't embarrassed to ask questions. "They're so used to hopping on the Internet and finding out about something. There isn't that intimidation factor that some of us grew up with. They're not afraid to go out and ask or talk to each other."

Fuzion, she says, is an example. Consumers seized on a few early reviews by critics (including yours truly) and began exchanging their own reviews online, creating grassroots buzz for the brand. "There's been no promotion about Fuzion in any of our stores, and customers are coming in and buying it and looking for it by the case," she says. "It's viral. It's quite a phenomenon."

Coincidentally, Fuzion also makes a nice match for meat loaf.