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IN THE HEAT OF THE SUMMER, LIGHT RED WINES CAN BE A COOL OPTION

By John Mariani

Now that late-summer heat has descended over most of the U.S., the thought of drinking big, heavy cabernet sauvignons, Barolos and Pomerols with outdoor food is about as appealing as wearing a sweater to the beach.

Yet most wine lovers wouldn't want to go through August and Labor Day weekend drinking nothing but white wine and rose, especially if the food on the grill is steak, lamb or hamburgers. The solution is to drink lighter reds, particularly those that can chill down a little and be refreshing while matching the richer flavors of red meat.

When I say chill, I mean slightly, to 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit (10-13 degrees Celsius). That's roughly the recommended cellar temperature for all wines, though it's a bit too cold for drinking big reds.

The good thing about light reds is that they will go well with anything a full-bodied white will, except simply grilled or sauteed white fish like bass, sole and halibut. Even then, if they're made with a red-wine-and-butter sauce, that same wine would be the most rational choice to accompany the meal.

Light reds go very well indeed with mussels, octopus, scallops, salmon, mackerel and monkfish. And they hold up with red meats, as long as they're not doused with hot seasonings.

Petite Sirah

Finally let me recommend a varietal we don't see nearly enough of -- petite syrah, or petite sirah, which was once believed to be related to the Rhone Valley's syrah but is actually the grape known in the Rhone as the durif.

You won't find much of it in France anymore, but it's still propagated as petite syrah in California, where a few examples are worth seeking out. The 2005 Bogle Vineyards Petite Sirah (\$12) is a beauty, full of black cherry flavors and spice, just the thing to go with smoky barbecue, even if there's pepper and sweetness in the accompanying sauce.

In every case, go with the younger vintages, stick them in the fridge for 15 minutes or the freezer for five, and sip them under an umbrella or swinging in your hammock to induce a good summer's nap.