



BY JAYMI CURLEY

IT'S TAILGATE TIME!

FALL MEANS FOOTBALL, AND A RETURN TO AMERICA'S NO. 1 PARKING-LOT PASTIME

Image credit: Daniel Aguilar/Reuters/Corbis

The Labor Day cookout may be summer's official last hurrah, but you don't have to silence the sizzle of the grill just because you've traded in your sunscreen for a sweater. Tailgating, once a simple parking-lot party for die-hard football fans, has exploded in recent years to become an all-out social event. In 2006 alone, well over 20 million people set up shop in stadium parking lots all over the country to eat, drink and root for their favorite teams, according to the American Tailgaters Association.

"Tailgating is the last great American neighborhood," says Joe Cahn, the self-proclaimed Commissioner of Tailgating. Cahn has traveled more than 500,000 miles in his 40-foot Country Coach to attend more than 500 tailgate parties. "In this day and age—where we hunch over computers, we don't go over to the neighbor's house, we don't even pick up the phone before we've

checked the caller ID—the tailgate is where we can all get together," Cahn says.

Tailgates started out as low-key affairs involving a cooler of beer and some burgers dispensed out of the back of a pickup truck, but the pregame party has become a decidedly more elaborate event. The recreational vehicle rental industry earns more than \$350 million dollars a year, due in part to the popularity of renting RVs for premium comfort on tailgating trips. Doug Russ, co-owner and general manager of Atlanta-based RV Connection Rentals, has seen his tailgating rentals soar over the past five years. "We get 300 to 400 rentals over the three months of football season," says Russ. "NASCAR rentals are big, too. There's three or four NASCAR events every year that sell out our rentals completely."

The average tailgater spends between \$200 and \$500 per year on tailgating food and

supplies, and the variety of foods has gone far beyond the old standbys. Tailgaters nowadays are grilling up cedar-planked salmon, shrimp scampi, pork loin roast, filets of beef, and a host of other outdoor delicacies. Depending on the time of day, you might see tailgaters setting out a breakfast spread of filet mignon with eggs benedict and fluffy German pancakes, or a full sit-down dinner of turkey with all the trimmings.

In the early part of football season, when the tailgate party is apt to get hot, most tailgaters will dive into the cooler and pull out a frosty beer. Bob Townsend, beer columnist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and editor of *Southern Brew News*, says beer's long-standing popularity can be traced to its image as an easy-drinking, sociable beverage. "Beer has traditionally been an everyman drink," says Townsend, "the drink of the working man, the drink of the sports fan. It's changed in recent years—go down to the Brick Store [a pub in



Decatur, Ga.] and you'll see sophisticated beer drinkers drinking upscale craft brews—but it's historically populist. Pub culture in America, England, Germany and Belgium has been around a lot longer than the wine bar. Also, beer is refreshing. The carbonation cleanses the palate. It has bright flavors and not so much acidity. I think beer is so much easier to pair with food."

Steve Farace, spokesman for Sweetwater Brewing Company, has his own take on beer's perennial appeal. "Beer is a communal thing," Farace says. "It's cold. It's lower in alcohol than wine or liquor, so you can drink more before feeling the effects. It's simple—no glass or mixing required."

But why is beer so beloved of the nation's grill masters? "Everybody knows beer goes with spicy food," says Jordan Fleetwood, brewmaster of Twain's Billiard and Tap, a popular brewpub in Decatur, Ga. "The hops complement the flavors of barbeque and hamburgers, but even subtle dishes like fish are complemented by something like a pilsner."

There's one more reason beer is so popular at tailgates: "Beer is more transportable, so it's great for outdoor events," says Fleetwood.

The friendly everyman image of beer is acquiring some polish with the recent explosion of microbrews and seasonal beers. According to the Brewers Association in Boulder, Colo., sales by craft brewers increased 11.7 percent by volume in 2006. "The craft beer market has shown a large increase, especially among the younger age groups," says Fleetwood. "The public's taste buds are getting more sophisticated. Beer is no longer just something to drink to get a buzz."

Farace says that as people learn more about the diversity of beer, they begin to appreciate the wide variety of flavors craft beers can offer. "People are just starting to learn beer's complexity," he says. "There's a beer for any tailgating food. Even desserts: a nice stout with chocolate and malt flavors, a lambic with fruit. Beer goes with anything, except maybe cotton candy."

While beer has long been king of the tailgate beverages, many tailgaters are turning to wine as a refreshing counterpart to their game-day meals. Renee Rowe, owner of The Wine Cellars in Smyrna and founder of the African American Wine Tasting Society, acknowledges that beer may be the traditional tailgating favorite, but wine is definitely making inroads.

"Typically, you're outside, it's hot, and you want something ice cold, so people automatically think beer," says Rowe. "But dry Sauvignon Blancs, Rieslings and especially rosés can be chilled just as easily and just as cold."

Many wines make an excellent complement to the basic four food groups of tailgating: spicy, cheesy, grilled and sweet. "Sauvignon Blanc is dry, crisp and citrusy, so it goes great with grilled salmon," says Rowe. "And rosé is a great all-purpose outdoor wine. It's wonderful with burgers on the grill, hot dogs, fried chicken and potato salad. You can get a fruit-forward one for spicy food, or something drier and more complex for meats."

Wine's health benefits aren't lost on inveterate tailgaters, either. "Light beer hasn't got a lot of flavor," says Russ, "but a nice wine has great flavor, and without all the carbs and calories of beer."

Web sites devoted to tailgating abound on the Internet, offering everything from delicious outdoor recipes to advice about tailgating necessities like cups, chairs and first-aid kits. But on one point, everyone seems to agree: the most important element of a successful tailgate is gathering a lot of good friends.

"I've tailgated myself for years. It's just more fun with a group," says Russ. "You need lots of food and beverage, a good group of six to eight of your buddies, and plenty of time to enjoy yourself."

Jaymi Curley is Wine Report's editorial assistant and an Atlanta-based freelance writer with a secret recipe for fantastic barbecued ribs. She'll never tell you, though.

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