

What do stress awareness, wine and square dancing all have in common?

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ALEX LASSITER: Hello, lovely people! It's Alex Lassiter with the Minnesota Daily, and you're listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

At the time of this episode coming out, we're past the threshold of Halloween, and have now entered into the filler month of November. I'm one of those people who gets so excited for the holiday season that the second October is over, it's "Jingle Bells, Batman Smells" until the start of the new year and sometimes a little bit past it.

Of course, the main festivity of the month us Americans celebrate is Thanksgiving, which falls on Nov. 28 this year. There are some religious observances near the beginning of the month, like the Catholic All Saints Day and Hindu Diwali, which both fall on November 1.

But I'm interested in the really niche holidays. The ones people aren't raring to have a celebration for. Ones where people celebrate not with friends or family, but with a glass of wine or by dancing a little jig. So I did some digging, and I found some folks willing to talk to me about some of November's lesser-known holidays, and, if you'd like to, how you can celebrate them.

First, and likely most topical for us college students, is International Stress Awareness Day on Nov. 8. University of Minnesota psychology professor Liza Meredith said though stress is a spectrum, there are some ways to know if you're getting too burnt out.

LIZA MEREDITH: There's not, like, you know, three things to figure out if you're stressed or not, but I think some commonalities. A lot of times when you're feeling stressed, you also are more irritable.

Are you avoiding things? Sometimes you have to avoid things in order to get things done, but if you're in a state of constantly avoiding your partner or your friends or your family because you feel so overwhelmed. That might be a sign that you have too much going on, especially if you're avoiding things that you normally care a lot about.

LASSITER: Meredith focuses primarily on college student mental health, and she was more than happy to provide some tips for students overloaded with work in the middle of the semester, like myself.

MEREDITH: We sometimes talk about there being two major strategies you can use with stress. You can problem solve some of the time. That's one branch. The other is to do more work in terms of managing your emotions.

Doing things like taking breathers, trying to stay present, going outside for fresh air, talking to a friend, calling home—things that make us realize that our life is bigger than any assignment that we're working on.

LASSITER: If you've just now become aware of International Stress Awareness Day and you're looking for ways to celebrate, the best option you've got is to take a self-care day.

MEREDITH: Well, I think about in terms of the short term, trying to do something that makes you laugh. Like humor can be a really helpful perspective for getting through a hard time. So watching a funny show or talking to a friend that makes you laugh can really help you in the short term.

I also think getting outside can do a world of good. For me, if I just walk down to the river and go on some of the walking paths sort of by the hospital, it's like a total perspective change, even just to get away from the lecture halls. So I think that can also help in the short term, just getting out of your space that may be very stress inducing for you.

LASSITER: And indeed, these things all do help to relieve stress in the middle of a busy semester. If you're looking to re-center with International Stress Awareness Day, taking a self-care day may just be the best way to do that. But you know what else helps relieve stress? A glass of wine, for those of us over the age of 21, of course.

The day right after International Stress Awareness Day, Nov. 7, just so happens to be International Merlot Day. I'm trying to learn more about wine and winemaking on a personal level, so I jumped at the chance to speak with Drew Horton, an expert in oenology at the University. Horton has quite a bit of professional experience working with merlot — in fact, the first commercial wine he ever made in his winemaking career was merlot.

DREW HORTON: Merlot is not a style of wine. Merlot is a grape — it's a cultivar. Just like cabernet sauvignon is a specific grape. Merlot is a little bit more tender. Its skins are a little thinner. The berries are a little smaller. The color is a little lighter, and it has a little less tannin than cabernet sauvignon.

That being said, there are many people who much prefer merlot, even though cabernet sauvignon is so popular and so widely planted around the world. And I can speak for myself — I prefer a well made merlot over a well made cabernet because there's just a little more subtlety, a little more finesse.

LASSITER: When someone brings up fruits from the U of M, the one that comes to mind the quickest for most people is the Honeycrisp apple. However, the U has a few grapes they breed for use in wines. One of these is the Marquette, which Horton said blends well with a merlot.

HORTON: After you sort-of master the basics of making a pure wine, making a merlot, making a chardonnay, making a Marquette. After you've sort-of mastered that and gotten really good at that, the final thing to learn as a winemaker is how do blends work?

And we winemakers are sometimes a bit of mad scientists. We literally sit around with little, little eye droppers and little graduated cylinders and samples of the wines and we sit there and make, uh, different blends and different percentages.

One of the things about the Marquette grape is it's a little low in tannin. Tannin is that sort of chalky feel on your tongue and it helps bind the color and it helps give the wine structure when you taste it. And so, the Marquette grape is low in natural tannins. And so blending some portion of cabernet or merlot or something with Marquette does make a rounder, fuller wine.

LASSITER: And what better way to celebrate a holiday dedicated to a wine than to pour a glass of said wine? In the Bordeaux region of France where merlot originates, the go-to winery is the Chateau Petrus, where a quality bottle of merlot goes for around \$3,000. Since that's just a little out of the price range for most college students, Horton recommended checking out local wine shops in the Twin Cities instead.

HORTON: So if you go to a good wine cellar, and I encourage people to go to smaller wine shops with individually chosen wines run by owners or proprietors who really care about your enjoyment. Certainly you can go into Total Wine, and there's a wall of merlot and on the top shelves are going to be the \$80 and \$100 bottles and there's going to be the \$40-50 bottles. Then the \$35 bottles and then down at the bottom somewhere or on the stacks at the end, \$12 and \$15 bottles. So but I would encourage people to try a French Bordeaux regional Merlot.

Of course, merlot is a red wine, so there's always the old adage, red wine with red meat and white wine with fish. And merlot is rather bold, so I would say it would go with grilled or roasted red meats. Then again, for our vegan and vegetarian friends, merlot goes very, very well with different cheeses.

Things like mushrooms, savory vegetable preparations, ratatouilles. Keep in mind, there are fish that don't necessarily like white wine. Salmon is a very, as we know, very flavorful, very oily, very rich fish—sometimes will overpower a white wine. And so a lighter bodied French-style Merlot could go very, very well with a nice piece of roasted salmon.

LASSITER: Once your stress is relieved and your wine bottle is empty, there are some other holidays peppered throughout the middle of the month. Americans celebrate Veterans Day on the 11th. Nov. 16 is the day to set a Guinness World Record. And I hope at least one of you gets me some flowers for International Journalist Day on the 19th. But for the most part, November starts to fall into a slump. I think it might have even gotten bored of itself.

However, the day after Thanksgiving, on Nov. 29, you can arise from your food coma and burn off all of that turkey, mashed potatoes and pie by celebrating a unique and active holiday — Square Dancing Day.

DAN SAHLSTROM: You know, three to five miles worth of brisk walking, you know, low impact aerobic activity, and the fact that the American Heart Association gives it a double thumbs up. They really like square dancing, not just for the elderly, but for anybody that walking is really good.

LASSITER: Minnesotan square dancing caller Dan Sahlstrom has been keeping in step with the rhythm for most of his life.

SAHLSTROM: My parents and I got involved in modern American square dancing in 1978. So at that time I was 12, which, you know, I didn't think this was cool or I was going to enjoy it, but it intrigued me in the choreography. And I was extremely, it worked in my head, you know, I understood.

I got interested in the calling aspect very early, and so I started learning the craft of actually calling modern American square dancing. So I've been doing that for 45 years and I did it full time for about 30 of those years.

LASSITER: During our conversation, Sahlstrom told me something I didn't know. That back in the 1970s, the U used to have its very own square dancing club called Wrong Way Grant, named after a square dancing move.

SAHLSTROM: They'd have 20 or 30 squares, which is about 250 people dancing every week. So it's really a social thing once you get involved in, like I said, you can travel all over the states and even many other countries and have this in common with people. So we got involved out of friends inviting it and then we stayed involved, especially I got involved in the calling.

So it became a big part of our social life and we met a lot of friends there that we still have today. I met my wife there through square dancing and my kids all dance now. So it's enjoyable.

LASSITER: Unlike the other two holidays, square dancing can require a little more commitment, since it is a learned skill. Sahlstrom's advice for anyone looking for a way to celebrate the holiday? Go out and take your very first lesson.

SAHLSTROM: So what does that look like? You're learning, maybe five to 10 calls. Pretty simple stuff. Normally we use kind of what people expect for music. You get a little banjo picking in there. I'll throw in a variety and, you know, put a little "Moves Like Jagger" or something in just to let them know there's a variety of music you can dance to.

The hard thing about getting into square dancing is finding a place where you can just start anytime. Traditionally, lots of clubs start their class in September, and they go for, you know, six, seven months, dancing once a week to teach those moves.

Well, we've kind of grown up in our idea that people don't want to spend that much time doing it, so we have what's called "Blast Classes," where you can come in and you spend maybe three hours and take a dinner break and another three hours. And in those six hours, you cover, like, a good half of the calls. And then you only have, you know, how many weeks, then you can learn the rest of those. And then the world opens up to you in square dancing.

LASSITER: If you're interested in learning more about square dancing or how to sign up for classes—I know I sure was—you can reach out to Sahlstrom via email: dan@dansahlstrom.com. His next Blast Class will be taught at the Hotfoot Stompers Square Dance Club on Nov. 23, just in time for Square Dancing Day.

As I said earlier, November is a filler month, the often forgotten middle child of the latter three months. You don't see people dressing up as a bottle of merlot, or placing presents under the square dancing tree. But that's part of the charm of a month like November—you get to explore new things.

Things you never thought you'd try. And sometimes, they stick. Horton and I are in talks for a wine tasting now. Sahlstrom and I might set up a square dancing lesson. And that self-care day is looking more and more appealing by the hour. So maybe the greatest holiday to celebrate is life itself, and all the little activities it has to offer regardless of when they fall during the year.

This episode was written by Alex Lassiter and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in and feel free to send a message to our email inbox at podcasting@mndaily.com with any questions, comments, concerns or ideas for episodes you'd like to see us produce this season. I'm Alex, and this has been In The Know. Take care, y'all.