

SUCCESSFUL WINE PAIRINGS

MATCHING WINES WITH FOODS

The ability to successfully pair food and wine is growing in importance for today's chef. Clients have a more educated palate and are willing to pay for dining experiences that focus on the marriage of wine with food offerings. Tasting menus are an integral part of menu offerings in many restaurants and demonstrate the collaboration between the chef and sommelier. In many establishments, the role of the sommelier is critical to the success of the restaurant. The management of the wine cellar to provide offerings that match with the menu and meet guest expectations and budgets is a key operational goal of the establishment. If a chef does not have the necessary skills to pair the menu with wines, then a collaboration is necessary. For establishments that cannot afford a sommelier, working with a reputable wine merchant is important to providing greater guest satisfaction.

There are no easy rules in matching foods to wines. The general guidelines are just that—general. One cannot assume that, because Cabernet Sauvignon is supposed to go with beef, any Cabernet will work with any beef dish. Marinades, seasonings and herbs used in the preparation or garnishing of the dish will all affect the suitability of a wine to pair. Very often it is the sauce that must be matched to the wine as it will have the dominant flavours. The chef may put more or less of a seasoning in the finished dish, changing the flavour sufficiently to render the wine pairing as less suitable. Or, the chef may change the supplier of an ingredient, resulting in different flavour characteristics.

Further compounding the difficulty of a successful match is the changing nature of the wine itself. Is the wine young or aged? From what vintage did the wine originate? The characteristics of the grapes will vary from year to year in the same vineyard. Growing conditions affected by the weather play a huge role in the resulting wine. Even the same vinifera (variety) in adjacent vineyards will have different characteristics as a result of different ages of the vines, mineral content of the soil, exposure to the sun, and slope of the land. A Chardonnay, depending on where it is from, may be described as light and citrusy or heavy and buttery; both are Chardonnay, but rarely would both work with the same dish.

Do you complement or contrast? In other words, should one match a rich fish dish with a buttery Chardonnay, or contrast with a Sauvignon Blanc, or pair up with a light red? One needs to keep in mind that an acidic wine will intensify the effect of spicy hotness while a sweet wine will mellow it out. Some foods are very difficult to pair with wine, in which case beer, sherry or mineral water may provide a better match.

TASTE COMPONENTS

Many factors make up taste. Some experts identify four basic taste or flavour components, while others count up to fourteen different components. The four basic components are generally identified as **sweet, sour, salty and bitter**. Some people recognize astringency as a component (for example, tannin in tea or red wines). The Japanese speak of the *umami*, the savoury taste of protein. Gray Kunz and Peter Kaminsky even talk about “funky” as a taste: the stinky characteristics that some foods, particularly aged ones, exhibit.

The various nuances of the basic categories may be further identified and these are compounded by the importance of texture in the food as part of the taste sensation. Is it soft, mushy, crunchy or meaty?

EXPLORING FOOD AND WINE PAIRINGS

Experimenting with food and wine pairing is quite easy. Organize sample portions of five or six different foods with varied characteristics. Pour samples of three or four red or white wines (do not mix the red and whites in the same tasting sample). Taste each food with each wine varietal or vintage. Keep a record of your impressions of how the two match up, noting the differences between the same food with a different wine. You can educate your palate to recognize successful pairings and ones that just do not work. The food and wine may fight with each other for dominance, or the taste of either may become unpleasant when paired with an inappropriate choice. When the food and wine truly complement each other, the sensory pleasures are definitely worth the experimentation and refinement of the food dish to get it right.

GRAPE VARIETIES AND ASSOCIATED FLAVOURS

Following is a listing of the major vinifera and some of the commonly identified flavours and aromas associated with them. When creating a dish to match a wine, it is a good idea to review the tasting notes and recommendations from the vineyard that produced it and build from there. Your own creativity and skills can shine through. Some wine producers sponsor annual competitions to allow chefs an opportunity to create perfect matches to newly released wines.

Pinot Noir

One of the great wines of the world, Pinot Noir has been cultivated for over 2000 years. Originating in France, it is cultivated in most world wine producing regions with great success. It tends to be a full-bodied wine with rich, complex characteristics. Pinot Noir grapes are also used to produce sparkling wines (Champagne) and rosés. Flavours and aromas associated with Pinot Noir include

- fruit such as raspberry, strawberry, currant, cranberry, cherry, orange and watermelon
- florals such as violet and rose
- spices including ginger, clove and vanilla
- herbs such as mint and sage
- earthy flavours like truffles and mushrooms
- Parmesan cheese, cooked bacon and roasted nuts

Try Pinot Noir with tuna, salmon, swordfish, chicken, duck, game birds, grilled meats and pork.

Shiraz/Syrah

Originating in the Rhône valley, this grape varietal has been taken up by the Australians, who have done wonderful things with it, often marketed as Hermitage. Shiraz is a big-bodied wine that has deep flavours and good aging potential. Flavours and aromas associated with Shiraz include

- fruits such as plum, blackberry and raspberry
- spices including white pepper
- herbs such as rosemary and thyme
- earthy flavours of mushrooms, potatoes, beets and truffle

Blue cheeses, beef, venison and tuna are good bases to start from.

Merlot

Originating in the Balkans, Merlot is a rich, fruity wine noted for its smoothness. The Bordeaux region produces the greatest percentage of world supply. It is often blended with Cabernet grapes. Flavours and aromas associated with Merlot include

- fruits such as berries, plums and black cherries
- spices including pepper, anise, vanilla and licorice
- herbs from the mint family (basil, oregano, sage and thyme), bay leaf, tea and grasses

- earthy flavours of Asian mushrooms
- vegetable flavours such as olives, beans, sweet peppers, beet and potato

Chocolate, red meats (including duck), barbecue and soy all work well with Merlot.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Also originating in the Balkans, Cabernet is considered the king of grapes. Widely cultivated, it is characterized by an odour of cedar and black currant. It may be light or full bodied, and young Cabernets are often so tannic (astringent) that aging is required. Flavours and aromas associated with cabernet include

- fruits such as currant, blackberry and cherry
- spices including vanilla, cinnamon and pepper
- herbs from the mint family, bay leaf, tea and tobacco
- vegetable flavours including black and green olives, sweet peppers
- earthy flavours of mushroom, oak and eucalyptus

Aged creamy cheeses, braised, barbecued and grilled meats including game, Asian foods and chocolate pair well with Cabernets.

Sauvignon Blanc

Originating in the Mediterranean, Sauvignon Blanc is an aromatic wine ranging in flavour from herbal to vegetative. It is characterized as an acidic wine. Flavours and aromas associated with Sauvignon Blanc include

- fruits such as grapefruit, other citrus, pineapple, other tropicals including figs and melon, apple and plum
- spices including black pepper, vanilla and juniper berry
- florals such as honey
- herbs from the mint family, lemon grass, lemon verbena, cilantro, and dill
- vegetable flavours ranging from cucumber to peas, asparagus, sweet peppers, beans, garlic and green olives
- nutty flavours like peanuts, pistachio, almond and hazelnut

Sauvignon Blanc works well with white fishes, oysters, scallops, chicken, pork, goat cheese and tart sauces.

Riesling

Rivalling Chardonnay for the title of the greatest white grape, Riesling is most popular in Germany. Northern German styles are fruity, light and acidic with a hint of sweetness. Dessert wines associated with this variety include Ausleses, Beerenausleses and Trockenbeerenausleses. Alsace is the home of the southern-style wines, which are dry and full bodied, therefore much easier to match to foods, unlike their northern cousins. Flavours and aromas associated with Riesling include

- fruits such as citrus, apple, melon, pear, apricot and peach
- spices such as ginger and fennel
- herbs and vegetables including cucumbers, capers and artichokes
- nuts like almonds

Firm aged cheese, freshwater fish, sole, shellfish, turkey, chicken and veal work well with Riesling.

Gewürztraminer

Thought to originate in Italy, this spicy, full-bodied varietal is best known in Alsace. Often overlooked due to its name, this wine is an interesting addition to a tasting and matches up with foods that would kill most wines. Flavours and aromas associated with Gewurztraminer include

- fruits such as grapefruit, apple, nectarine, lychee and apricot
- spices including cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, star anise and cardamom (as in curry)
- vegetable flavours like zucchini, green olives and garlic

Try Gewürztraminer with ham, sausages, shellfish, and Muenster and Asiago cheese. It is one of the few wines that will stand up to Asian, Tex-Mex, Indian and Thai cuisines.

Chardonnay

Middle Eastern in origin, the Chardonnay grape is cultivated worldwide. The resulting wine can be light and fruity to rich and complex. Two key factors in the wine's character are the area in which it is grown and the length of time it is oaked. California, Australia and France are the major growers. Flavours and aromas associated with Chardonnay include

- fruits such as apple, pear, melon, pineapple, citrus, peach and banana
- florals such as honey and honeysuckle
- herbs such as sage, hops, tarragon and cilantro
- spices including vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger
- nuts like hazelnuts, cashew, pecan and almond
- vegetables including corn, cauliflower and peppers
- earthy tastes of mushroom and potato

Butter and toasted items go well with Chardonnay, as does salmon, halibut, pork, chicken, quail and rabbit, with buttery, creamy, and smoky sauces.

Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris

Italian in origin and perhaps lighter versions of Gewürztraminer, these two varieties make a good addition to the wine list. They tend to be light, crisp and acidic, making them ideal summer drinking wines. Flavour and aromas associated with them include

- fruits like citrus, pineapple, melon, apple and pear
- spices like vanilla
- vegetables including celery, peas and fennel
- ginger, garlic and pine nuts

Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris work well with salmon, shellfish, rabbit and other white meats, sauced with mustard, cream or sweet offerings.

Late Harvest and Ice Wines

Most often associated with dessert, these characteristically sweet wines are growing in popularity. More late-harvest wines are available as they are easier to produce. The ice wines require that the grapes freeze on the vine before picking while still frozen. Canada's climate makes it an ideal growing region for ice wine production. Riesling grapes are commonly used for these styles of wine, and Muscat blended in gives marked character and depth. Red grape varieties are now being produced as well, such as cabernet franc. Flavours and aromas associated with these styles of wine include

- fruits such as citrus, mango, apricot, peach, pear, raisin and apple
- floral overtones such as honey

Try with foods using ginger or vanilla. Aged cheese, foie gras and tuna go well, as of course does the dessert menu.