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Food and Wine Pairing – Tips and Tricks

Before I suggest anything related to food and wine pairings, let me emphasize that taste is a matter of personal preference, and that what may seem obscure to one person is sure to appeal to another. In other words, in the privacy of your own company, drink what you like and pair it with what you enjoy. Should your plans include a house full of guests, you might want to follow a few basic guidelines to ensure that creativity does not exceed expectation...



There is a great deal of material in this article to digest (pun intended); please take your time.

In General

Enjoy ~> White before Red - Dry before Sweet - Young before Old

Consider the meal as a summation of flavours and textures. The wine that you select should be one that compliments the overall package, i.e. the richer the dish, the more full and flavourful the wine required.

Many people turn their nose up at the thought of acidity in wine. We're not talking extreme pH here, but rather just enough zip to get your taste buds tingling before the next mouthful. It is the acidity in both food and wine that makes you salivate; without it, many taste combinations would become dull, flat, and in some case cloying.

The Cliché: Red with meat and White with fish... sure, why not? It works - as a general rule. But with the mix of cultures plus the introduction of new dishes and cooking methods, there is so much more to consider beyond this catchall philosophy.

Consider:

The method of preparation: Raw, steamed, or boiled food has a lighter flavour intensity when compared to that which is braised, roasted, or grilled.

In many cases, you must pair the wine with the sauce and not with what is underneath.

Side dishes: A roast turkey itself is generally a mild flavoured meat. The dressing, gravy, and side dishes however add a multitude of flavours and textures to the equation.

Pairing Techniques:

Respect the older wine regions' culinary and viticultural history; the two have likely grown together. A fail-safe method of pairing is to consider the origin of the food and choose a wine from that region.

Some food/wine pairings are 'like for like' while others pose the idea that 'opposites' attract. Do you want the wine to 'enhance' the flavours of the dish or act as a 'highlight' by contrasting flavours and textures?

~> Like for Like: An element of the dish will compliment a similar quality in the wine i.e. Pork and applesauce with the apple flavours of Chardonnay.

'Bridge Ingredients' are additions to the dish that enhance both the flavour and texture of a pairing. Examples are the minty aroma of a cool climate Cabernet Sauvignon and mint seasoning in a dish such a lamb. Another bridge is to pair an oaked Chardonnay with a dish containing toasted hazelnuts or almonds. The oak influence of the wine barrels imparts these same characteristics to the wine and the two combine to complement each other in the pairing.

~> Contrasting (opposite) flavours and textures: Every wonder why bitter salad greens pair so well with a acidic dressing? Individually, both elements are somewhat unappealing, but together the two tastes and textures mingle perfectly. The same concept works well with food and wine pairings and the most common example is to combine a crisp, acidic wine with a rich cream-based dish. The heavy texture and flavours of the food are whisked away with each refreshing sip of the wine leaving a clean palate for the next bite.

Consider the flavour of the dish: Sour / Sharp / Savoury / Spicy / Smoky / Sweet

- Sour/sharp tastes call for a similar level of acidity in the wine, try: Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, or Valpolicella.
- Spicy foods need a wine of contrast, try an unoaked example such as: Chablis, Gewurtz, Albariño, Riesling, or Pinot Grigio. Lighter-bodied, juicy reds as well as sweeter whites will also work with a hit of spice.
- Smoky tastes call for the similar character of Shiraz or Zinfandel but will also work with a contrast of sweetness: Try an off-dry Riesling.
- Desserts and Sweet tastes – the wine you choose must be at least as sweet as the food. Otherwise the wine will seem thin and bitter.
- With salty food try: Chablis, Muscadet, or Sherry. A touch of sweetness will work well too: think prosciutto and melon: consider an off-dry Riesling

A few Classics

Vintage Port and Stilton cheese – on its own, the cheese is aggressive, assertive, and slightly intrusive. But the port adds a sweet richness and textural compliment that neutralizes the saltiness and overall intensity of the hard cheese.

Fresh strawberries and old Bordeaux – the fresh berries bring out the subtle strawberry fruit character of the wine.

Goat cheese and Sauvignon Blanc - it is a passage to fine taste!

Cedar plank Salmon and Pinot Noir - classic aromas of cedar, cinnamon, and cherry pair beautifully.

Champagne and Caviar – a bit hoity-toity in my opinion, but yes, this is a classic.

Tips, Tricks, and random Thoughts

- The wine that you cook with should be similar in both quality and style to the wine that you serve.
- Ask the waiter if there is any wine in the dish... if so, I'd buy that same wine off the list if possible.
- Dishes with strong citrus or vinaigrette flavour need a wine that is high in acidity.
- An alternative to vinaigrette salad dressing is to splash a little of the wine or some lemon juice on the salad instead.
- A squeeze of lemon on foods will make full-bodied wines seem less oaky (it works for both white and red).
- Fatty or oily foods can become cloying with a heavy wine – try a more crisp/acidic wine instead.
- Asparagus contains a naturally occurring sulphur component called methyl mercaptan which can lead to a metallic/tinny aftertaste. Try Sauvignon Blanc or Gruner Veltliner.
- Hard cheeses generally pair with red wine while the soft creamy examples go with white.
- Avoid fortified wines with soft creamy textured cheeses like Brie or Camembert. Try Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, Savennières, or even sparkling wine.
- A salty dish calls for wine with higher acidity. The salt will neutralize the acidity of the wine to bring out the flavour of both.
- Eggs mask the sense of taste. The bubbles in the sparkling wine/Champagne will act to scrape the taste buds clean.
- With tomato based sauce and pasta try wine with higher acidity to match the intensity of the dish: Chianti, Barbera, Rioja Crianza, or Veneto.

- Wonderful together ~> Roast chicken with Cru Beaujolais... 10 different crus to choose from.
- Pairing with older wine: Always have an understudy bottle in case the first bottle is corked.
- Pairing with older wine: Be careful not to overpower the delicacy of the wine with rich/spicy foods.
- When eating spicy food, try a clean, crisp white to refresh the palate.
- There is a magical connection between Gewurztraminer and the ginger spice.
- Wines from 'down-under' pair surprisingly well with spicy Asian foods: Try Australian Chardonnay, Semillion, or Gewurztraminer from New Zealand.
- Dijon is at the top of the Burgundy's great Côte d'Or. Try pork tenderloin or baked ham with mustard glaze and a bottle Pinot Noir.
- Stodgy old British men drink their Tawny Port chilled with a dish of walnuts. Uber cool Canadian wine writers drink it at room temperature paired with milk chocolate – amazingly good ;)
- Champagne and eggs is another classic, though you may have bigger problems if you are drinking at 8am.
- Protein-rich foods soften the tannin in wine. That is why we generalize red wine with red meat.
- Ribs on the BBQ screams for Cali Zinfandel, Chilean Cab, or an Aussie Shiraz.
- The taste of salt tends to mask the tannins in youthful red wine.
- Creamy sauces need an acidic wine that will cut through the weight. Try Sauvignon, Alsacian Riesling or Pinot Gri(gio)



Try these!

PX (Pedro Ximénez) Sherry with Vanilla Ice Cream

Black truffles with Aged Burgundy and
White truffles with Old Barolo.

Smoked salmon and fino sherry.

A single fresh raspberry and a mouthful of dry Prosecco

Dark chocolate and a big Cali Cab are magical.

Chateauneuf du Pape with lamb curry and fig chutney

Pairings to Avoid

! Despite popular belief, some Wine and Cheese combination do not pair well together: Smoked cheese is probably the most notorious and I'd avoid wine altogether here. Stinky old and veined cheese is another problem child; for these, you need sweetness as a contrast. Try Port, Sauternes, or Hungarian Tokaji.

! When serving a very mature wine, be careful not to upstage it with a dish that is too aggressive.

! Smoky foods and oaky wines can be too much together. Try to avoid too much 'wood' flavour.

! The iodine in some fish such a mackerel, haddock and cod will react with the tannin structure of red wine to create a metallic taste. Consider a fruity red or white instead.

! Very hot and spicy food paired with full-bodied, high-alcohol reds will increase the perception of heat on the palate. Try lighter, fruit wines instead... or better yet, beer.

! High alcohol wine will emphasis the saline in salty food - exercise caution.

! Egg yolks coats the palate and restricts the sense of taste. Try sparkling wine to cleanse the palate.

Pairing Tips for Vegetarians

- The wine pairing depends on how you cook the vegetables...
- Roasting and Grilling vegetables adds richness to the taste which will help tame the wine's tannins.
- Artichokes with wine are troublesome; they cause the wine to taste sweeter than expected. Avoid reds and opt for a higher acidity dry Italian white instead.
- Consider mature wine over young. It will have less tannin structure, and won't overwhelm the dish.
- Beans / lentils take you to the south of France. Try a Languedoc or Roussillon red
- Raw/Steamed? Try a light-bodied white wine.
- Asparagus: Sauvignon Blanc if served with vinaigrette, but unoaked Chardonnay if with cheese or hollandaise sauce.
- Pinot Noir's lively acidity, Merlot's low tannins, or Beaujolais' freshness are all vegetarian food friendly wines.