



The Principles of Food and Wine Matching

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Most wines are produced as an accompaniment to food, and there are many established guidelines for matching food with wine successfully. Originally wine styles evolved to complement the cuisine of a region, so this is often a good starting point for finding a good wine and food combination.

There is no single choice of wine that must be drunk with a certain dish, but some are definitely a better match than others. To achieve the 'best match' it is necessary to analyse the basic components in both the wine and the food. The principle is to try to balance these, so that neither the food nor the wine overpowers the other.

The basic considerations

The main elements to consider are...

- Weight/body of wine
- Flavour intensity and characteristics
- Acidity
- Tannin
- Sweetness

The first and most important element to consider should be to match the weight of the food with that of the wine.

Rich heavyweight foods, like game, roast meats and red meat casseroles, need a full-bodied wine. Powerful red wines are often the favoured choice, although it is the weight of the wine which is the most important consideration rather than its colour or flavour. Often a rich full-bodied white wine is a better match for meat than a lighter red wine.

Lighter food, such as plain white meat or fish, is complemented by more delicate wine. Although white wines are the normal choice, light-bodied, low-tannin red wines can also be successful.

After weight, the next most important element to consider is flavour and how intense that flavour is. Flavour intensity, although similar to weight, is not the same. Think of a food that has a lot of weight but is low in flavour, say a plate of plain boiled potatoes or plain boiled rice, both are heavy in weight but low in flavour. At the other end of the scale think of a plate of raw, thinly sliced red or green peppers; these are high in flavour but light in weight. Wines can be the same. Riesling for example makes a lightweight wine that is intensely flavoured; while Chardonnay makes full-bodied, heavyweight wines that can be low in flavour. Delicate wines and strong flavoured foods do not match.

Isolating the dominant flavour in a dish is not as simple as it sounds, often the dominant flavour is in the sauce. Take a chicken curry for example; it is not the flavour of the chicken that dominates. So think weight and then flavour intensity when selecting a suitable wine. A rich creamy sauce will need a wine that will complement the smooth creamy, buttery flavours of the sauce.

It is also worth considering the way the food has been cooked. If a food is cooked by a moist, gentle method such as steaming, it will require a lighter-bodied wine than a food that is roasted, which will require a wine that is fuller and more robust in body as the method of cooking adds more intensity of flavours to the food. Foods that have been cooked by frying will need lighter wines with good acidity, as the method of cooking increases the fat content. A slow-cooked dish that has been braised or stewed will be weightier and need fuller-bodied wines, as the flavours are intensified by the method of cooking.

Weight

Flavour intensity and character

The flavour character of a wine can sometimes be matched with food. For example:

- Grapey or floral characteristics like wines from the Muscat variety with fruit.
- Spicy flavours like Gewurztraminer with spicy dishes (the term spice when describing a wine can mean a number of different aromas such as white pepper, black pepper, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger).
- Oaked wines with smoked foods - the stronger the smoke the greater the oak can be.
- More neutral wines, such as Muscadet or Soave complement delicate flavoured food like seafood, and would be over powered by stronger flavours.

Acidity

The acidity found in food must be matched by the acidity in the accompanying wines. Acidity is something we rarely think about in food. Tomatoes, an everyday ingredient in many foods, are extremely high in acidity. One of the characteristics of Italian red wines are their noticeable acidity. This is because Italian cuisine is dominated by two ingredients - tomatoes and olive oil - hence wines that go with Italian food need good acidity in them. Vinaigrette is a good example of acidity being added to a dish. The oil needs to be cut by the sharpness of acidity, so when making a vinaigrette you blend olive oil and vinegar together.

Dishes dominated by tart acidic flavours, like lemon, lime or vinegar, can be difficult and require care when matching as they will overpower most wines.

Tannin

Tannin in red wine reacts with protein molecules. Foods with a high protein content, particularly red meat, will soften the effect of the tannin on the palate. This is why wines from tannic grape varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah/Shiraz, go well with roast meat and stews.

Light, fruity red wines with low levels of tannin, like Beaujolais and Bardolino, will complement white meats as these are low in proteins and lighter than meats such as lamb and beef.

Tannin in combination with oily fish can result in an unpleasant metallic taste, so the general recommendation is to avoid red wines with fish. However, low tannin reds are fine with meaty fish. Wines with a high tannin content can also taste better with salty foods.

Sweetness

Dry wines can be tart and over-acidic when drunk with any food with a degree of sweetness. Sweet food is best with wine which has a similar or greater degree of sweetness; the sweeter the food the sweeter the wine needs to be. Late-harvest wines, especially botrytis-affected wines and sweet Muscat-based wines, are the ideal choice for puddings.

Fat and oiliness

Wines with a good level of acidity can be superb with rich, oily foods, such as pate. For example, Sauternes works well with foie gras. Here the weight of both wine and food are similar, and the acidity in the wine helps cut through the fattiness in the food. This is also an example of matching a sweet wine to a savoury food. Crisp wines such as Riesling and unoaked Barberas can make a good match with fatty meats such as duck and goose.

Spice

Hot spices like chilli reduce the sweetness in wine and can make dry red wines seem more astringent. Spices can also accentuate the flavours of oak. A good match for spicy food are wines that are made from really ripe, juicy fruit, either unoaked or lightly oaked. Wines such as New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc can work well with spiced foods, as can ripe Chilean Merlot.

Smoke

Smoked foods need wines with enough character to cope with the strength of the smoking. Lightly smoked salmon is a classic partner for Brut Champagne; smoked meats like pork can benefit from some slight sweetness in the wine like that found in some German Rieslings; smokey barbecued flavours suit powerful oaked wines like Australian Shiraz.

Salt

Salty foods are enhanced by a touch of sweetness. Think of classic combinations like prosciutto and figs. The same works with wine. Roquefort cheese & Sauternes and Port & Stilton are famous matches. Salty foods also benefit from a little acidity. Avoid tannin wines as the salt seems to bring out the bitterness of the tannin. Salty foods such as olives, oysters and other shellfish go best with crisp, dry, light-bodied white wines. Manzanilla or Fino Sherry are classic partners for olives and nuts.

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