

Food and Wine Pairing 101

First off, let me say that at the end of the day the best wine to drink with your favorite foods is the wine you like! It's your money after all. Having said that, if you allow yourself to open your mind (and taste buds) to some new combinations, you might discover that there are even better combinations that you enjoy even more.

When you consume food with wine it will have an effect on the way wines tastes. Wine can also affect the taste of food. The goal of food and wine pairing is to take advantage of these effects, so that under the right circumstances you will derive more pleasure from the food and wine than either would provide separately. The more successful you are with pairings, the more enjoyment and excitement you will achieve from your dining experiences.

It's important to understand the basic relationships and taste interactions between wine and food. It's equally important to be aware that different people have different reactions and taste sensitivities to various flavor and aroma components, meaning that the same level of acidity or bitterness for instance will likely affect one person differently than another. Keep in mind this is not the same as personal preferences. Pairing should therefore take into account the preferences of the individual, as well as the interactions between food and wine.

Predominant Food and Wine Tasting Influences

When you place food in your mouth, your taste buds will adapt to alter the perceptions of the levels of salt, sugar, acid, etc. of the next items you taste. An example would be the unpleasant reaction when you taste highly acidic foods after using toothpaste. Also, some foods such as chocolate or rich, creamy dishes have a mouth-coating effect that inhibits the sense of taste.

Basically, there are two components in food (sweetness and umami) that can make wines taste "harder" (more astringent and bitter, more acidic, less sweet and less fruity), and two components (salt and acid) that tend to make wines taste "softer" (less astringent and bitter, less acidic, sweeter and more fruity). In general, food has a greater impact on the taste of wine than the other way around, and in particular is more likely to affect a wine negatively.

Sweet Food

- Increases the sense of bitterness and acidity in the wines

- Will enhance the burning effect of alcohol
- May make a dry wine seem to lose its sense of fruitiness
- A general rule of thumb with sweet foods is to select a wine with a higher level of sweetness than the food

Umami in Food

Umami can be difficult to identify, compared to the other primary tastes. In general it is the savory taste you get from herbs and vegetables like mushrooms and asparagus; MSG; ripe cheeses; meats, seafood and hard cheeses. Although the negative impact of umami on wines in many of these foods can be overcome in meats, smoked seafood and cheeses, due to the significant levels of salt in these foods.

When you encounter foods that are difficult to pair due to high Umami, you can counter this negative effect by adding salt and/or acid to the dish and then pairing the wine based on those additions (quite often in the case of a sauce created for that dish, or by adding lemon to fish, for instance).

- Umami increases the perception of bitterness, acidity, alcohol burn
- Lessens the perception of body, sweetness, fruitiness in wine

Acid in Food

Acid is the most important element in the pulp, aside from the water and sugar. In general some acidity in foods or sauces can be a good thing when pairing and can quite often bring a very high acid wine into balance and highlight its fruitiness. Acid in wine gives the wine vivacity and makes it thirst quenching, therefore keeping acid in balance is critical when creating the wine. When pairing wine with foods with higher levels of acid it's important to

make sure the wine has a high enough level of acid to avoid making the wine taste languid, flat or flabby.

- Acid increases the perception of body, sweetness and fruitiness
- Decreases the perception of acidity in wines
- Helps make the wine thirst quenching

Saltiness in Food

Salt is a very wine-friendly component which can mellow many of the more difficult and harder elements of a wine. Salt is a great contrast to acidity, which is why, for instance, Asian dishes with a lot of soy sauce are a great match with a German Riesling. And of course, many of us love the contrast between sweet and salty, which is why a great Stilton or Blue Cheese matches so well with Port.

- A great contrast to acidity
- Decreases the perception of bitterness and acidity in wine
- Increases the perception of body
- Works well with sweet wines

Bitterness in Food

Different persons will be affected differently by bitter flavors in both wine and food. In most cases, however, bitter flavors do not pair well with each other. The level of bitterness in both the food and the wine may be at favorable levels separately, but when consumed together they may combine for an unpleasant taste profile.

- Bitterness in food increases bitterness in wine.
- Avoid wines with a high level of hard tannins

Chili Heat in Food

As with bitterness, chili heat in food can affect different people in very different ways. In general, chili heat will increase, in an unpleasant way, the sensations of bitterness, acidity, and alcohol burn. The intensity of this reaction increases as the alcohol level of the wine increases. The alcohol can also increase the sensation of heat in the food.

- Chili increases the perception of acid, bitterness, and alcohol burn
- Decreases the perception of body, sweetness and fruitiness in the wine

Flavor Profile

In general, it's usually a safe bet to match the flavor intensities of the food and wine to be paired, so that one doesn't overpower the other. However, in some cases, more intensely flavored foods, such as a curry, can work well with a lighter style wine, like a slightly fizzy Lambrusco. Many lightly flavored desserts can also pair well with intensely sweet dessert wines.

Acidity and Fat

Most people, especially in America, enjoy the pairing of acidic wines with fatty or oily foods. The pairing gives the subjective sensation of the acid cutting through the richness of the food and thereby cleansing the palate. Fat also has a way of softening highly tannic wines.

This is why so many people enjoy a bold Cabernet or Syrah with a grilled rib eye, or a high acid and citrusy Sauvignon Blanc with many types of white fish.

Sweet and Salty

Although it doesn't seem to work technically in wine pairing, who can argue with the wonderful (if somewhat subjective) combinations of sweet and salty? Who doesn't like a chocolate dipped salty pretzel? A classic example of this would be the European tradition of pairing Stilton cheese with Port.

Geography

All things being equal – if you find a suitable pairing for your dish and you can source it from the same geographical area, you can discover some very wonderful and fun combinations, that also quite often are accompanied by some interesting stories and history.

Difficult Foods to Pair

- **Sweet** – foods or dishes high in sugar should be paired with wines that have sweetness levels as high or higher than the food
- **Umami** – fruity wines or wines with lower, softer tannin levels pair more favorably with dishes higher in umami as the umami brings out the bitterness of the tannins in the wine. High levels of umami can be balanced out by the addition of salt or acid

to a dish, but the addition shouldn't change the basic character of the foods

- **Bitterness** – in food will emphasize bitterness in the wine. Match bitter foods with white or neutral wines, or reds with lower levels of tannin
- **Chili Heat** - pair with white wines, slightly sweet whites and reds, or low-tannin reds. Low alcohol wines are better, as the chili heat accentuates the alcohol burn and bitterness for many people. Chili also reduces fruitiness or sweetness, so look for wines that are higher in these properties.

Wine Friendly Foods

- Foods higher in acid and/or salt tend to be easier to match with most wines; keeping in mind that foods high in acid should be matched with a wine with a higher acid level, or the wine may taste too soft or flabby.

Challenging Wines

The more structural components in the wine and/or food to be paired, the more challenging, but also rewarding, the pairing can become. The most difficult wines are those with higher levels of bitterness from oak or tannins and/or high levels of alcohol and/or acid. The good news is that if you find a suitable pairing the wine can reveal complexities and flavors that might not be detected if the wine were to be drunk without food.

Lower Risk Wines

Neutral, unoaked wines with a small amount of residual sugar can be pretty safe with most foods, but also aren't likely to produce very interesting experiences.

Other Considerations

Notwithstanding all the guidelines for food and wine pairing, people who have the most frequent success tend to be those who rely mainly on their instincts and experience. Some simple concepts to consider:

- Pair great with great and simple with simple. A basic meatloaf sandwich doesn't need an expensive merlot to make a nice combination. On the other hand, an expensive crown roast of lamb or prime rib may be the perfect occasion for breaking

out that big and opulent Napa Cabernet or Bordeaux you've been saving.

- Match delicate to delicate and bold to bold. A delicate red Burgundy or most any delicate white will be completely overshadowed by robust or spicy dishes. Likewise, bold, spicy and hot flavors work well with spicy, big flavored, lower tannin wines such as Zinfandel.
- You can choose to mirror the wine to the dish, or set up a contrast, either can work. For instance: a California Chardonnay with lobster or pasta in cream sauce would be an example of mirroring. Or, you can serve that same dish with a crisp, sharp, bubbling Champagne.
- Think flexibility: Oaky Chardonnay is a very popular varietal, but it is one of the least flexible white wines to pair with most foods. Sauvignon Blanc, dry Riesling from Germany or Alsace, or a more neutral wine like Pinot Grigio offer much more flexibility. More flexible red wines either have nice acidity, such as Chianti, red Burgundy and American Pinot Noir; or they are fruity with moderate or low tannins, such as Zinfandel, simpler Italian reds and southern Rhone wines.

Conclusion

A couple of good ways to produce interesting and satisfying combinations are to use these principals to practice your own pairings, and make notes of what works and what doesn't. Another way is to take notice of long established successful pairings and try to identify which of these principals are at work there, and use those same ideas when creating your own pairings. Also, consider what exactly you're trying to pair the wine with when you have a dish with many different flavor profiles going on at the same time. Are you trying to match the protein, the sauce, the vegetable, etc. In general, the simpler the better.

At the end of the day, the wines that appeal most to you at any given times are always a good choice; however, we feel that by practicing these principals over a period of time you will begin to discover new wine and food experiences that are even more appealing to you and your guests.

SIGNIFICANT RED VARIETALS

Cabernet Sauvignon (Cab-er-nay Saw-vee-nyon)

Cabernet is a complex and full-bodied wine characterized by aromas of black currants, blackberries, black cherries, plums, cedar, mint, clove, and strong hints of vanilla oak. "Cab" is intensely flavorful, and is more acidic and has harder tannins than Merlot.

Merlot (Mer-loe)

Merlot is fruit-intensive and has softer and more velvety tannins than Cabernet. Merlot is characterized by black cherries, red cherries, and oak flavors. In Bordeaux Merlot is almost always blended with Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc.

Pinot Noir (Pee-noh Nwahr)

Pinot Noir is complex, having a velvety texture, majestic flavor, and is extraordinary in bouquet. Pinot Noir is sophisticated and has rich, fruit flavors of black cherries, blackberries, and plums as well as dried roses, tar, bark, earthy mushrooms, cola, and spicy black pepper. Pinot has a higher level of acid, which makes it a more flexible food pairing wine.

Zinfandel (Zin-fan-dell)

Zinfandel is a full-bodied, spicy wine with strong raspberry, blackberry, boysenberry, cranberry, and black cherry flavors, as well as hints of licorice, black pepper, plum, tobacco, cedar, vanilla, and light oak.

Syrah/Shiraz (France/Australia) (Seerah/Shur-oz)

This wine is deeply colorful, powerful, peppery, spicy, and is characterized by black cherry, blackberry, tar, clove, thyme, leather, and roasted nut flavors. This wine exhibits a rich, smooth, supple texture, and even tannins.

Sangiovese (San-joe-vae-sae) – Predominantly ITALY

Medium-to-full-bodied wine with supple "warm" texture. Sangiovese boasts the flavors of raspberries, cherries, anise, and various spices. It is the varietal used to make Chianti.



SIGNIFICANT WHITE VARIETALS

Chardonnay (Shar-doh-nay)

At its best, Chardonnay features bold, rich fruit flavors of apple, fig, melon, pear, peach, pineapple, and citrus fruits. It also may possess hints of honey, butter, vanilla, butterscotch, and hazelnut. Most significantly, as a result of oak-barrel aging, Chardonnay is well known for its flavors of apple, vanilla, and toasty oak.

Sauvignon Blanc (Saw-vee-nyon Blahnk)

Sauvignon Blanc is brisk, strong, dry, and light-bodied, and features citrus, grassy, and floral scents. Most Sauvignon Blanc wines are dry and “un-oaked” (fermented in steel vats instead of oak barrels), with a bracing, lively acidity that balances the wine’s natural fruitiness.

Chenin Blanc (Shen-in Blahnk)

Chenin Blanc’s signature is its acidity combined with high alcohol content and a full-bodied, almost oily texture. Though Chenin Blanc is most often found in simple, dry wines, it can - especially in the Loire Valley - create great wines in a variety of styles from dry to sweet. It has a subtle fruitiness (melon, peach, quince, apricot, and sometimes even a citrus quality.) It can also have spicy overtones together with a smooth hint of honey.

Gewurztraminer (Geh-Vairtz-trah-mee-ner)

Full-bodied and flamboyant, Gewurztraminer wines are invariably deeply flavored, aromatic wines. Their flavor is somewhat exotic with a bit of apricots and grapefruits, floral roses, and herbal spices such as tarragon. Still, they are dry, refreshing wines that couple extremely well with food.

Riesling (Rees-ling)

These are light-bodied, medium-dry, low-alcohol wines, often with lively acidity and crispness. A good Riesling has a distinctive floral or honeysuckle aroma with citrus fruits, peaches, and apples. For the most part, Rieslings should not be aged. They should be consumed fresh and young.

Pinot Grigio (Pee-noh Gree-joe)

Pinot Grigio wines are medium-to-full-bodied, lightly fruity, somewhat peachy, with slight hints of grass and spice.



Some Basic Wine and Food Pairings

Asian Cuisine (umami) – Grüner Veltiner, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Gamay, Pinot Noir

Caviar, Oysters, Smoked Salmon – Champagne or Dry Sparkling Wine

Olives, Almonds, Canapes, etc. – Sauvignon Blanc, Cava, Albariño, Chablis, Dry Sherry, Blush Wine

Cream Soups – White wine

Heavy Vegetable Soups – Lighter Red Wine

Barbeque Ribs & Chicken - Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Rhone Wines, Carmenère, Lower Price Red Blends in General

Fried Foods – Sparkling Wines such as: Cava, Champagne, Crémant, Moscato d' Asti, Prosecco

Fish: Poached, Grilled or Sautéed; Crab or Lobster – Chardonnay (Chablis), Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Soave, Verdejo from Spain

More complex Fish or Shellfish dishes – Champagne, Riesling, Soave, Chardonnay (Chablis), Gewurztraminer, Vermentino from Italy, Fino Sherry, Pinot Noir

Chicken or Turkey – Barbera, Dolcetto, Chardonnay, Torrontes from Argentina, Dry Rose

Pheasant – Champagne, Viognier, Mature Pinot Noir

Roast Ham or Pork – Gewurztraminer, Viognier, Blush wine, Beaujolais, Dolcetto from Italy

Lamb – Fine Red Bordeaux, Cabernet Sauvignon

Beef – Merlot, Beaujolais, Cabernet Sauvignon, Dry Italian Red Wines (Nebbiolo), Syrah, Petite Syrah, Tempranillo

Mediterranean (salty, oily dishes) – Assyrtiko, Carricante, Pinot Grigio, Vermentino, Cotes de Provence

Tomato Based Pizza & Pasta – Barbera, Corvina, Lambrusco, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese

Stews or Pot Roast – Beaujolais, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Pinot Noir, Basic Sangiovese

Salads – Chenin Blanc, French Colombard, Sauvignon Blanc, Assyrtiko from Greece

Cheese – Full-bodied Red Wine, Big Bordeaux, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Fume Blanc, Port

Desserts – Any Sweet or Sparkling Wine

Galloway Culinary