Wine Enthusiast

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE to Wine and Food Pairing
Pairing wine with food invites a wide spectrum of attitudes and approaches.

At one end of this spectrum is a complete lack of patience for the entire exercise: “I eat what I like. I drink what I like. Just open the bottle, and let’s dig in.”

At the other end is the scrupulous search for the ultimate pairing, where every nuance of vintage, flavor, body, acidity, tannin and oak treatment of the wine is scrutinized against the acidity, flavoring and weight of the meal. This includes the spicing, saucing and preparation of everything on the plate, and on the plates of everyone at the table.

At a restaurant, this can involve intense study of the menu and wine list, interspersed with a keen interrogation of the server and sommelier.

At Wine Enthusiast, we find merit in both approaches. Since 1988, we’ve held that wine is the perfect accompaniment to food and social ease. We’re steadfast in demystifying wine, taking it off its pedestal and placing it at the dinner table where it belongs. Still, we understand that wine is an intimidating subject for many people.

The fact is, wine is intimidating. There are dozens of wine-producing countries, hundreds of grape varieties, thousands of regions and many thousands of producers. That’s in addition to strange terms on labels, off-putting rituals and lofty verbiage from professionals.

But just because it’s an intimidating subject doesn’t mean that you should be intimidated.

Drinking the wine you enjoy with the food you’ve ordered or made is Pairings Rule No. 1. This validates the “no fuss, drink up” attitude. Here’s some truth: No meal has ever been completely ruined by an “improper” wine and food pairing.
So drink what you like. That's the first step in becoming a wine expert. But remember, the wine world is far too rich to drink only what you know you like. Exploring that world is part, if not most, of the fun.

The quest for the perfect pairing is also valid, as long as the process is pleasurable and shared. It's a sensory, intellectual game that can yield spectacular dividends at the table.

Make no mistake: The perfect pairing of wine and food is sublime. It elevates both to a blissful experience, and one long remembered.

This special issue is intended to be a simple, direct and pleasurable tool to help you get the most from your food and wine choices. Enjoyment and ease are what it's all about.

**MASTER WINE STYLES**

Each chapter's recipes are arranged according to difficulty level, depending on whether you want to present a lavish feast or a quick meal. And the chapters are arranged not by food type, but wine style: Light, Aromatic Whites; Rich, Full-bodied Whites; Rosés and Light Reds; Medium-bodied, Fruit-forward Reds; Big, Powerful Reds; Champagne and Sparkling Wines; and Fortified and Dessert Wines. We offer examples of each style, and explain why it pairs with the corresponding recipes.

“Style” refers to the elements contributing to the wine's overall feel in your mouth—viscosity, acidity, tannins, alcohol level, flavor type and intensity. These terms will likely be familiar to you except, perhaps, tannins.

Tannins, crucial to the aging process of fine wines, are chemical compounds found in the skins, seeds and stems of grapes. Some tannins are also incorporated through aging in wood barrels.

You will experience tannins, particularly in young, full-bodied red wines, as a sandpaper-like, drying, astringent feel on your tongue. As a well-made wine ages, the tannins will “melt,” contributing to a more pleasurable, velvety texture.

Why is flavor taking the back seat to the other components of wine style, you may ask? After all, when you think of food and drink, flavor is what’s foremost on your mind.

There are two reasons. One, it’s a wine's style, primarily the mouthfeel discussed above, that most directly determines its role in relation to food. And second, mouthfeel is much easier to discern and communicate than flavor.

*Expert Tip*

“Texture, people! When pairing, how the wine feels in the mouth—it’s texture against the food, the acidity, tannin, and glycerol—can be much more of a player than its flavors.”

Andrew Fortgang, Le Pigeon, Portland, OR
Flavor is subjective. What tastes like blueberry to us might be more like blackberry to you. What we discern as smoke, you might taste as mushroom. But style—mouthfeel plus flavor—is something that’s more immediate and communicable.

Talking about wine style will enable you to communicate with your retailer or restaurant sommelier in a common language. The bottle you select will better reflect your personal preferences and the meal you’re planning to enjoy. Knowing your way around this subject and having a vocabulary of wine style is useful.

MAKE PERFECT MATCHES

Pairing is all about matching the main components of a dish and the main components of the wine, so each enhances the other. That does not always mean complementing. Sometimes, a contrasting style is ideal.

But, in general, think about the main dish’s dominant flavor, its character, intensity and the comparative level of its fats to acids. Then find a wine whose style (acidity, viscosity, tannin, alcohol level, flavor type and intensity) will best showcase that dish.

Whether lamb, chicken, beef, fish or vegetables, these main ingredients often take on the character of the seasoning, or at least take a back seat to the overall texture. What is the dominant element? If it’s a stew, is it tomato-based, and therefore acidic? (Try a fresh, aromatic white like Sauvignon Blanc, or a light, easygoing red like Lambrusco.) Is it more earthbound, featuring mushrooms, garlic and onions? (Try a medium-bodied, fruit-forward red like Pinot Noir.) If it’s

EXPERT TIP

“In general, I lean towards old world wines that are more earth and acid driven than fruit, regardless of the dish. And I believe in ‘what grows together goes together’—if you can find a wine that comes from where your dish was inspired from, it’s likely a good choice.”

MATT CONWAY, RESTAURANT MARC FORGIONE, NEW YORK CITY
pasta, is it a creamy sauce, or a leaner, oil-based sauce? Some refined dishes and ethnic cuisines, like Thai, call for citrus flavorings. Much vegetarian cuisine is herbal in nature. Each will point you to a certain style of wine. One useful shortcut: Many dishes are regional in origin, and you should definitely consider that region’s wines. An Italian pasta? Italian wine.

**NO TWO WINES ARE CREATED EQUAL**

Let’s examine the much-maligned “white wine with fish, red wine with meat” rule. It’s very, very old school, and there are many delicious exceptions to it. However, it’s a useful example, because it captures the no-fuss, instinctive nature of wine and food pairing that we seek with this special issue.

If you’ve sipped a light Chardonnay or Pinot Grigio, you recall a light texture on the palate and brighter flavors of citrus. Fish, your sense memories tell you, is also light (in color, but also in texture). White meats like chicken and turkey also belong in this category.

If you do the same mental exercise with a full-bodied red wine like Cabernet Sauvignon and a grilled steak, you begin to see the method behind the madness. Both red wine and red

**WHAT IF THE DISH IS SPICY AND HOT?**

The richness of the dish will determine this somewhat. In general, you want a low-alcohol, high-acid wine with some sweetness (fresh, aromatic whites). The acidity blends with the heat, while the sweetness will help mitigate the heat. (A high-alcohol wine will accent the dish’s heat, muting the wine’s flavor.) Riesling and Gewürztraminer are the classic choices for Asian cuisines. For barbecue, consider a big, powerful red like Zinfandel or Shiraz, varieties with some faint spice notes. (And let’s be honest, beer works, too.)
meat-laden plates are fuller, darker and deeper in texture and flavor. And thus, they make a good pairing.

Of course, nothing is that simple in the wine and culinary worlds. Just as there’s no single way to prepare and serve fish (or meat, or vegetables), there are no useful generalizations about the wines of the world.

A Chardonnay from Chablis and a Chardonnay from Napa Valley share some core (and quite subtle) flavors and characteristics, but most of the stylistic elements we discussed will vary widely. This holds true for Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and other wine grapes that are vinified worldwide.

The respective climates, soils and winery treatments will affect the alcohol levels, tannins, acidity, intensity and secondary flavors of the wines. And that affects their ability to pair with a specific dish.

For grilled fish served with a light drizzle of olive oil, a light white wine like most Italian and cool-climate Pinot Grigios would be a good match, as would a lean and steely Chablis.

But again, not all Pinot Grigios or Chardonnays are created equal. A full-bodied, intensely flavored, oaky wine might render the fish tasteless. What if the fish is not simply grilled, but smothered in a rich, flavorful cream sauce? In that case, the very light Pinot Grigio might be overwhelmed by the food—a fuller white wine or a leaner red, like Pinot Noir, might be a better choice.

What if a squeeze of lemon is needed to bring this fish to life, or perhaps the fish is a component in an acidic ceviche? Then the acidity of the wine becomes a factor. Either choose a low-acid wine to contrast the acidity of the dish, or pick a crisp, acidic wine to complement it.

You can see how this can get insane very quickly. So generalizations like “white wine with fish” are useful, but only to a point. If you leaf through this special issue, you’ll find the answers to many of the questions that naturally arise during this endeavor.

HOW ABOUT VERY RICH, FATTY DISHES?

Here, you will typically want to contrast, not complement, the dish and the wine. If the dish is creamy and rich, it might render a rich, creamy wine like a warm-climate Chardonnay flabby. That case, an acidic wine could cut the richness and allow both flavors to shine. With fried foods, you want a crisp, light or sparkling wine to cut through the oil. It cleanses your palate, allowing you to taste the fish or chicken. That said, a lamb or beef dish swimming in a rich, nuanced sauce might call for a big, powerful red wine to showcase those flavors.

VEGETABLE DISHES?

Two important questions: What’s the richness of the dish (cream sauce, dairy, etc.)? Is it cooked or raw? If dairy enriches the dish,
then a richer wine is called for—but this is a relative term. Fresh, aromatic whites with a touch of sweetness will generally pair well. Stay in the comfort zone of Rieslings and Pinot Grigios for whites, or light, easy-going reds like Beaujolais. Cooked root vegetables have a deep earthiness, so try a full-bodied white, like an oaked Chardonnay. Try a Pinot Noir with the meatiness of mushrooms.

We want to share our enjoyment with the wine and food dynamic without boring you. And we hope you will do the same, without taxing your guests or tablemates or making yourself frantic. Wine has shed its image as elitist and intimidating. It’s all about enjoyment.

ARE YOU SURE THIS IS FUN?

It is, if you want it to be. If you are hosting friends for dinner, you want them to enjoy your cooking and appreciate the wines without necessarily seeing the effort and thought behind them. What if you unwittingly serve a wine that makes your veal dish taste like a heel cushion, or if your sole meunière makes the wine taste like skid-row jug juice? As we’ve said, no meal has been completely ruined by an improper pairing, but why not enhance your chances of brilliance and triumph? Time spent with this special series and consideration of the outstanding recipes will improve your odds.

EXPERT TIP

“Vegetable-based dishes offer sommeliers the opportunity for unique wine pairings. A fino Sherry really complements some vegetables otherwise considered difficult to pair, such as asparagus and Brussels sprouts.”

JAIME KALOUSTIAN, DOVETAIL, NEW YORK CITY
“LAST NIGHT, WE TASTED PINOT NOIR FROM SEVEN DIFFERENT REGIONS. BUT DIDN’T PULL A SINGLE CORK.”

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