



THE STRATEGIC OENOPHILE:

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Strategic: of or relating to an elaborate and systematic plan of action designed to achieve a particular goal

Oenophile: a connoisseur of fine wines

Wine and Food Pairing

Have you ever wondered which wine to serve with a particular meal?

Many people have. Some pick a wine they like or that is familiar (they've had it before) and hope that it goes with the food. Others go to the store and look around and hope they'll be inspired by a label or bottle shape. Yet others ask the product consultant (the one in the white shirt) to recommend something. But what if nothing looks familiar and nothing inspires, or what if the product consultant doesn't have a clue what duck l'Orange tastes like or knows less than you do? Or what if there's no product consultant in the store (they sometimes start at 1:00 P.M.), or if there's a line-up to speak to the product consultant?

To the uninitiated, or uninterested, the very idea of choosing the right wine to go with your food may sound like matching your gloves to your shoes—an outdated custom kept alive by geeks, snobs and anyone else with nothing better to do. But think about it: Do you drink orange juice with chocolate cake, or coffee with lasagna? Plenty of beverage/food combos are just gross.

Wines are as diverse as wine lovers. Every style of wine contains variations from vintner to vintner, region to region. Every wine expert has different opinions. Many of the numerous and contradictory "rules" about pairing wine and food are best left unlearned.

The bottom line is to choose a wine that you find to be an appealing combination with a particular dish. If you really enjoy wine, be prepared for a fun process of trial and error. Nevertheless, you can give yourself a head start with some basic information and a few practical tips. Follow these steps and you'll not only avoid turning your meal to culinary nightmare, you may even enhance it.

Mixing wine and food is an art, not a science. There are numerous approaches to pairing and it can become very complicated if you let it. Consider the following methods to be loose guidelines for experimentation, not unbreakable rules.

Match Sweetness

A first step for practical pairing can be to make sure the wine is at least as sweet as the food. When you eat sweet food with dry wine, the flavors in the wine are obscured, leaving little more than a taste of acidity and alcohol. See the tables below to match sweetness, keeping in mind that these are only generalizations; certain wines that are typically sweet can also be dry, depending on the winemaker.

Note: The sweetest wines, of course, are dessert wines, such as Port and Muscat, but those don't concern us here.

Sweet Wine

1. Riesling
2. Pinot Noir

Slightly/Moderately Sweet Wine

1. Rose
2. Gewurztraminer
3. Zinfandel
4. Cava
5. Merlot
6. California Chardonnay

Dry Wine

1. Syrah
2. Pinot Grigio
3. Chenin Blanc
4. French Chardonnay

Sweet Food

1. Heavy cream dishes
2. Dishes with fruity sauce
3. Sweet pork

Slightly/Moderately Sweet Food

1. Barbecue
2. Indian cuisine
3. Thai cuisine
4. Some Chinese cuisine
5. Dishes with caramelized onion roast
6. Dishes with caramelized walnuts
7. Dishes with goat cheese
8. French onion soup
9. Chicken with mole
10. Lobster

Non-sweet Food

1. Steak
2. Beef stew
3. Grilled fish
4. Crab
5. Oysters

Pair for Body

It's a good rule of thumb to match rich foods with full-bodied wines, but these qualities can also be contrasted. A lighter wine can provide a refreshing counterpoint to rich food. As ever, it's a matter of taste, as well as trial and error.

The term "body" refers to the sense of fullness a wine gives as it enters the mouth, or to put it another way, its richness.

One wine writer uses the example of dairy milk to explain the concept of body:

A light bodied wine is akin to skim milk.

A medium-bodied wine to whole milk

A full bodied wine to half and half.

Use these tables as a rough guide only; a wine's body will vary somewhat from maker to maker and year to year.

Light-Bodied Wine

1. Sauvignon Blanc
2. Chenin Blanc

Medium Bodied Wine

1. Chardonnay
2. Pinot Noir

Full-Bodied Wine

1. Cabernet Sauvignon
2. Merlot

3. Pinot Grigio

3. Cava

3. Syrah

4. Gewurztraminer

4. Zinfandel

5. Rose

Light Food

1. Grilled chicken or fish
2. Pasta with vegetables or light marinara
3. Cous cous
4. Rice dishes
5. Most salads
6. Most fish
7. Most shellfish

Moderately Rich Food

1. Pork roast
2. Salmon
3. Lobster
4. Duck
5. Turkey
6. Pheasant
7. Pasta with cream sauce or hearty marinara
8. Vegetable lasagna
9. Middle East cuisine

Rich Food

1. Steak
2. Leg of lamb
3. Thick stew
4. Hamburger
5. Pasta with meat sauce

Pair for Flavor

Now it's time to approach flavor, which is something subtler and harder to quantify than a wine's sweetness or body. A wine's flavors are best thought of as you'd think of the flavors in a side dish or condiment. You'll want to complement or enhance the flavors of food, not ruin or overpower them. When pairing for flavor, it helps to have a broad knowledge of dishes from a variety of cuisines, but if—like most of us—you've been eating food all your life, you should have an instinctive feel for it already. Here are some delicious examples:

1. Syrah with lamb.

Lamb is often prepared with savory spices and marinades and is delicious grilled over charcoal. Syrah, which is smoky and peppery, underscores exactly the same flavors.

2. Sauvignon blanc with fish.

Sauvignon is acidic and citrusy, so it livens up fish, much like a spritz of lemon.

3. Champagne with oysters.

Champagne typically has strong mineral flavors, due to the chalky soil in the region of Champagne, France. This mineral quality is an excellent complement to the mineral flavors of shellfish, particularly oysters.

4. Chardonnay with lobster.

Chardonnays are often described as having an "oaky" flavor, due to the oak barrels in which they're aged. To the average non-connoisseur, this "oaky" quality is more readily described as "buttery." And what goes better with lobster than butter?

5. Gewurztraminer with curry.

It's not just the touch of sweetness in Gewurztraminer that makes for a delightful combination with Indian food. Gewurztraminers are spicy and complex in flavor, a quality that fits perfectly with the array of spices in curry dishes.

6. Cabernet Sauvignon with steak.

Many steakhouses stock nothing but Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet-based Bordeaux. Cabernet's typical full-body partly accounts for this, but so do its flavors: bold, simple and juicy, making an excellent match for food with similar attributes.

Pair by Region

One time-tested pairing method is to pair wines with cuisine from the same region. This works for two reasons: First, the wine itself is likely to have been developed together with the food, sometimes over hundreds of years. Secondly, if the dish contains ingredients imported from the region of its origin, a regional wine may contain similar subtle flavors from the air and soil (see terroir).

Here are just a few examples:

1. The Spanish sparkling wine **Cava** with the Tapas (Spanish appetizers).
2. An Italian **Pino Grigio** with a light, authentic pasta dish, such as Rigatoni with zucchini.
3. **Champagne** with Chevre cheese from France's Loire Valley.
4. Plank-smoked salmon with an Oregon **Pinot Noir**

One of my favourites is a kind of tapas, i.e. putting little bits of food together in different combinations and pairing them with different wines. I start with a cracker (table water cracker is good) or small morsels of bread (for carbohydrate), and place a small piece of cheese (salt) on top of it. Next I add some liver or chicken pâté (not fish) or prosciutto (protein) and top it off with a raisin or seedless grape (sweetness). I place this delectable tidbit in my mouth, chew a bit to release the flavours, swallow, and then have a sip of wine, say a cabernet. I repeat, this time with a shiraz, and the again with a zin or a pinot noir. You can use potato chips in place of the crackers, and a variety of cheeses, meats, and fruits as you like. Remember, though, it's the combination of carb, salt, protein and sweet in balance that make this an adventure. And don't forget, the wine changes as it aerates, so the first sip of the same wine with the same tapas will likely be different than the fourth, etc.

And finally, if you're going to do the above, it's a good idea to sip some water between each round of wine and tapas ... it cleanses the glass, clears the palate and hydrates the brain, so that even though you wake up the next day still enebriated, you won't have a headache.

Enjoy!



There are so many styles of wine available in stores these days, and when you add that to the fact that today's food shops and restaurants are filled with flavours from around the world, the possibilities for wine and food matching are endless. But don't be discouraged by all this variety.

Here are a few basic tips to get you started in putting together your own delicious wine and food pairings. And remember, do what tastes good to you. Wine and food matching is both an art and a science. Keep these tips in mind and let your taste buds do the rest.

Balance

You don't want your wine to overpower your food, but you also don't want the flavours of your food to be too intense for the wine. Complicated? Not really. Consider both the flavours and the textures of your food, as well as the wine when trying to find a balance. For instance, steamed lobster is a rich, buttery meat with a subtle, sweet flavour That's delicate enough for

a white wine, but because the texture is so rich, the white wine should also be rich and full bodied; an oak-aged Chardonnay is the perfect pairing.

Dominant Flavour

Determine what the most dominant flavour in your dish is, then match your wine to that flavour. Often, this is the sauce or seasonings used in the dish rather than the meat. Let's say you're making chicken (light, mild-flavoured) with a big, spicy barbecue sauce. The sauce would be more important in choosing a wine than would the chicken because it's the dominant flavour. Think of a fruity, medium-bodied red (like a Gamay or a Grenache).

One way of creating delicious matches is to mirror the characteristics of the food in the wine you chose. A jammy, berry-flavoured red Zinfandel with a rich meat and a berry sauce works so well because the flavour of the wine is mirrored in the flavour of the sauce. And here's a little tip: add a splash of the wine you are serving to the sauce for a fool-proof match!

This is the opposite of mirroring. Sometimes when you contrast the characteristics of the food with those of the wine you can end up with an entirely different but delicious pairing. Stilton and Port is a classic example; Port is a sweet, rich wine that perfectly contrasts the strong, pungent, salty cheese to create an amazing taste sensation.

Think Regional

Ever wonder why a bottle of Chianti tastes so good with a bowl of spaghetti with rich, tomato meat sauce? Because they were made for each other! Regional wine styles developed over the years to complement the cuisine of that area, so when in doubt, try a regional wine pairing for your dish.

Consider Acid, Sugar and Tannin

These are all key components in wine that need to be considered when choosing your wine match. Acidity in food can make a wine without much acidity taste bland or flabby. Take tomatoes for example; they are packed with acid and need a wine with enough acidity to balance it out. Try a light to medium-bodied red from Italy (such as Chianti, Valpolicella or Dolcetto), or a zesty white such as Sauvignon Blanc.

Sweetness in food also needs to be balanced. If you are serving a dessert or even a savoury dish that has a sweet element (such as a mango salsa on fish or candied nuts in a salad), pick a wine that has a touch of sweetness to balance it off. For desserts, your wine should always be at least as sweet as your dessert.

Finally, tannins are a component of wine that comes from skins, seeds and stems of grapes. They're found mostly in red wine and leave an astringent feeling in your mouth (much like strongly brewed tea). It's easy to tame the tannins: simply pair your tannic wine with a dish high in protein. A classic example is Cabernet Sauvignon with a big, juicy steak. The protein in the meat coats your mouth and makes the tannins in the wine seem soft and smooth.

Don't Forget the Alcohol

The alcohol content in wine can have a big impact on how it tastes with the food, especially when the food you are serving is spicy. Alcohol intensifies spice, so unless you love blow-your-mouth-off heat, avoid serving high-alcohol wines with your spicy dishes. A great alternative is an off-dry wine, which has just a bit of sweetness in it. The alcohol level in these wines tend to be lower, and the sweetness cools down the heat of the spice.