

Fundamentals of Food & Wine Pairing

Using the right tools — and not just following the rules — can enhance your meals

BY MICHAEL SCHAFER

What's the best wine to drink with a hamburger? What wine pairs perfectly with perch? Can you enjoy white wine with pizza? The answer to all these questions is precisely the same — whichever wine you enjoy most.

While there are fundamental principles and guidelines to pairing wine with food, the goal is to drink wine you enjoy with your meal. If your favorite wine is a California white zinfandel and you're a steak lover, then enjoy them together. It's really OK.

The fun is balancing the dish with the wine: The sum should be greater than the parts, just as your favorite dish is greater than the sum of its ingredients. When seeking taste combinations, synergy is the key.

There are three principles wine professionals use to maximize their guests' enjoyment of food and wine:

- Matching or mirroring the wine to the dish.
- Bridging the wine's aromas and flavors with those of the dish.
- Contrasting the food and wine.

But before we start applying these principles, consider a few food and wine "keys."

FOOD KEYS

While some folks (wine geeks) select the wines for the meal before choosing the food, most of us choose the food first. The first on our food "key ring" is, of course, the ingredients — vegetables, meat, poultry, and fish.

The cooking method is next. For chefs, the chicken breast is the *tabula rasa*, or a

"Matching flavors and textures involves mostly, common sense."

blank slate. How is it prepared: poached, sautéed, deep-fried, or grilled? The method of cooking has an enormous effect on the dishes' aroma, flavor, and appearance. That is critical in determining which wine to select.

Our next keys are sweetness and spiciness. Both are very subjective. What's really sweet to you may be just a bit sweet to your dining companions. Is milk chocolate your favorite or is the dark chocolate with 75 percent cocoa your choice? Spiciness is also

extremely personal. It's why menus at many Asian restaurants include the spice level.

Finally, for many diners, a favorite key is sauces and condiments. Whether it is marinara, sweet barbecue, Alfredo, or hollandaise, everyone has a favorite. The sauce or condiment is very important when pairing the wine to the dish. And all of these food keys unlock what we need to know to best pair wines with our favorite foods.

WINE KEYS

Keys to wine are a bit different than food keys. The most important key on your wine "key ring" is acidity.

Acidity is to wine as the nervous system is to our bodies. Wines high in acidity are much easier to pair with food than ones lacking acidity. Balanced acidity's finish leaves us desiring a bite of food, and then the food begs for a sip of wine. And so on. Examples of adding acidity to food are when we squeeze lemon on seafood or add a pickle to a hamburger. A bit of acidity "kicks it up a notch." Acidity in wine can boost the flavor of the food.

Tannins are found in many red wines. They're acids that create the same feeling as



tea that's been steeped a bit too long. Fruit tannins are from the grape skins. Wood tannins are from the oak barrels. They can be very soft and luxurious or almost like sandpaper. Some folks love the "grip in your mouth" that tannins provide. Others find it unpleasant and avoid tannic wines. Tannins have a dramatic effect on the texture of the wine.

Oak can be a very important key. If used in moderation, it amplifies the wine's color, body, and flavor. If over-oaked, the wine is clumsy, bitter, and frankly unpleasant. Oaky aromas and flavors should be components of the beverage. Balance is key. Some wine lovers enjoy lots of oaky aromas and flavors while others don't like the lumberyard. A recent trend, particularly with chardonnays, is to use no oak at all. Unoaked wines can be more flexible in pairing with a variety of dishes.

Alcohol content is also key. The lower the alcohol, the lighter the wine. The level of alcohol is a reliable indicator of mouth feel and weight. However, a wine with 14

percent alcohol may be so well-made and balanced you don't really notice the alcohol. A reliable indicator of the wine's body and alcohol are the "tears" or "legs" of the wine as it swirls down the glass.

APPLYING FOOD AND WINE KEYS TO PAIRING

Now we can apply the food and wine keys to the three main pairing principles.

Matching is simply mirroring the wine to the dish. Is it a light, mild dish? Are the aromas and flavors delicate and elegant? Or is it a big, bold hearty dish? Is there a dominant flavor or ingredient?

Matching flavors and textures involves mostly common sense. Light dishes are enhanced with lighter wines. Big, bold robust recipes call for heavier, denser wines. A spring salad works well with a crisp sauvignon blanc. Rich flavors like lobster in a cream sauce are flattered by a buttery, oaky chardonnay. Earthy flavors such as mushrooms or truffles are reflected by pinot noirs from Oregon or France's Burgundy

region. A juicy, well-marbled steak with hollandaise sauce is best with a hearty Bordeaux or cabernet sauvignon. If we're digging into a beef stew, then a full, robust red — say a full-bodied syrah or zinfandel — will mirror the body of that hearty entrée.

You can also match the wine to the cuisine. If it's a particular ethnic cuisine, then pairing wines from that country or region is your best bet. Italian wine with Italian food, French wine with French food, etc.

Classic Contrasting Food and Wine Pairings

- > Foie gras with **sauernes**
- > Fresh chèvre (goat cheese) with **sauvignon blanc** (preferably Sancerre)
- > Stilton cheese, walnuts, and **vintage port**
- > Gorgonzola cheese with **Amarone** (dry Italian red)
- > French fries with **champagne**
- > Tapas and **fino sherry**
- > Pad Thai and **Gewürztraminer** (preferably with a little sweetness)



The Old World (Europe) has a storied history of pairing local wines with local foods. New World (the rest of the planet) winemakers and chefs are quickly catching up with innovative food and wine combinations.

Bridging is linking aromas and flavors in the food and wine. Herbs such as dill, oregano, and even cilantro frequently waft from

our glasses. New Zealand sauvignon blancs frequently have herbal, citrus, and mineral aromas with zesty, zingy acidity. Bridging those aromas with a lemon dill sauce on fresh whitefish is a match made in heaven.

Spice aromas of pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg are frequently found in wine. Using those spices in a dish makes it easy to bridge. A “Michigan salad” with nuts is complemented by dry sherry. Pork or chicken with a sauce of apples or cherries works well with viognier, riesling, and beaujolais.

Smoke is a classic bridge between food and wine. That brisket will taste even better with a smoky syrah from the Rhone Valley in France. A hearty entrée like venison sauced with lingonberries or blackberries has many of the same aromas and flavors as a zinfandel. Sommeliers often think of the wine as a condiment or sauce in and of itself.

Contrasting the flavors and textures of wines and foods is fun, but a bit more challenging. While there are some classic contrasting combinations, creating new pairings can be an adventure. Guidelines for

contrasting include sparkling wines with crunchy foods like deep-fried chicken. Heat likes sweet. If you’re dining on spicy dishes, a riesling, chenin blanc, or Gewürztraminer (with a little residual sugar) are a soothing contrast to the heat.

When contrasting flavors and textures, be adventurous! For salty foods such as smoked salmon or caviar, select a wine with little or no tannin and low alcohol — rieslings and sparkling wines are your best bets.

A NOTE ON DESSERTS


Dessert is a special category when pairing with wine. While vintage port and some chocolate desserts are marvelous pairings, many wonderful dessert wines have been obliterated by an overwhelming dessert. The wine should *always* be sweeter than the dessert. If not, the wine will taste flat, bitter, and insipid.

The goal is to have a delicious and enjoyable experience. Pleasure is the guiding principle. Have fun, and may your previous meal be half as delectable as your next.

Easy Rules of Thumb

- ▶ Pair complex food with a simple wine. Pair simple food with a complex wine.
- ▶ Refined wines with refined cuisine, robust wines with robust food.
- ▶ When in doubt, pair the wine to the sauce, rather than what the sauce is complementing.
- ▶ The two most flexible wines are sparkling wines, and wines made from the pinot noir grape.
- ▶ Pair the wine to the occasion: value wines with casual cooking, champagnes for celebrating, complex wines with elegant dining.

GRAPE FINDS

What are some of metro Detroit restaurant's favorite wine selections? Discover some new favorites by using this checklist to see if their picks match up with yours. 

ANTONIO'S – CANTON

- Reserve Stock - Gaja DaGromis Barolo, Piedmont
- Livio Felluga, Pinot Grigio, Friuli Colli Orientali

ANTONIO'S – FARMINGTON HILLS

- Argiano "Non-Confunditur" Super Tuscan
- Teruzzi & Puthod Terre di Tufi, Tuscany

ASSAGGI BISTRO

- Insolia, Case Ibidini, Valle dell'Acate, 2012
- La Massa Toscana, 2008

BAKER'S KEYBOARD LOUNGE

- La Crema Chardonnay
- Darioush Cabernet Sauvignon

BIG ROCK CHOPHOUSE

- Carlisle Zinfandel by Mike Officer
- Bedrock Kick Ranch Syrah, 2011

CAFÉ FELIX

- Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape Bois de Boursan Cuvée des Felix, 2009
- Gravelle-Lacoste, 2011

CARRABBA'S

- Mount Veeder Winery Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

COACH INSIGNIA

- Sektkellerei Szigeti Grüner Veltliner Sekt Brut
- Dunham / MacLachlan "Pursued by Bear," Columbia Valley, 2009

EL ZOCALO MEXICAN RESTAURANT

- Conde de Valdemar Crianza, Rioja region
- Licia Albarino, Rias Baixas region

FLEMING'S

- Belle Glos Dairyman Vineyard Pinot Noir, 2011
- Ruffino Chianti Classico Riserva Ducale Oro Gold Label, 2007

GASTRONOMY

- Chateau Grand Traverse Gamay Noir, 2011
- Justin Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles 2011

HAMLIN CORNER

- Mimi Chardonnay by Chateau Ste. Michelle, 2012
- Louis M. Martini Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon

HYDE PARK

- Belle Glos, "Clark & Telephone" Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir, 2012
- Celani Family Vineyards Ardore Cabernet Sauvignon, 2010

JUMPS

- Le Bordeaux de Bernard Magrez Bordeaux, 2011
- Chateau de Calavon, 2009

THE LARK

- L. Mawby NV Blanc de Blancs Brut, Leelanau
- Chateau de la Font du Loup Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, France, 2010

MACCABEES

- Faust Cabernet
- Cuvaison Chardonnay

METRO CAFE

- Schweiger Vineyards Chardonnay, 2009
- Meritage, Robert Karl Cellars "Claret" Horse Heaven Hills, 2008

NORTHERN LAKES

- Merry Edwards Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc
- Evening Land Willamette Valley Pinot Noir

NOVI CHOPHOUSE

- Merry Edwards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 2009
- Bowers Harbor 2896 Langley Vineyard, 2010

PRIYA

- Sterling Vineyards Vintner's Collection Meritage, Central Coast
- Mouton Cadet

ROMAN VILLAGE

- Rosso "Arvino," Statti Calabria
- La Carraia Sangiovese, Umbria

ROMAN VILLAGE – DEARBORN HEIGHTS

- Celani Family Vineyards Tenacious, Napa
- Celani Family Vineyards Chardonnay, Napa

TOM'S OYSTER BAR

- Martin Codax Albarino
- Lock & Key North Coast Meritage Red Wine

WASABI JAPANESE SUSHI

- Red Diamond Merlot
- Rodney Strong Vineyards Chardonnay

WOLFGANG PUCK CUCINA

- Giuseppe E Figlio Mascarello Barolo Monprivato, 2005
- Tenuta Olim Bauda Gavi di Gavi, 2010

WOLFGANG PUCK STEAK

- Kamen Estate Kashmir Cabernet Sauvignon
- Zind-Humbrecht Riesling Rangen, Alsace Grand Cru, 2002

WOODBRIIDGE PUB

- Buena Vista Pinot Noir
- Pouilly-sur-Loire Chantalouette

THE WHITNEY

- Ferrari-Carano Fume, 2010 Terra d'Oro Zinfandel