



CREATING PAIRINGS THAT WORK

The practice of pairing wine and food has been around for a long time. For many Europeans, for people who have grown up in households where wine is a part of daily life, and for folks who have spent time eating their way across France, Italy, Spain, and other gastronomically rich corners of the world, the notion of pairing wine and food is a happy and familiar one.

But for wine and food lovers in the United States, learning what goes with what has often been a roller-coaster ride. Knowing little about pairing wine and food, we first explored (and were handcuffed by) the European and classically grounded “old rules” of color coding: red wine with red meat, and white wines with fish and poultry. While there’s some inherent value to those time-honored rules, they leave little to the imagination and discourage the freedom of mixing and matching. Once this became apparent, many Americans embraced culinary anarchy, with people deciding they could serve whatever wine with whatever food they wanted. This extreme encouraged an experimental spirit but led to more misses than hits. And when a memorable match occurred, the diner didn’t know why it worked. I favor a middle course between those diametrically opposed approaches, because, as with most things in life, the truth seems to lie somewhere in between. I am both a firm advocate of the classics and a devout believer in shaking things up (and violating taboos) for the right reasons!

First and foremost, wine and food appreciation and enjoyment are personal. No two mouths react the same way to tastes. If somebody were to ask, “What’s your most memorable wine and food experience?” at a dinner party (which, by the way, is fun to do), the responses would be all over the place. Most would be simple, formed more by memorable events and settings and good company than by the intricacies of the pairings themselves. Indeed, most people do not, thank goodness, spend their time overanalyzing wine and food and trying to pair, for example, the lemongrass and light green-olive flavors of XYZ Sauvignon Blanc with the tossed spring greens dressed with a lemongrass, citrus, and cold-pressed olive oil vinaigrette flecked with pieces of . . . green olive! This connect-the-dots approach to flavor, espoused by many epicurean magazines, even more winemakers, and a few too many chefs, is unnecessary and intimidating.

So what's really happening when you serve a particular wine with a particular food? Once the emotion and the heart are removed from our thinking, the more objective rationale lies in our intrinsic ability to ascertain characteristics that are "measured" in the mouth. Most of these quantifiable characteristics are referred to as *primary tastes*. But to understand taste, it is crucial to grasp the significant difference between taste and flavor. Though I get into this in more detail below, tastes are, simply stated, quantifiable—the sourness of a lemon, the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of dark chocolate, or the saltiness of a fresh oyster. All these tastes can be measured on a scale from low to high. On the other hand, flavors are countless—strawberry, butterscotch, steak. They are personal, subjective, and impossible to measure.

If you move in circles that include wine aficionados (or snobs), you are likely familiar with those who wax poetic about the pear and apple qualities of a Chardonnay, the apricot and nectarine flavors of a Riesling, or the black pepper and smoked-meat character in a glass of Syrah. We know there are not, in fact, essences of the above or any flavors added to wines. However, many people can, with experience, detect these suggestions of flavor, which are essentially reinforced aromas of the wine that is being enjoyed. Smell and taste are inextricably linked, as colds and allergies so frequently remind us.

The ability to smell is essential to sensual appreciation. This is true of both wine and food. Without smell, your ability to appreciate the difference between pork and veal is significantly diminished, just as the ability to identify blackberry versus blueberry in a Merlot is moot. As we will see later in the discussions of individual varietal wines, the lexicon of flavors creates an exciting vocabulary for talking about all grapes. But although the glossary of adjectives for wine and food is full of flavors, these terms have very little to do with determining what will make a great pairing. Yes, it's true that a wine that displays a minty personality can pair with mint as an ingredient in a dish. However, the echo factor doesn't ensure a perfect match.

Only one of the two stars, either the wine or the dish, can effectively take center stage. If you want to show off a special bottle of wine, the food selection should play a supporting role. If you want to showcase a spectacular recipe, it's best to choose a lower-key wine. Much like two people in a conversation, in the wine and food partnership one must listen while the other speaks, or the result is a muddle.

Finally, wines change when served with food. Whatever your perception of a wine's flavor and personality when you taste it on its own, it won't be the same when tasted with a meal. Oddly, the most critically acclaimed wines are typically rated and scored alongside other wines of a similar genre but rarely actually tasted with food. Critics may say that sensational XYZ wine "goes well with pasta," but in all likelihood this is no more than an educated guess. These wines may show gorgeously as solo performers, but when served with dinner they can seem different, or even downright unpleasant.

Armed with a context for our thinking and with the traditional epicurean paradigms questioned, let's agree that there are other quantifiable factors and rationales that bring wine and food together. The common wisdom is that wines and foods, like people, pair well with those that resemble them. Some successful wine and food pairings are grounded in shared characteristics. An off-dry Riesling served alongside a pork tenderloin with an apricot chutney illustrates this type of pairing: the sweetness of the chutney complements the slight sweetness of the wine. Other matches succeed through the truism that opposites attract. As with people, wines and foods can harmonize successfully despite seeming disparate at first glance. Ever wonder why a crisp glass of Sauvignon Blanc goes sublimely with a plate of raw oysters? Think of what a squeeze of lemon would do—cut through the oyster taste of the oyster. The wine acts the same way by countering the saline character of the oyster and refreshing the palate.

This “opposites attract” theory was cutting-edge, even radical, in the 1980s. Today, it's accepted and taught by many wine and food experts. At the root of this thinking is the principle that wines and foods share certain basic tastes. Tastes are not flavors. Tastes are simple, the core ones being sweet, sour, salt, and bitter. All are present to some degree in food, and different dishes reveal various combinations of them. For example, some cuisines are founded on plays of salt and sweet, such as a Thai chicken satay with peanut sauce, or salt-brined or dry-rubbed pork shoulder smoked slowly and served with a sweet, tangy barbecue sauce. Wine is also a play of basic tastes, of which three (sweet, sour, and bitter) are the building blocks that define a wine's profile and reveal how (and with what) it would be best served. This combination of tastes holds what I call the keys to wine and food matching. There are six of them for wine and three for food.

THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING WINE

KEY 1. ACIDITY

If you have only one horse to bet, choose this one. It's the most important factor in pairing wine with food. There are several ways in which acidity, the sourness or tartness factor, figures in wine.

Acidity is the ultimate contrast to an array of dishes.

If you are seeking to “cut” a dish that is rich, salty, oily, fatty or mildly spicy, serving the dish alongside a tart-tasting wine will be effective and refreshing. Think of what I call the “lemon-wedge rule”: just as a squeeze of lemon juice will accent or “cut” a rich or salty dish (tempering the brininess of seafood, for example), an acidic wine will do the same. Foods served with cream- or butter-based sauces, oily or strong-tasting fish or shellfish, mildly piquant dishes, and virtually all-deep fried foods are prime candidates.

Acidic wines are the best wines to pair with tart foods.

Tart dishes, such as a green salad dressed with a vinaigrette, and sharp ingredients, such as zucchini, capers, leeks, and tomatoes, all harmonize best with wines of similar sharpness. A wine that is less tart than the dish it is accompanying will be thinned out and may come off quite unpleasantly. When serving wine with a sharp dish or ingredients, it's hard to find a wine that is too tart! Examples of wines that can be too puckery on their own but sing with food include Pinot Blanc, cool-climate Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc, and some brut Champagnes.

Acidity brings out the integrity of good, simple ingredients.

I like to think of the acid in wines as the gastronomic equivalent of the yellow highlighter pen. The quick swoosh of the highlighter makes the words on a page stand out. A wine's acidity can mimic this phenomenon with food by "bringing out" the essence of an ingredient's flavor. The summer's first sweet corn or vine-ripened heirloom tomatoes, freshly cracked, boiled crab or lobster, or a farm-fresh mozzarella cheese all take on another dimension when paired simply with a sharp, uncomplicated wine to make their vibrant and delicious flavor "pop."

Acidity allows a tart wine, which may seem too sharp for sipping on its own, to work perfectly in conjunction with food. To some it is counterintuitive to think that a sour, unpleasant bottle can turn into liquid magic at the table—but sometimes life is stranger than fiction.

By the way, low-acid wines are more difficult to match with food. It's best to serve them with milder ingredients that contain a touch of sharpness (such as a squeeze of lemon). A flat Pinot Grigio or Chardonnay may perk up if paired with an otherwise mild fish mousse served with a wedge of lemon and a tangy jicama salad. With some experimentation and exploration, the role of acidity, and its importance, will become increasingly clear to you.

KEY 2. SWEETNESS

Wines can be sweet in varying degrees. Unctuous dessert wines have specific serving guidelines, which I cover in the dessert-wine section. Wines can also be off-dry (a little sweet) or semi-dry (medium sweet). We often find a little sweetness in Rieslings, Chenin Blancs, lighter-style Muscats, and some styles of sparkling wine.

Sweetness is a great counterbalance to moderate levels of spicy heat.

Many Asian preparations, such as spicy Korean barbecued chicken or the archetypal Chinese twice-cooked pork, need not be paired exclusively with beer! Here, moderate amounts of sweetness in the wine provide a nice foil for the heat and tame its ferocity, even alleviating the burning sensation caused by the peppers.

Sweetness in the wine can complement a slight sweetness in food.

Offering an off-dry Chenin Blanc with a fillet of grouper, served with a fresh mango salsa, would be a good example of this observation. Others would include pairing sweet wines with dishes accompanied by chutney or sauces made with fresh or reconstituted dried fruit (such as raisins, apricots, and cherries). The mirroring of fruit flavors resonates well with most off-dry wines.

Sweetness can be an effective contrast to salt.

This is the rationale behind the long-established matches of French Sauternes with salty Roquefort (and similar blue cheeses) and port with English Stilton. However, this genre of pairing requires some experimenting, as not all of these marriages are happy ones.

Sweetness can take the edge off foods that are too tart.

This type of contrast requires precise balance, or the food can make the wine come across as sour. Many Asian appetizers with vinaigrettes, at once tart and sweet, are seamless with off-dry wines. The ever-popular green papaya salad, found in the cuisines of Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar, is a classic example.

Dessert-style or extremely sweet wines must be sweeter than the dessert itself.

The wisdom of this rule is evident to anybody who has ever attended a wedding and experienced the unfortunate pairing of expensive dry brut Champagne with cake covered in gloppy, white buttercream frosting. Dom Perignon suddenly tastes like lemony seltzer water. At a minimum, the levels of sweetness in the wine and the dessert should match. With wedding cake, serving a sweeter bubbly (such as the seemingly misnamed but sweeter extra dry or demi-sec styles) would be a much better call, as the sweetness of the wine and the cake are better matched. Fruit-based desserts are more compatible tablemates for dessert wines; avoid thick, sweet buttercreams and ganache!

KEY 3. SALTINESS

As with your own health, salt in wine and food pairings is important and necessary in small quantities. Just as doctors would encourage us to pay close attention to sodium intake, so at table you need to be aware of the salt content of dishes and how it will affect wine selection. For maximum enjoyment with wine, salt should be reduced, rather than amplified, in perception, so I offer the following opinions:

Saltiness is lessened by wine's acidity.

Again, whites and sparkling wines, as a rule, are inherently sharper and therefore generally fare better with salty dishes than most red wines. For example, the zesty bite of acidity from a glass of young Pinot Grigio is a refreshing foil to deep-fried calamari or salt-crusted baked fish.

Salt perception is exaggerated by tannin.

Tannin is the substance that creates a chalky or sandpaper-like taste and texture in red wines (see key 4 below). This is an important consideration when serving a salty dish. Tannin will often accentuate an excess of salt, resulting in a match with as much charm as sucking on a salt lick, especially when you're serving a rich red wine, ample in tannin (bitterness).

Alcohol, like tannin, is accentuated by salt.

An abundance of salt in food will make wines seem "hotter" (more alcoholic) than they are. This is extremely important to know, because you want the wine to harmonize with the dish, not come across like a shot of vodka. Much like salt, high levels of spice and heat (from jalapeño, cayenne, and so on) will make wine come across as quite hot. Drinking full-bodied wine with Texas five-alarm chili almost always leads to heartburn!

Salty dishes can be counterbalanced by off-dry or sweet wines.

Salt and sweet are often magic together. Though people don't think of them that way, salt/sweet combinations are time-honored and well loved. Snickers bars, Reese's peanut butter cups, or cookie-dough ice cream are extreme cases of this phenomenon, but it's equally present in savory Thai fish cakes with their accompanying sweet/hot sauce, the contrast of country ham and sweet mustard, or a salty fast-food hamburger with sweet ketchup and relish.

If, despite the cautions above, a wine and food combination comes off as being flat, try a sprinkle from the salt shaker. Occasionally, adding salt to the dish can miraculously revive the wine's presence.

KEY 4. TANNIN

In wine, tannin can be associated with a bitter taste and a somewhat gritty texture. This is the same astringency (from tannic acid) encountered in tea that has been steeped too long. Tannins in wine come from two sources: fruit tannins generated from the skins of grapes, especially in big, generous red wines, and wood tannins from the oak barrels in which the wine is aged.

Longer maceration of wine with its skins amplifies fruit tannins, whereas extended barrel aging, especially in newer barrels, accentuates the wood tannins.

Serve bitter foods with tannic wines.

Foods that have been grilled, charred, or blackened are excellent vehicles for showing off bitter-edged wines. Ingredients that are implicitly bitter, like arugula, endive, and sautéed broccoli rabe, are great, too. There's nothing like a charcoal-grilled steak with a full-bodied, tannic Cabernet Sauvignon.

Counterbalance tannins with fat and protein.

This is the fancy way of saying drink red wine with red meat! Those hard and astringent tannins are tamed when paired with rare to medium-rare red meat (ample in fat and protein) or many cheeses (also chock-full of both). If the wine is too tannic, however, the tannins can still dominate. Also, certain hard, sharp, or pungent cheeses—such as aged Parmesan or Romano, French goat cheeses, aged Spanish Manchego, or aged dry Cheddar or Gouda—can give the tannic red wines a metallic character. If you serve a very tannic wine alongside a recipe containing little or no protein (a vegetarian entrée, for example), the tannins will react chemically with the available protein (on your tongue and the inside of your mouth) and come across as even more tannic.

Tannin and fish oil usually aren't happy together.

This lesson requires no subtle training of the palate. Generally, all it takes is one bite of fish alongside a rich, tannic wine to provoke the unpleasant “sucking on a penny” reaction between fish oil and tannin. Red wines with less tannin (Pinot Noir is a prime example) fare far better in this challenging pairing of wine and food.

KEY 5. OAK

Although plenty of wines are not aged in wood barrels, many winemakers claim it's impossible to create a fine wine without oak. The vanilla and coconut that you may detect in Chardonnay or the smoke and chocolate identifiable in Cabernet Sauvignon are not from the grapes: the flavors we associate with our favorite wines are often due to the extended time spent in oak. With respect to oak and food:

Oaky flavors are exaggerated by food.

Sooner or later every wine lover runs into a wine that seems too oaky or heavy-handed. Food amplifies the oak in wine, making it stand out as a distinct flavor component. Try any extremely oaky wine with virtually any entrée, and lo and behold, you'll have wine, food, and a lumberyard!

Oaky wines need very specific foods to show them at their best.

This is not to say you can't enjoy oak-aged wines with food; you simply need to choose carefully. Oak imparts tannins (bitterness) that can easily dominate food and need to be balanced out. If you want to show off an oaky wine (a spanking new Cabernet Sauvignon or a modern-styled Italian Barolo, for example), simply tailor the food to handle it: serve grilled meat and similar dishes.

With oak, match the flavors in the wine (toast, char or smoke, caramel, and so on) by using cooking techniques, or ingredients cooked with those techniques, that also contain those flavors: grilling, smoking, caramelizing, and so on.

Lightly oaked or even unoaked wines are the easiest to pair.

Most of the time, I prefer to serve wines that are low in oak, extremely well-balanced, or unoaked (that is, made and aged in stainless-steel tanks or in very old wooden barrels that impart no flavor). Minimizing oak creates a level playing field, allowing you more flexibility in matching your wine with different foods and methods of preparation. An unoaked Chardonnay can work with foods ranging from simply poached filet of sole to tandoori chicken to veal piccata, served with lemon, capers, and garlic, whereas an oakier version of the Chardonnay would pair well only with the sole.

Oak adds smoothness and roundness of texture to wines.

Wines that spend no time in oak, or very limited time, are much more austere. Wines aged in oak are more mouth-filling and voluptuous. You can play off this added texture by complementing, for example, a silky, oak-aged Chardonnay with a dish accompanied by a cream sauce or compound butter. A velvety Merlot can be sublime when served with a slow-cooked osso buco, or other slow-braised dishes of similar personality.

KEY 6. ALCOHOL

Alcohol is what distinguishes wine from grape juice, and a wine's alcohol content is the primary determinant of body and weight. As a rough guide, the higher the wine's alcohol content, the fuller-bodied the wine seems. As with fat content in dairy products, an increase in alcohol content increases the perception of density and texture. A milder wine (7 to 10 percent alcohol) is significantly less weighty and textured on the palate than one of 13 to 14 percent.

Match wines and foods of equal "weight."

This principle is somewhat intuitive. You shouldn't crush a gentle Pinot Noir with a stick-to-the-ribs beef stew. Nor should you match light, simple filet of sole with an amply textured Chardonnay, which might obliterate the fish. Try to keep the mouth-weight profiles of the wine and food on a par. For example, serving a medium-bodied red wine such as a Merlot or Chianti with a medium-weight dish such as roast chicken is successful. So is a full-flavored risotto with scallops and cream served with an equally rich barrel-fermented white Burgundy like a Meursault. As the wine's alcohol content increases, the food-pairing options decrease.

We know now that our perception of a wine's alcohol is amplified by food, specifically by salt and by spicy heat. If a very powerful wine is paired with spicy dishes, you may feel as though someone poured gasoline on the fire! Lots of salt creates a similar effect. In general terms, medium-bodied wines (those of medium alcohol content, 11 to 13 percent), and even lighter wines are easier to work with at the table.

THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING FOOD

Which comes first, the food or the wine? This question, like the chicken-and-egg dilemma, can lead people in circles, because the synergy between food and wine makes it impossible to make decisions about either one in isolation. But to know how a food might affect the way we perceive a good wine, we need to understand how various flavors and preparation techniques contribute to the taste of a finished dish. Now that we know how to define a wine's ability to go with food, we need to get a handle on how to understand a dish.

Recipes are as different as snowflakes; it's impossible to pair up every recipe with a single perfect wine. As with wines, in thinking about any recipe the rationale remains the same: identify certain basic characteristics. Rather than get caught up in thinking about a dish in all its complexity, it's far easier to look at the three food keys and then determine how to proceed.

KEY 1. INGREDIENTS

We have been "trained" to think about a dish primarily in terms of its ingredients. From a wine and food perspective, this approach allows you to think about pairings in a formulaic way: if you know the ingredients, you know the correct wine selection, right? Red meat with red wine, and white meat and fish with white wine. Well, sort of.

Certainly, when you're pairing wine and food, what's cooking is important, and it's often the main consideration. Of course, the wine you choose to accompany rock cod will be the polar opposite of what you'd choose to go with leg of lamb. However, within the broad "red" or "white" categories of meat, fish, and poultry, there are many shades of pink. For example, some fish are strongly fishy (sturgeon, mackerel, anchovies, and Chilean sea bass), while others are mild (rock cod, halibut, sole, and trout).

Red meat can be strong, like lamb, or mild, like a filet of beef. White meat (pork and veal) is very different from red meat in personality, often acting more like chicken, semineutral in character and much influenced by the supporting cast of ingredients. Poultry also may vary from mild (chicken) to pungent (squab). Then there are other categories, such as offal (sweetbreads, liver, and so on), vegetables, grains, and legumes. So it really is more complicated than choosing a red wine for dinner because you're having meat.

A handful of very useful ingredients can inform—and hedge—your wine and food pairings. Often referred to as "bridge ingredients" or "wine links," these allow you to play Merlin in the kitchen. See the table on page 23 for a list of "magic" ingredients and their effects.

[TABLE][Box
4 about here]

KEY 2. COOKING METHODS

Although the selection of ingredients is important, it's only one element of the overall plan. And while it's true that the primary ingredient in the food may determine the wine selection, just as

MAGIC INGREDIENTS AND THEIR EFFECTS

GARLIC AND ONIONS (SLOW-COOKED)

- Add creaminess and roundness to a dish. When braised, roasted, or sweated, they add sweetness. When caramelized, they add sweetness and smoky flavors.
- Pop red or white wines with riper fruit and/or slight sweetness.
- Meld nicely with oak-aged and oak-influenced wines.
- Help bridge foods to wines with more weight and texture.
- Provide a link to earthier wines, such as classically styled European wines (true of raw and quickly sautéed garlic and onions as well).

OLIVES

- Can swing dishes toward pairing with either red or white wines. Green olives create a white-wine affinity (especially with Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, and unoaked Chardonnay), and black olives create a red-wine affinity (especially with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Syrah).
- Flavored cures (such as those incorporating peppers and herbs) can lend another dimension of compatibility to a dish. Strong cures (especially those very high in acid or vinegar) are best rinsed off.

CURED MEATS (PROSCIUTTO, BACON, PANCETTA, AND OTHER CHARCUTERIE)

- Can tilt “white-wine” dishes (fish, poultry, veal, pork) toward pairing with red wines. Prosciutto-wrapped fish or shellfish with bacon, for example, can pair beautifully with soft, bright reds and rosés.

CHEESE AND OTHER DAIRY INGREDIENTS

- Add texture and richness to a dish when used in cooking.
- A small amount of goat cheese, feta, or gorgonzola can bridge salads and vegetable dishes to higher-acid white wines.

HERBS (FRESH OR DRIED)

- Fragrant herbs (chervil, dill, tarragon) pair best with whites like Riesling and Chardonnay.
- More pungent herbs (basil, thyme, rosemary) go best with Sauvignon Blanc and many reds (especially Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon).

LENTILS, BEANS, AND OTHER LEGUMES

- Can pair beautifully with white wines.
- If prepared with herbs, can swing a dish toward white wine; if prepared with meat (bacon, ham, pancetta, sausage), can swing a dish toward red wine.
- Waxy white beans can provide a clean backdrop for fuller-bodied white wines.
- Fish served over a bed of green lentils can pair with red as well as white wines.

MUSHROOMS

- Add earthiness and a natural affinity for earthy wines.
- Darker mushrooms (especially reconstituted dried mushrooms) make almost all foods red-wine friendly.
- Creamy and textured white mushrooms (shiitake, chanterelles, oyster, button) help dishes go well with white wines, especially those with texture (Chardonnay, oak-aged Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Gris).

NUTS

- When toasted and added to a dish (as a crust on a piece of fish, for example) pick up on the nutty nuances imparted by oak-barrel-aged wines and show off oak-aged wines.
- Unskinned nuts (especially walnuts and almonds) have an inherent bitterness that softens the perception of bitter tannins in red wines and some strongly oak-aged whites.
- Use of powdered nuts in cooking (as in moles and other Latino and ethnic foods) makes dishes wine-friendly and can favor lightly oak-aged wines.

often it's not the only or the main basis for the choice. Preparation of the ingredients can just as frequently play a part. Savory marinades can transform the taste of the primary ingredient(s), drawing out new or different flavors. But the cooking method may overshadow everything.

Some cooking techniques, such as steaming, poaching, and boiling, impart minimal flavor and are what I refer to as “low-impact.” Others, like smoking, grilling, and blackening, are dominant, “high-impact” techniques that can transform the flavors in foods. Smoking can add sweet as well as smoky elements. Grilling will impart a bitter, slightly acrid, taste and an outer crust. Sautéing is fairly neutral: it can add mild sweetness, but the flavors in the resulting dish have more to do with the ingredient profile. Deep-frying adds a hint of sweetness and intriguing texture, and braising, roasting, and baking fall somewhere in the middle.

To taste the differences, take three chicken breasts, salt and pepper them all in the same way, and prepare one with a low-impact cooking method, one with a medium-impact method, and one with a high-impact method. Then try each with a series of different wines and note how your preference in wine varies with the cooking method.

KEY 3. SAUCES AND CONDIMENTS

A sauce is the trump card: it invariably dictates the wine match. Varied in personality, sauces may be cold, room-temperature, or hot. They may be vinaigrettes, salsas, chutneys, or reductions. They may contain herbs, spices, fruit, or any combination thereof. Some contain cream or butter; others may be based on stock, flavored infusions, or wine. Some are smooth in texture; others are chunky and coarse. In any form, sauces want to run the show. Every sauce can be analyzed and broken down into its basic taste components. From that analysis, you can reach an informed choice about wine.

For example, vinaigrette-based or citrus-based sauces share the common element of acid: there is sharpness at the core. Rather than try to find a wine that works with all the ingredients, it would be wiser to find one that pairs well with sourness, for that will be the basic personality of the dish. In chutneys, sweetness may dominate, whereas in a salsa, harissa, or any other sauce based on hot peppers, the dominant characteristic, and the one that will govern wine choice, will be heat.

Matching a wine with the basic tastes in a sauce is a fairly straightforward principle that can also apply to textures. A butter- or cream-based sauce has a silky and rich texture which, like emulsified sauces (such as mayonnaise and aioli) may pair best with similarly rich-textured wines such as Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, and Viognier.

To demonstrate these principles, return to the chicken-breast experiment. This time sauté three chicken breasts identically and serve them alongside three very different sauces: salty (soy-based), sweet (such as a fruit chutney), and spicy (harissa, salsa picante, or another hot sauce). Next, line up an array of wines. As you work through the permutations, you'll note the dramatic impact of saucing.

AND THOSE DEVILISH SIDE DISHES

With the advent of travel, food experimentation, and increasingly daring palates, supported by the year-round availability of fresh ingredients from around the world, we live in an intriguing food time. I am often astounded by restaurant menus. Not only can these dining establishments lay on the lavish “menu-speak” descriptions, but the dishes themselves may have four to six accompanying items that have personalities as compelling as that of the central item. I have been surprised and at times disappointed to discover that the entrée I ordered had to take a back seat to a more intensely flavored side dish. Surprises like this can wreak havoc on wine choices, so when you’re dining out, it’s important to read the menu carefully; when you’re planning an elaborate meal at home, remember that side dishes and condiments can, like a sauce, influence the wine selection even more than the main ingredient or its preparation.

WINE IN THE COOKING

Having explored how cooking influences wine pairing, we need to look at the use of wine *in* the cooking. There are three fundamental applications of wine in cooking: cooking with or in wine, marinating foods with wine, macerating foods in wine.

COOKING WITH WINE

Like your good olive oil and vinegar, your cooking wine should not be stored next to the heat of the stove. It detracts from the wine’s flavors and accelerates spoilage; the convenience of having the wine right at hand does little to justify the sacrifice of integrity for expediency. Also important is what’s in the bottle. Hands off any “cooking wine” from the shelf of the local market! Such wines are almost always chock-full of added salt and bring nothing to the party. Never cook with wines that you wouldn’t be willing to drink.

The two most common applications of wine in cooking are as a flavoring component of a sauce (as in a *beurre blanc* or *beurre rouge*) and as a cooking or stewing liquid (as in the classic *coq au vin* or *boeuf bourguignon*). In both cases, once the wine is cooked (and the alcohol and most of the water evaporated off), what’s left bears little resemblance to what was in the bottle. Compulsive chefs who want to tie a dish and a wine together by cooking with the wine that they intend to serve are, in my opinion, fooling themselves. Here’s the making of a lively dinner party conversation: cook down a cup each of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay to a saucelike consistency. Add a touch of butter to emulsify each, and serve the two sauces to all. Ask your guests to identify which is which, and watch the sparks fly.

This transformation is even more pronounced when a dish is stewed for hours. A simple but tasty *vin de table* does just fine to pour into that *boeuf en daube*. There’s no need to use a sixty-dollar Napa Valley Cabernet. Hooray for life’s little bargains!

But surely, people ask, there must be a way to sense the pedigree of the wine when cooking?

In one single case the answer is definitely yes: when the wine is incorporated into the dish at the last moment, and therefore not cooked. Many recipes either require or suggest this use for wine, and in this case alone I would recommend using a very fine wine or the wine being served with the meal, as there will be a strong reference.

A couple of principles are important when cooking with wine.

- *If you cook with an off-dry wine or a sweet wine, the residual sugar will have an effect on the dish.* This sweetness may or may not be desirable.
- *High oak and high tannins will add a perceptible note of bitterness.* I generally avoid monster reds and Château Two-by-Four super-oaky whites for cooking, as I don't enjoy the added acrid notes.

MARINATING AND MACERATING

Marinating and macerating both use uncooked wine. With marinades, the ingredients spend time in the wine and are then removed from the wine and cooked. With macerating, the ingredients spend time in the wine and are generally served in the maceration liquid in the final presentation. As when cooking with wine, most people grab whatever's open and pour in the required quantity, regardless of quality. And although it is true that added ingredients such as chiles, dried spices, herbs, garlic, and onions may overshadow the flavors of the wine, the wine's quality will nonetheless influence the final dish.

Marinating is a wonderful technique. It creates great complexity of flavor and gives the impression that you slaved over a dish for hours when in fact you might have put the marinade together in twenty minutes yesterday or the day before. In wine marinades, it pays to use a better wine: it will add a more complex flavor to the dish.

Usually used for meat but often also for fish or fowl, marinades provide layers of flavor while tenderizing and adding texture. The acids in wine act to break down the toughness of the meat, so the higher the acidity of the wine, the more dramatic and effective the marinade will be.

With macerating, too, the quality of the wine has a dramatic effect on the final dish. The two most popular examples of macerating with wine are that lovely concoction, sangría, and fresh or dried fruits macerated in wine.

While using a bottle of Château Lafite Rothschild is not necessary, a tasty, juicy, and appropriately fruity red will make a difference: a *local* Spanish Rioja *joven*, a zesty Beaujolais, or a plump Italian Dolcetto makes a welcoming base for those cut-up oranges, lemons, and other flavorings for sangría. Similarly, when you're serving a dessert of fresh summer peaches floating in Moscato d'Asti, a cheap, soapy-tasting bottling will take away from the dish; using a better wine will pay off in spades.

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This chapter covers a lot of material. To make the information easier to refer back to, I've created the following cheat sheet that summarizes the key points of this chapter and adds a few other tips.

[TABLE][Box 5 about here]

QUICK REFERENCE (A CHEAT SHEET)

WHEN THE WINE IS . . .

TART

- Select dishes that are rich, creamy, high in fat, or salty to counterbalance the wine.
- Match the wine with tart food (sharp ingredients, vinaigrettes and other sharp sauces).
- Use the wine to cut the heat in mildly spicy dish.
- Try skipping the lemon wedge that you might otherwise serve with the dish (with fish, chicken, veal, pork, vegetables, and grains).

SWEET

- If you're serving the wine with dessert, choose one that's less sweet than the wine, or else the wine will taste sour.
- If the wine is not too sweet (closer to off-dry), try serving it with foods that are slightly sweet to complement it, or dishes that are mildly hot or spicy as a foil.
- Try playing the wine against dishes that are a little salty; you may find some fun combinations, especially with cheeses and many Asian and Nueva Latina, North African, Floridian/Caribbean, or Hawaiian-influenced "tropical" preparations.

HOT/ALCOHOLIC

- Ensure that the dish being served is ample in personality and weight, or it will be overwhelmed.
- Don't serve very spicy-hot food, or you'll be sorry!
- Remember that food will make the wine appear even hotter.
- Avoid excessive salt, which will exaggerate your perception of the wine's heat (alcohol).

TANNIC

- Counterbalance the tannins by serving foods that are high in protein, fat, or both.
- Remember that an entrée relatively low in protein or fat may make the wine come off as even more tannic.
- Remember that tannin and spicy heat can clash brutally.
- Use pepper (cracked black or white) to counterbalance tannins, as it's somewhat bitter by nature.
- Serving foods that are bitter (eggplant, zucchini, chard, endive, broccoli rabe, and so on) or preparing ingredients in a way that accentuates bitterness (blackening, cooking over a wood fire, or grilling) to achieve taste symmetry.

OAKY

- Because really oaky wines will always seem "bigger" with food, accompany them with bold recipes.
- Play up the oak through the choice of ingredients (include nuts or sweet spices) or cooking methods (lightly grilling or smoking).
- Remember that oak aging adds rich texture that can be nice with rich and textured sauces and dishes.

AGED AND RED

- Serve rare preparations of meats to fill in the flavor gaps left by the drying out of the youthful fruit that occurs as the wine develops in the bottle.
- Remember that because tannins soften over time, an aged red gives you a broader range of food options than a tannic young wine does.
- Bear in mind that wines become more delicate as they age; choose simpler preparations to show them off rather than make them compete for attention with complex recipes.

AGED AND WHITE

- Serve the wines with dishes that feature similar flavors (nuts, sherry, and dried fruits) to mirror the flavor profile.
- Compensate for the lost acidity in the mature wine with acidity in the dish: a squeeze of lemon, a spoonful of verjus, or a splash of vinegar.

WHEN THE FOOD IS . . .

TART

- Serve a wine which is equally sharp or even more so, or the wine will taste off and shattered.
- Avoid red wines, except those of a sharper nature (Sangiovese, Pinot Noir, Gamay).
- Don't overlook rosés and sparkling wines as options.

SLIGHTLY SWEET

- Make certain that the wine accompanying the food shares its personality traits: choose a wine that is slightly sweet, such as a Chenin Blanc, Riesling, or even sake.
- If you really want a dry wine, serve one that's young and very, very ripe.
- Remember that sometimes a wine with oak can work if the wood's *sweetness* mirrors that of the dish; however, success is not guaranteed.

SALTY

- Pick wines with a low to moderate alcohol content, as the wine's heat will be exaggerated by the salt.
- Play with wines that have some sweetness; salt and sweet can enjoy each other's company!
- Avoid wines with high levels of oak or tannin.

SPICY OR HOT

- The spicier the dish, the more difficult it is to pair with wine. Select young wines with low to moderate alcohol content, minimal (or no) oak, and, if possible, some residual sugar (for whites and rosés).
- Among still wines, stick to off-dry whites and rosés; sparkling wines can also be nice foils for heat.
- Note that no wine will go with Texas five-alarm chili or those Thai, Indian, and Korean dishes that make your hair stand on end. Opt instead for beer and yogurt-based drinks, along with large, large bowls of rice!

BITTER

- Select wines with bitter components (oak aging, tannins) to complement the personality of the recipe.
- Try wines with high acidity. This doesn't always work, but it's better than the opposite extreme. After all, tannin is an acid.

DOMINATED BY A STRONG SAUCE OR CONDIMENT

- Forget the main dish and match the wine to the sauce or condiments and side dishes.

SERVED VERY HOT

- Allow the dish to cool off, or it will ruin your enjoyment of the wine and make the alcohol (by heating it) seem overwhelming.
- Serve chilled wines if it's essential that the dish be served very hot.