

Matching Wine with Food

By Harvey Steiman, Wine Spectator editor at large

The first thing to remember about matching food and wine is to forget the rules. Forget about shoulds and shouldn'ts. Forget about complicated systems for selecting the right wine to enhance the food on the table. This is not rocket science. It's common sense. Follow your instincts.

Just choose a wine that you want to drink by itself. Despite all the hoopla about matching wine and food, you will probably drink most of the wine without the benefit of food--either before the food is served or after you've finished your meal. Therefore, you will not go too far wrong if you make sure the food is good and the wine is, too. Even if the match is not perfect, you will still enjoy what you're drinking.

Some of today's food-and-wine pontificators suggest that mediocre wines can be improved by serving them with the right food. The flaw in that reasoning, however, is the scenario described above. If the match does not quite work as well as you hope, you're stuck with a mediocre wine. So don't try to get too fancy. First pick a good wine.

This is where common sense comes in. The old rule about white wine with fish and red wine with meat made perfect sense in the days when white wines were light and fruity and red wines were tannic and weighty. But today, when most California Chardonnays are heavier and fuller-bodied than most California Pinot Noirs and even some Cabernets, color coding does not always work.

Red wines as a category are distinct from whites in two main ways: tannins--many red wines have them, few white wines do--and flavors. White and red wines share many common flavors; both can be spicy, buttery, leathery, earthy or floral. But the apple, pear and citrus flavors in many white wines seldom show up in reds, and the currant, cherry and stone fruit flavors of red grapes usually do not appear in whites.

In the wine-and-food matching game, these flavor differences come under the heading of subtleties. You can make better wine choices by focusing on a wine's size and weight. Like human beings, wines come in all dimensions. To match them with food, it's useful to know where they fit in a spectrum, with the lightest wines at one end and fuller-bodied wines toward the other end.

A Spectrum of Wines

To help put the world of wines into perspective, we offer the following lists, which arrange many of the most commonly encountered wines into a hierarchy based on size, from lightest to weightiest. If you balance the wine with the food by choosing one that will seem about the same weight as the food, you raise the odds dramatically that the match will succeed.

Yes, purists, some Champagnes are more delicate than some Rieslings and some Sauvignon Blancs are bigger than some Chardonnays, but we're trying to paint with broad strokes here. When you're searching for a light wine to go with dinner, pick one from the top end of the list. When you want a bigger wine, look toward the end.

Selected dry and off-dry white wines, lightest to weightiest:

Soave, Orvieto, Pinot Grigio

Off-dry Riesling

Dry Riesling

Muscadet

Champagne and other dry sparkling wines

Chenin Blanc

French Chablis and other unoaked Chardonnays

Sauvignon Blanc

White Bordeaux

White Burgundy

Pinot Gris (Alsace, Tokay)

Gewürztraminer

Barrel-fermented or barrel-aged Chardonnay (United States, Australia)

Selected red wines, lightest to weightiest:

Valpolicella

Beaujolais

Dolcetto

Rioja

California Pinot Noir

Burgundy

Barbera
Chianti Classico
Barbaresco
Barolo
Bordeaux
Merlot (United States)
Zinfandel
Cabernet Sauvignon (United States, Australia)
Rhône, Syrah, Shiraz

More common sense: Hearty food needs a hearty wine, because it will make a lighter wine taste insipid. With lighter food, you have more leeway. Lighter wines will balance nicely, of course, but heartier wines will still show you all they have. Purists may complain that full-bodied wines "overwhelm" less hearty foods, but the truth is that anything but the blandest food still tastes fine after a sip of a heavyweight wine.

These are the secrets behind some of the classic wine-and-food matches. Muscadet washes down a plate of oysters because it's just weighty enough to match the delicacy of a raw bivalve. Cabernet complements lamb chops or roast lamb because they're equally vigorous. Pinot Noir or Burgundy makes a better match with roast beef because the richness of texture is the same in both.

To make your own classic matches, start off on the traditional paths and then deviate a little. Try a dry Champagne or a dry Riesling, which are on either side of Muscadet on our weight list, for a similar effect. Don't get stuck on Cabernet with lamb. Look up and down the list and try Zinfandel or Côtes-du-Rhône. Instead of Burgundy or Pinot Noir with roast beef, try a little St.-Emilion or Barbera. That's the way to put a little variety into your wine life without straying too far from the original purpose.

At this point, let us interject a few words about sweetness. Some wine drinkers recoil at the thought of drinking an off-dry wine with dinner, insisting that any hint of sweetness in a wine destroys its ability to complement food. In practice, nothing can be further from the truth. How many Americans drink sweetened iced tea with dinner? Lemonade? Or sugary soft drinks? Why should wine be different? The secret is balance. So long as a wine balances its sugar with enough natural acidity, a match can work. This opens plenty of avenues for fans of German Rieslings, Vouvrays and white Zinfandel.

One of the classic wine-and-food matches is Sauternes, a sweet dessert wine, with foie gras--which blows the sugarphobes' theory completely. The match works because the wine builds richness upon richness. The moral of the story is not to let some arbitrary rules spoil your fun. If you like a wine, drink it with food you enjoy and you're bound to be satisfied.

--Excerpted from Wine Spectator Magazine's Guide to Great Wine Values.