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Wine & FOOD

Rules of Engagement 101



Learn HowTo Perfectly Pair Food & Wine

Wine and Food: Rules of Engagement 101

Wine and food have been paired for so long that it takes a downright Herculean effort to think of one without the other. The two are practically an old married couple. They bring out the best in each other, and the worst if the pairing is a complete mismatch. But that is something you should not worry about because you will rarely find a bad pairing if the wine you choose suits your preference.

The Golden Rule

If we were to talk of the old days, the golden rule is: ***Red goes with meat; White with fish.*** To some extent, this rule still applies but gone is the rigidity of yesteryears. Today, people are more flexible in how they choose to enjoy their wines and foods and rules may be ignored.

You are, of course, the sole determiner of what wine you would like to have with what food. After all, though both wine and food can offer civility, pleasure, and life giving properties, this unique combination of human experience is ultimately personal.

You are the one eating the food and drinking the wine, not that magazine wine writer, so *you* should have the last say in matters pertaining to wine and food pairings.

It is true that there are no right and wrong answers but there are certain combinations that most people find more enjoyable than the others. As such, certain basic considerations need some remembering.

Pairing Basics

- ***Light wine with light food. Heavy wine with heavy food.*** This is actually the principle on which the shorthand rule of “red to meat and white to fish” is based.

If the weight of wine and food complement rather than fight with each other, then you're set for a fabulous dinner. After all, it only makes sense that when you serve a very special, delicate dish, its flavor should not be overwhelmed by a full-bodied, highly flavorful wine.

Relatively, if you are planning to serve a fine, well-aged bottle of wine, bring out its rare complexities with a simple, unspiced, and neutral dish that will not interfere nor overpower the spirit.

- ***How food is prepared.*** The questions to ask are: What key ingredients are used to prepare the food? How was it prepared? Is it grilled, roasted, or fried? What sauce was used? Spices or fruits? Dry or fresh herbs? White or red meat?

The answers to all these questions will help you determine what bottle of wine would go well with your food. But for a better illustration, consider the nice contrast between smoky barbecued ribs and sweet, fruity white wine like the California brand of Chenin Blanc.

Sweet wines like Riesling or Pinot Noir go well with spicy foods – Mexican, Thai, Chinese, or Cajun, while cream sauces and cheesy dishes call for an equally creamy wine. A bottle of Chardonnay, Zinfandel, or Merlot is worth a try.

- ***Food Action, Wine Reaction.*** It's a basic rule in physics: for every action, there is a reaction. And so cars move, birds fly, and fishes swim.

According to Sir Isaac Newton, this simply means that forces come in pairs – action and reaction. The same thing happens with a wine and food pairing.

The taste of wine with food is different from its taste when you drink it by itself. Think of wine as a type of spice. There are elements found in wine that interact with certain elements in the food. And this interaction results in a different taste sensation each time.

Italian tomato sauce, honey-mustard glazes, and Japanese teriyaki are sweet foods that react by making your wine taste drier. Balance the flavor by opting for off-dry or slightly sweet wines like Chenin Blanc, White Zinfandel, or Riesling.

Salads with balsamic vinaigrette dressing, fish served with a squeeze of lemon, or soy sauce are high acid foods so they would go well with higher acid wines as well, such as Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, or Pinot Noir. But if you're looking for something slightly less acidic, White Zinfandel will provide you with a nice complement with its relatively low acid content.

Full flavored wines like Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot go well with bitter and astringent foods. Their forward, fruity tastes will provide a nice pleasant contrast to foods like mixed green salad, Greek kalamata olives, or charboiled meats.

And those are the basic rules of wine and food pairings. But you probably heard of the saying “rules are made to be broken.” Well, that goes for wine and food pairing rules, too.

Again, the main determining factor of what wine goes with what food is *your personal preference* and the rules...aren't really rigid rules. More like loose guidelines.

Tasting the Wine

But knowing the basic rules of pairing wine with food is not enough to help you buy the best wine to go with dinner. If this is your first time in the world of wines, you might find it a bit hard finding your preference if you haven't even tasted the wine in the first place.

Speaking of taste, there are actually only three kinds of wine taste:

- Sweet
- Bitter
- Sour (or dry)

***NOTE: Salty is not a wine taste. That salty taste in your mouth when you drink wine over dinner actually comes from the food.*

The rest, which most of us perceive as tastes, are actually aromas: floral, fruit, nuts, vegetables, spice, herb, roasted flavors, animal odors, alcohol, wood, etc.

Every person possesses four kinds of taste and over 200 different aromas. A combination of both taste and aroma helps elevate your wine experience into a whole new level.

The best way to go about finding the right combination of wine and food is to conduct a taste test. Taste as many wines as you could get your hands into.

How do you think all those wine experts (or “snobs” to some people) got so knowledgeable about wine tastes? It is not because they have some kind of secret text containing codes for wine tastes. Neither is it because they possess an oenological database of all the different kinds of wines from all over the world.

No, what they did was to sit down for a few days and taste the food with dozens of different wines until they hit on the jackpot – a combination that is the perfect synergy.

Synergy, one where neither the food nor the wine upstages the other, is what you should aim for when pairing wine with food. And the only way to do that is through wine tasting with food, applying all the basic rules of pairing, of course to enhance your taste on their combination.

Selecting Wines for Hard-to-Match Choices

In wine and food pairing, there are no hard rules to follow. It seems the right attitude to adopt is: whatever goes with your unique style.

And the basic rules available are only guidelines which you can bypass any time you hit on a better combination. Finding a good pairing is not difficult to accomplish, especially if the food contains easy to match ingredients like chicken and risotto.

But how about if you stumble on a few hard-to-match choices? What do you do then?

Rule of thumb is to ***choose a wine that comes from the same region.***

Some foods that are difficult to match are asparagus, artichokes, and strong cheese. Chilies and eggs can also be difficult as other spicy foods. Eggs, particularly the yolk part, can mask the taste of wine so you need to tread around this carefully.

Vinegars and pickles can also rob a wine of its flavor. Some wines even react by becoming more astringent. However, if you use balsamic vinegar in moderation, that can be an exception as are capers and pickled gingers, both of which work well with white wine.

The development of regional cuisines depends on two salient factors: regional cultures and regional wines. Countries like France, Italy, and Germany are heavily geared towards regional diversion so if you encounter hard-to-match foods that come from any of these regions, your best option is to match them with wines of the same region.

However, this rule is only good if you are dealing with regional cuisines from wine producing countries. What about if you encounter a food selection from countries that are not well known for producing wine? What steps can you take?

Below are some basic tips to deal with this particular problem:

- ***Chinese*** – Cuisine is highly spicy with seasonings ranging from ginger to garlic, soy sauce and oyster sauce. In addition, their sauces are further divided to sweet and sour, peanut, ginger, and oyster.

The dominant taste is sweet although salty comes at a close second. Therefore, the perfect match would be a sweet, spicy, fruity white wine. If not, a low tannin red wine is also possible, especially for dishes like duck.

- ***Japanese*** – Japanese are fond of bitter and sour tasting foods with a few exceptions like teriyaki. To balance the taste, avoid acidic wines. Instead, utilize dry, fruity white or sparkling wines. For heavier dishes like tempura, match them up with the fuller, fruitier wines like red Chinon, Sancerre, or Brut Champagne.
- ***Thai*** – Aromatic and spicy, Thai cuisine is best paired with a crisp, dry white wines. Slightly sweet wines like Sauvignon Blanc, Marsanne, and Chardonnay also provide great combinations as do robust reds. Shiraz, a robust red, goes best with beef dishes.
- ***Mexican*** – Another highly spicy cuisine with chili as the dominant taste. Chili is known to numb the palate so it would be difficult for you to acquire a real taste for the wine when the food is too spicy. The only way for you to overcome the effects of chili is to opt for a wine with taste that could match the spiciness. Spice wines with a touch of residual sugar are best although chilled, fruity white, or a Beaujolais Cru (low tannin red) may also work well.
- ***Indian*** – The common ingredients found in Indian cuisine are curry, coconut, cumin, creamy or milk based sauces, all of which combine well with low tannin, fruity wines with little oak, like Merlot, Zinfandel or Syrah.
- ***Middle Eastern*** – This is another difficult cuisine to pair with wine but there has been much success in combining the figs, raisin, nuts, and tumeric flavor of Middle Eastern cuisine with soft fruity reds and whites like Beaujolais or New World Pinot Noir.

- ***Pacific Rim and Fusion*** – For bold dishes like Pacific Rim and Fusion cuisine, you need a confident, forward wine. The New World Cabernet Sauvignon fits the bill perfectly. But if you're looking for a little dazzle, try Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

Pairing wine with food could be a tedious task if you are dead serious about discovering the newest classic combination. But for us ordinary folks, wine and food pairing is more like a game of horseshoe. "Close" counts and in the end, you always win.

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