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Tips for Food and Wine Pairing

by Steve Kershner

Food and wine companions will vary widely depending upon preparation and accompanying side dishes. One must consider all flavors and textures presented to make complementary wine selections. A simple roast complemented by a Cabernet becomes not such a simple roast if the meat is covered with herbs, Dijon mustard, and garlic, and basted with pan juices enriched with red wine. Now a fuller, spicier red is required. As the flavors become more complex, so should the wine.

My approach to recommending a wine complement for a dish takes three tacks.

First, like the doctor's oath, do no harm. It is always better to have a wine that is subtle and understated against the food than to have an overt, boisterous, center-stage wine that climbs on top and dances around on the foods. Just as you may be careful about the guests you have invited to the meal, consider that you have invited the wine to participate in the evening's enjoyment, but you probably don't want anyone, or any wine to dance on the table, start a food fight, or knock the guests out of their chairs. Consider the wine to be a complementary and balancing side dish, or maybe an invigorating palate refresher between bites of the foods.

Second, the goal is to make the food taste *better* by choosing the best combinations of flavors, textures, styles, and other characteristics. The wine should lift, enhance, and highlight the foods, or the other way around—any way this synergy can be attained.

Third, have the foods show off and develop something more in the flavors and textures in the wine.

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A Few Words of Caution

A few words of caution about areas of difficulty are needed first. Wine components and styles of wine that have difficulty pairing with a wide range of foods are high alcohol, coarse rough tannin, overtly toasty wood flavors, and low acidity. There are ways to adjust the foods to complement these wines, but wines with these general qualities are not very food complementary.

*High alcohol is never warranted with spicy foods, especially foods with spicy “heat” because the alcohol with be accentuated and the wine will seem thin, hot, and aggressive. Instead choose wines with lots of fruit character, freshness, and even a bit of sweetness.

*Most people have a natural aversion to high tannin, bitterness, coarseness in the wine, even in small amounts, and these wines require foods such as fatty meats and cheeses, or butterfat. The fat tends to round the wine and hone off, or fill in, the wine’s coarseness by coating the palate.

*Wood flavors run from the dill hints found in American oaks to roasted nut, vanilla, and slightly smoky flavors, depending on the type of wood, size of the barrel, and the cooper’s level of char on the barrel. As long as these particular nuances are just that, *nuances,* wood flavors can be an interesting subtle flavor addition to a wine. Wood barrel ageing is used to polish and round the young, gawky wines. But often these wood flavors are overwhelming and too obvious, and the resinous wood textures can also enter the profile, adding tannins and astringent qualities. These flavors and textures are no match to foods, except for the possible exception of barbequed and grilled preparations. Wines of this ilk also tend to be fairly low in acidity, so they are usually best on their own, or with the simplest foods and cheeses. Low acidity in wine will cause it to seem dull, lifeless, and cloying if paired with food. Also, this is a good exercise with the older aged beauties. Pair more simple foods and flavors so the wine will better stand alone; i.e., match the food to the wine rather than the wine to the food. The exception here is young, rich, explosively flavored wines, which still retain ample acidity, as these will usually require equally explosive food flavors.

Now let’s examine the three factors that influence the palate *perception* of food and wines—flavors, textures, and outside influences.

Factors Influencing Palate Perception of Food & Wine

Flavor

Pleasant companionship of foods and wines can be based upon similarity of flavor. For instance, Chardonnay often exhibits apple-like fruit flavors which can match well with dishes using apples as an ingredient, such as a pork tenderloin and apple sauce. Or perhaps try that same tenderloin roasted with apples and basted in the apple and pan juices, maybe with a splash of the wine in the pan as well, which helps to unite the wine and food. Roasted duck with a fruit coulee or berry sauce will love a dry red to cut through the duck fat, but here one with a rich, forward fruit character is needed to get along with the sauce. A tannic, bold red will not do well because its astringency will be accentuated by the fruit sauce. Flavors in the wine should lean toward berries and red fruits, and alcohol, tannin, and wood tone should be held in check. Pinot Noir, Gamay, and richly fruited wines will serve best. The apple-fruited Chardonnay above could have gone through malo-lactic fermentation, which adds a rich buttery/butterscotch flavor and reduces acidity. It might also be finished in toasty oak barrels, giving a vanilla/ smoky note to the wine. This rich, powerful, full throttle Chardonnay would match up with broiled or grilled swordfish in butter sauce, but would overwhelm the light, delicate flavor of filet of sole. The *style* of the wine dictates its food companions.

Texture

This is a critically important consideration in food and wine companionship, and one that is generally overlooked. It is a major influence on our perception of compatibility. Texture is the tactile experience that our tongue has when it encounters the five basic sensations of *sweet, sour, salty, bitter,* and *fat*. Often we are not even aware that we are considering texture in our tasting experience. In fact, physiologically our tongue can only recognize the first four as textures. The olfactory senses in our noses really identify *flavors*. We taste (feel) sweetness on the tongue, but we “taste” the flavor of apples in the nose, more as an aromatic scent. This is one of the reasons wine geeks slurp and gurgle when critically tasting wines, while we try to get the flavors into our olfactory senses even while the wine is on the palate. Let’s examine each of these textures.

Texture & the Five Basic Sensations

Sweet

Proper food and wine pairing requires that the sweetness of the wine nearly always be higher than that of the food. Otherwise the palate cannot perceive the fruit in the wine and it will seem thin, tart, bitterly astringent, and very dry. For an extreme example, think of serving a crisp dry white with a sweet iced-cake dessert—sort of like scratching your fingernails on a blackboard. There are some exceptions, but this area is usually best left to the experts, the well informed, and the well practiced. Cabernet with chocolate is one of the notable common exceptions (though I‘ve never really cared much for it myself), but here, too, the wrong choice in Cabernet can have a very uncomfortable result. Care must be taken to have the wine’s *texture* be round, low in astringency, with vivid fruit flavors. The chocolate/Cabernet match is more about complementary flavor profile than about texture, and the textures can make for a disastrous pairing. Many of today’s foods use fruit sauces, honey, fruit infusions, salsas, and coulees, and the wines should be more delicate, sweeter, lower in astringency, brighter, lower in wood tone than what seems to be the current vogue in wine production (enormous extraction, high alcohol, liberal wood extracts, lots of tannin). Wine selection must be approached with care and knowledge.

Sour (acidic)

Acidity in wine gives lift and freshness. A simple example would be the difference between a plain glass of water and a glass of water with a squeeze of lemon or lime added. Aside from the flavor of the citrus itself, there is a refreshing, cleansing character and a bright “lift” to the acidified water. Acidity is an element that we want to protect when we pair wine and food, being careful of tart, acidic foods that will overwhelm a wine’s acid balance, like many green vegetables. If you lose the perception of the wine’s acid on the palate, the wine will seem lifeless, dull, flat, or flabby. Acidic foods sharpen and refresh the palate and will emphasize any flaws the wine might have. Salad dressings of vinegar base are wine enemies, and the old adage in the wine business, “buy on apples, sell on cheese,” is testimony to the fact that cooks should be careful to ensure that the acid level of the food is lower than that of the wine. Any wine merchant worth his salt should be aware of the acid balance between the foods and the wines he recommends as companions.

Texture & the Five Basic Sensations

Salt

Salt has the uncanny ability to lower the palate's perception of acid, a special relationship that causes salty foods to pair particularly well with higher acid wines. Examples abound, such as smoked fish, caviar, and fresh shell fish with crisp, high acid Champagnes, Chablis and Loire Valley Sauvignon Blancs (Sancerre, Reuilly, Pouilly-Fume), or green veggies with these crisp dry, high acid whites. Conversely, savory dishes without salt make uninteresting pairings with wine. Salt also has a tendency to slightly diminish the perception of tannin or bitterness in wine or in food.

Bitter/Tannin

Most of us have a natural aversion to bitter and sour flavors, preferring instead round, ripe, lush, smooth characteristics, probably something in our primate genetics. These tastes are acquired and remain palatable only in small doses. Very young wines will have tannic astringency (that mouth-puckering, suck-the-moisture-off-the-palate, cotton-ball-on-the-tongue tactile sensation), but this perception can be markedly reduced when consumed with fatty foods such as meats and cheeses, which tend to coat the palate and lessen the astringent bitterness.

Fat

This category includes animal fats and oils, as well as those foods that present a "fat" impression on the palate, such as potatoes or beans. Even big, rich wines with the butteriness from malo-lactic fermentation can be perceived as "fat." These wines can require intense flavors in the foods. Fats in food work very well with tannic wines. Where acid in food tends to magnify a wine's flaws, fat tends to diminish and cover them.

Other Influences

Although reasonable assumptions can be made, and sound decisions based upon knowledge and experience may avoid dramatic errors in wine and food pairing, there are also many differences of opinion on the subject. Commonly these differences are the result of influences outside the realm of taste, flavor, and aroma. These include personal preferences, body chemistry, mood, occasion, and temperature (yours, the weather's, the room's, the wine, and the food). The "perfect" food and wine pairing will be different things to different people, and simply reading instructions cannot make for perfect combinations. It can only point you in the right direction. Experience is the best guide, though eliminating obvious errors is a good starting point, and we hope you find these tips useful to that end.