



The Basic Concept of Matching Wine with Food

On the whole, extremes of flavor in food tend to narrow the range of what wine pairings might work well—or at all. A dark, oily fish like Spanish mackerel is hard to match. When focusing on the wine first, the best rules of thumb have more to do with weight and structure than flavor; for instance, a medium-bodied, moderately oaked Chardonnay will work with a broader range of foods than a super oaky, buttery, rich Chardonnay would. To that end, here are some tips:

Don't match strong to delicate. Pairing a big, powerful, high-alcohol or high-tannin wine with a light, delicate dish (and vice versa) is rarely a good idea. You want to balance the food and the wine so one does not dominate and destroy or overwhelm the flavors of the other.

Acidity is your friend. People tend to be wary of wines described as "high acid," like Sauvignon Blanc or Muscadet. Who wants to drink acid, after all? But there's no better quality in a wine for matching rich, creamy or cheesy sauces, deep-fried foods or fish dishes; in addition, tart wines go better with tart foods, such as with the vinaigrette on a salad. Sour foods with high amounts of acidity will decrease our perception of sourness or tartness in wine and make it taste richer and mellower.

Tannins pair well with fat. That's because the astringency of the tannins cuts through the viscosity of the fat. The "tannic" taste of a wine is known by the touch or feel of the wine. Tannins create a drying sensation in your mouth and food that is salty or fatty suppress the astringency.

Follow the don't-upstage-the-star rule. If you have an amazing bottle of wine you want to show off, especially an older vintage (they tend to be more subtle, their flavors less flamboyant), don't serve a wildly complex dish with it. A simple dish will allow the wine to be the center of attention.

Spicy Seasonings. Spicy food will exaggerate the tannins in a wine but adding something salty or sour to the food will counteract the effect. For instance, squeezing lime juice over a spicy enchiladas makes the entrée more wine friendly. This will pair better with a wine low in tannins and acid such as Gewurztraminer.

Pair Desserts with Sweet Dessert Wines. Most desserts are sweet, therefore you want to serve a wine sweeter than the dessert and you the wine will be perceived as less sweet. If you serve a wine that is not sweeter, the acid will become more pronounced and not be as appealing.

The essence of pairing wine with food is about creating balance. It is about creating an experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is about synergy.

The attributes used for matching wine with food are as follows:

- Weight/Body - The feel and intensity of a food or beverage.
- Total Acidity - The tartness of a food or beverage.
- Flavor/Complexity - The combined taste and aroma of a food or beverage.

These three elements all contribute to the concept of balance. When each attribute is in harmony with the others, a food or beverage is said to be "in balance". If one or more attributes are over-emphasized or decreased, then the food or beverage is said to be "out of balance".

Wine & Food Pairing Rules:

Rule 1. Look for compatible weights and bodies

Rule 2. Look for compatible acid levels

Rule 3. Look for complementary flavors and complexity

Rule 3. Look for contradictory, but balancing flavors and complexity

Rule 4. When a dish has a pronounced sauce, pair to the flavors in the sauce

Rule 5. When a dish has no pronounced sauce, pair to the main ingredient

Troublesome Matches:

- Vinegar or vinegar-based sauces - Look for clean, bright, high acid wines to pair the best, whites being most favorable.
- Tomato or other high-acid foods - look for high acid wines, like those made with Barbera grapes to provide the greatest balance. Less acidic wines will be overpowered by highly acidic foods.
- Artichokes and asparagus - The complexity and often-weedy flavors in both these vegetables make for tough wine pairing. Look for high acid, grassy wines, like Old World Sauvignon Blanc from the Loire to blend most favorably.
- Egg and egg-based dishes (i.e. Hollandaise) - The sulfurous quality of the egg has a similar as vinegar, imparting an unpleasant flavor to softer wines. Look for clean, bright high acid wines to pair best, almost always white.
- Cranberry sauce or other relishes - The flavors that abound in cranberry sauce and pickle relish make them near impossible to pair with wine. As with vinegar and eggs, look for clean, bright and high acid wines.
- Chocolate - The variability of chocolate in sweetness and texture can be difficult to pair well with wine. For sweeter chocolate, look for sweeter wines to make an effective pair, making sure to maintain balance in the weight and body of each. For semi-sweet or even bittersweet chocolate, look for drier wines to make an effective pair, again making sure to maintain balance in the weight and body of each.