

Wine with Food: A Guide to Pairing and Enjoying Classic Combinations

Introduction

Any foodie will tell you: great food is just about as close as you can get to an out of body experience here on Earth. And, similarly, any wine lover will admit that a truly great bottle of wine is pretty near perfection. But, caught up in their reverie, both the foodie and wine lover miss a critical fact: that together, food and wine are capable of taking you to still greater heights—to a state of gastronomic bliss unachievable when just one is consumed without the other. This nether world of dining nirvana is the product of stellar food and wine pairing, and by reading on, you too will be able to unlock its mysteries and savor its rewards.

The Basics

Let's get started! Pairing food and wine is a creative exercise with few rules and lots of room for experimentation. However, since learning anything requires ramping up before mastering a full-on understanding of the subject, I've outlined a few guidelines to help you form a context in which to think about food and wine:

•	Food and wine can be matched by weight, intensity of flavor, texture, sweetness (or lack thereof), or acidity. More on this later.
•	Keep in mind the cooking method when pairing food and wine. Smoked foods usually have more intense flavors than do those that have been steamed, for instance, and as such require a more intensely flavored wine. Again, more on this later.
•	Consider regional pairings. It's no accident that many classic pairings occur between food and wine originating from the same area, like Burgundian Pinot Noir with the French specialty Coq au Vin, made from the region's superb chickens.
•	Think outside the box. Many of the best pairings involve esoteric wines with which you may be unfamiliar but that will reward those adventurous enough to try them.
•	Listen to your palate above all else. The best wine and food pairings <i>for you</i> may not be found anywhere in this primer.

Using this Primer

Those better versed in food and wishing to find wines to match their culinary creations can do so by perusing the "Food First!" section of this primer. Alternatively, if you're the one who always consults the wine list before opening the menu, my hunch is that you'll prefer to find foods to go with your favorite wines. I recommend you skip the "Food First!" section and go straight to the "Wine It or Lose It!" section. Whichever you choose, happy pairing!

Food and Wine Pairing Frameworks

A Weighty Issue

Generally speaking, the weight of the dish is the most important consideration when pairing. Hearty and rich dishes are usually best when paired with a wine of equal substance, such as a full-bodied Syrah with a game casserole. Alcohol content is the main criterion in determining the weight of a wine, with full-bodied wines usually clocking in around 12.5% alcohol or higher, and light-bodied wines hovering around 11% or less. As far as food is concerned, weight is determined as much by the character of the food—i.e. meats and pastas are usually heavier-bodied than fish and vegetables—as by the method by which it was cooked. Cooking methods involving heavy sauces, reductions, grilling and smoking translate to more heavy foods, while those involving steam, boiling, poaching or no cooking at all usually result in lighter fare.

Flavor Force

One exception to the weight rule is that of food's flavor intensity. Some items, such as rich, fatty foods like foie gras, actually pair better with a light and crisp wine with a hint of sweetness, such as German Riesling. The wine's bright acidity works to cut through the fat of the foie gras, complementing it rather than competing with it, as would invariably be the case were it paired with a wine of equal weight. As it turns out, German Riesling is actually quite intense in its flavor, although still light in body, and this is why the combination works. The same cannot be said for most low-intensity light whites, like Pinot Grigio. Similarly to rich foods like foie gras, ethnic foods like Thai and Japanese that are assertive in flavor but not necessarily heavy or rich also pair well with intensely flavored whites without too much body. Young wines from aromatic grape varieties such as Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling work well here.

Texture Truths

Red wines high in tannin—the substance that gives rise to a chalky sensation on your teeth and leaves your mouth dark after drinking—are particularly difficult to match with certain foods, such as dairy. Fish, salty dishes and those with eggs are also natural enemies of tannin, and should be avoided when red wine is being consumed. Happily, tannin is at home and actually moderated by foods with chewy textures, such as steak and other red meats. Cabernet Sauvignon-based Bordeaux and similar dry high-tannin wines need only be partnered with the right foods to make them seem supple, fruity and pleasingly complex. Other foods, such as chocolate, eggs, and some cheeses, have a glue-like mouth-coating texture that interferes with our natural ability to taste wine. This quality in chocolate can be mitigated with a sweet wine backed by good weight, such as fortified sweet wines like Port, Madeira or Banyuls. The same goes for cheese and wine pairing. And last, but certainly not least, egg-based dishes are best matched with Chardonnay or other medium-bodied whites, like Pinot Blanc. If lemon has been used along with egg, a citrusy Sauvignon Blanc will work well.

Sweet Thing

Sweetness in food should be matched by sweetness in wine. There is little more vile than a dry wine consumed with sweet food: the sweetness of the dish makes the wine taste thin and tart. A good rule of thumb for dairy and bread-based desserts is that the sweetness of the dessert must at least be matched by the sweetness of the wine. The richest concoctions, it follows, merit pairing with the richest sweet wines. Liqueur muscats, such as those from Australia and France, and fortified wines including PX sherry and port top the list of rich dessert wines. Late harvest and botrytised (a phenomenon resulting from the so-called “noble rot”) wines like Sauternes follow in intensity, and work well with medium-intensity desserts like crème brûlée. Fruit-based desserts such as puddings and compotes pair best with lighter sweet wines including German Riesling, Asti and sparkling Moscato. Sweetness in savory foods provides a bigger but not insurmountable problem for food and wine pairing. Generally speaking, dry, buttery and oaky whites should be avoided, as these qualities are usually at odds with the fruit sauces and jellies typically served with sweet savory foods. A good bet is usually German Riesling, which has varying degrees of sweetness along with a healthy dose of strong acidity likely to pair well with most savory foods.

Acidity Answered

Like sweetness, acidity in food should be matched by acidity in wine. If it is not, the wine will taste flat and lifeless. Acidity in food derives from several sources, including citrus juices, fruit, vinegar and wine-based sauces. Dishes high in acidity include but are certainly not limited to the following: fish prepared with citrus, such as ceviche, dishes in which vegetables or fruit play a primary role, shellfish prepared with lemon, and ethnic foods such as Thai, which uses a good deal of lime. White wines grown in cooler climates tend to be higher in acidity than most reds and also than whites grown in warmer regions, such as California’s Napa Valley. Acidity also derives from the grape variety’s natural flavor profile: Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Muscadet and Chenin Blanc are a few examples of naturally high-acid white grape varieties. Some red grape varieties are also high in acidity, but pairing them with food is more of a challenge due to red wine’s naturally occurring tannin, which you read about in the Texture Truths section of this primer. Red varieties including Cabernet Franc, Gamay (the grape used in Beaujolais), Barbera and Pinot Noir have a good deal of acidity and are candidates for pairing with certain higher acid foods.

Sauce Note

Regardless of a dish’s makeup, if its sauce is of a strong enough character then that must be matched in the accompanying wine. Reduction sauces and glazes, such as those often used in steak houses, require a full-bodied fruity red, such as Australian Shiraz or Brunello di Montalcino. Reduced white wine-based sauces call for a white wine with strong acidity, such as Chablis, Sauvignon Blanc, or Muscadet. Béarnaise and horseradish-based sauces are best matched with German Riesling, and vinegar-based sauces by high-acid white varieties.

Food First!

Cured Meats & Charcuterie

Young fruity reds work best here. Try Cru Beaujolais, such as those from appellations Moulin-à-Vent, Fleurie or Morgons. As well, Pinot Noir from California's Central Coast will work well, as will Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache-based reds from France's Côtes-du-Rhône.

Salad Stuffs

High-acidity light-bodied whites such as Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio are the key here. Light reds like Gamay (Beaujolais) and Alsatian Pinot Noir as well as young Chianti will work too.

Casseroles Etc.

When meat is used, stick to full-bodied reds like New World Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, or Syrah. For chicken in white sauce, look to New World Chardonnay with some oak, or richer white Burgundy, like from Pernand Vergelesses. Chicken in red sauce pairs well with Pinot Noir in both New and Old World styles.

Nut Job

Nuts are difficult because of their drying texture, and as such pair best with sweet wines with some body. Madeira, tawny port and oloroso sherry are good matches because they also have a nutty quality.

Fungi Foods

Pinot Noir is a classic match with mushrooms, especially when the Pinot hails from Burgundy in France and has some age on it. Rioja with some age and white Chateauneuf-du-Pape will also do the trick.

Noodle Time

Pasta with meat sauce is best matched with medium- to full-bodied reds such as Chianti Classico, Barbaresco, or Dolcetto. Pasta with white sauce pairs best with light- to medium-bodied dry whites like Soave, Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco.

From the Sea

Almost without exception, fish is best paired with white wine. An exception is salmon, which can be enjoyed with both white and light-bodied reds such as Pinot Noir. Lighter fish like skate and trout prepared simply call for lightly oaked Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, or Alsatian Riesling. If prepared in a sauce redolent with butter or thickened with cream, a bigger-bodied white is required: try New World Chardonnay or Pinot Blanc. Richer fish like scallops and lobster call out for similarly robust whites. These include Viognier and top quality Chardonnay, especially from Burgundy in France.

From the Earth

Game is classically paired with Syrah from the Northern Rhône in France, from appellations including Hermitage and Cornas. It also goes famously with top Pinot Noir, especially from Burgundy. Chicken can be prepared in myriad manifestations; as such, allow its preparation method and sauce to guide your pairing. Chicken is remarkably flexible and, depending on how prepared, will work well with medium-bodied whites on up to full-bodied reds, so long as the tannin is not too overpowering. Pork is similarly flexible, and can be paired with full-bodied whites such as New World Chardonnay and fruity reds including Rioja and Cru Beaujolais. Lamb is classically matched with Cabernet Sauvignon from the Médoc region of Bordeaux, but also works well with New World Cabernets and Rioja.

Frommage Finds

Contrary to popular belief, the best wines to drink with cheese are not dry reds like Cabernet Sauvignon. Rather, sweet wines with a good amount of body are the best companions to cheese, much as they are the best accompaniments to dessert. Cheese, it turns out, is one of the most difficult foods with which to pair wine, a phenomenon arising from the stuff's often pungent aroma, strong flavor, salty character and gluey texture. The sweetness and relatively high alcohol levels of the following wines are ideal counterbalances to these qualities: port—both vintage and tawny, Madeira, Banyuls, late-harvest Rieslings and botrytised Sémillons.

If you simply must drink red wine, the stuff pairs fairly well with harder cheeses like Parmesan and Manchego, which are the most food-friendly of all cheeses. Cheeses with high acid levels like Chèvre, or goat cheese, call for a wine with similarly high acidity, such as Sauvignon Blanc. Soft cheeses present a particular challenge when it comes to pairing, and are usually best matched with French Chardonnay from Burgundy or Chablis, or fine light-bodied reds from Europe, including red Burgundy (Pinot Noir) or Chianti Classico. As far as blues go, Roquefort is a classic match for Sauternes, the botrytis-affected nectar hailing from Bordeaux, and Stilton is famous with good quality port.

Wine It or Lose It! - WHITES

Chardonnay

Chardonnay is the ultimate vinous chameleon because it is a fairly neutral grape that takes on the characteristics of the place in which it is planted. In cool Chablis in France it produces steely and acidic wines, while in Australia's hot Hunter Valley it produces butterscotch-rich versions. In its lightest manifestations, Chardonnay is best matched with light fish simply prepared, salad starters, light pasta dishes and chicken. In its bigger, more rich versions such as those from Mersault in Burgundy and California's Napa Valley it can stand up to the best and richest fish, such as lobster and scallops, as well as richer risottos, chicken dishes and guinea fowl.

Chenin Blanc

Made most famously in France's Loire region, Chenin Blanc is a versatile wine made in dry, sweet and sparkling versions and, in good years, capable of aging for quite some time. Unfortunately, bad Chenin abounds, and as such the variety has gotten a bit of a bad rap. Its sweet wines can be quite good, especially from appellations Bonnezeaux, Quarts de Chaume and Vouvray, and can taste of honeyed fruit and marzipan. Try them with fruit tarts as well as almond and hazelnut confections. The off-dry versions make good aperitifs and also pair well with fish in cream sauces.

Gewürztraminer

"Gewürz" means spice, and wines made from this aromatic grape variety often smell of cooking spices like cinnamon and ginger as well as sweet things such as lychee and roses. Famously made in France's Alsace region as well as in Germany and some New World outposts including Washington State, Gewürztraminer is at risk for becoming unappealingly low in acidity in warm years. When crisp, however, the dry versions work well with spicy foods including Thai and Indian. Sweet and sour Chinese dishes are also good candidates, as are foods made with sweet onions and leeks.

Muscat

Muscat is one of the most aromatic grape varieties after Gewürztraminer. It often smells of grapes themselves, an unusual phenomenon in wine, as well as a host of other aromas, including orange and floral scents. Although made in a dry form in France's Alsace, Muscat-based wines are usually sweet and some are sparkling as well, such as those from Asti in Italy. Muscat is considered an ideal accompaniment to chocolate and also works extremely well as an aperitif. Fortified versions from the south of France are gaining in popularity, particularly those from Saint-Jean de Minervois and Rivesaltes.

Muscadet

Made popular in western France along the Atlantic coast and now made virtually nowhere else, this unique grape variety is considered the ideal accompaniment to oysters. Also called Melon de Bourgogne, the grape is high in acid and fairly neutral in character. But if you're going to eat oysters, clams, shrimp or other fresh sea stuffs, it's your best bet.

Pinot Blanc

A near twin to Chardonnay in outward appearance, Pinot Blanc is not as malleable or as successful as its peer. However, it shares Chardonnay's easy quality when it comes to food, and when made in ideal regions such as France's Alsace and Italy's Alto Adige, Pinot Blanc can make easy drinking food-friendly wines with a hint of richness. Try it with simple fish dishes, pâtés, salads with meat, and ethnic dishes with a hint of spice.

Pinot Gris

Grown throughout Europe, Pinot Gris is made into dry, medium sweet and fully sweet wines that bear some of the spiciness of Gewürztraminer as well as a richness all its own. Honey is the operative word here, along with nougat and spice. Dry versions partner well with smoked salmon and onion- and bacon-based quiches. Sweeter versions work with foie gras, pâtés and puddings.

Riesling

Riesling has suffered over the past couple of decades due to the popularity of some extremely poor but very commercial versions of the stuff. It is, however, one of the so-called noble grape varieties, and with good reason. When made well, Riesling is THE most versatile of all wines for food pairing. German versions come in several degrees of sweetness, but all have food-friendly acidity along with lightness of body and lovely aromatics. Try the lighter versions with sushi and delicate fish dishes, and those with a notch or two more sugar with pork or duck in fruit sauce. Drier versions hail from Alsace and are generally richer in body than their German counterparts. These pair well with smoked fish and pâtés, and the late harvest versions are perfect counterparts to apple tarts.

Sauvignon Blanc

Another noble or classic grape, Sauvignon Blanc is known to "sing" with its acidity. Whether making floral-scented delicate versions in France's Loire or green and assertive variations in New Zealand's Marlborough, Sauvignon is remarkably food friendly. Goat cheese, or Chèvre, is a classic match with Sauvignon Blanc. Also delicious with it are many lighter fish dishes, tomato-based concoctions, and vegetable-heavy dishes.

Sémillon

Sémillon is the backbone of the famous sweet wine Sauternes, generally believed to be a classic pairing with foie gras. In Sauternes as well as in dry

renderings it is almost always blended with Sauvignon Blanc, which adds acidity to its richness. Besides foie gras, luscious desserts such as crème brûlée and a number of cheeses partner well with Sauternes. In its dry incarnation, Semillon is most often observed in white Graves, also of Bordeaux fame. White Graves is capable of aging, and is a medium-bodied white that pairs well with many of the dishes good Chardonnay matches.

Trebbiano

This variety grows in large numbers around the Mediterranean, particularly in the south of France and in Italy. It is the chief ingredient in Italy's smooth but rather unremarkable wine Soave as well as Frascati and Orvieto, also hailing from Italy. It is a good match for simple pastas and white fish dishes. In its sweet form, Recioto di Soave, it can work well with moderately intense puddings and blue cheeses.

Viognier

A big-bodied white with heady aromatics, Viognier is enjoying a rebirth as the darling of adventurous California winemakers. Its original home, a Northern Rhône appellation called Condrieu, still yields the best versions: they practically sing out with aromas of peach and apricot, musk and flowers. Being big in body, Viogniers are tough to match with food, but rich fish such as lobster and scallops are a good place to start, as are foods flavored with rosemary, with which it has a natural affinity.

Wine It or Lose It! - REDS

Barbera

This fairly high-acid red hailing from Piedmont offers up round berry fruit and licorice flavors that work remarkably well with a host of foods. These include charcuterie and smoked salmon for the lighter wines, while those with some oak and age can stand up to game birds and casseroles.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Particularly when it hails from the Médoc region of Bordeaux, but also in its best manifestations from other parts of the world, Cabernet Sauvignon is classically paired with lamb. It is also the ideal wine for red meat, and the rule of thumb is that the better the cab, the more simply the meat should be prepared.

Otherwise, complex sauces and overly strident flavors will compete with the wine's own flavor profile, a real shame if you're drinking a bottle of aged Latour.

Gamay

This is the most uncomplicated of the red grape varieties, and no wonder, since it's responsible for the truckloads of remarkably quaffable Beaujolais Nouveau shipped around the world every November. Gamay is a high-acid grape that produces bright red berry fruit-tasting wine with very low tannin. It works very well with light meats like salami as well as ham and salmon. It also makes more sophisticated *Cru* wines named under their own appellations that are generally viewed as the ultimate turkey wine for Thanksgiving. Watch for those from Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent and Fleurie.

Grenache/Garnacha

This variety is grown extensively in the Mediterranean, particularly in southern France, and is often blended with other varieties that lend structure to its pleasing red fruit and peppery flavors. Because it is a fairly high alcohol variety, growing as it does in hot areas, it often has a jammy reduced quality well suited to pizza, bbq ribs, and simple peppered meats like pepperoni. It reaches its best manifestation in Chateauneuf-du-Pape wines, in which it is the main ingredient.

Merlot

Usually blended with Cabernet Sauvignon in Bordeaux, Merlot stands on its own in California. The variety is at risk of becoming low in acid during very hot years, and as such has captured the disdain of some oenophiles who decry it "flabby" in those instances. However, when good, Merlot has a very pleasant round red fruit quality and chocolate undertones, and pairs well with pork and turkey as well as herbed meat dishes. When not too tannic, it also works well with tuna.

Nebbiolo

Northern Italy's darling is the stuff responsible for full-bodied Barolos and Barbarescos. It is intensely perfumed at its best and can be surprisingly high in

tannin. Barolo is truly magical stuff, and generally needs several years cellaring to integrate and mellow following bottling. Its most noted flavors include tar, violets, tea leaves, cocoa and roses. The biggest Barolos necessitate full-flavored game and beef dishes, while its more subtle compatriot Barbaresco works well with roast beef and meat delicacies including liver and kidneys.

Pinot Noir

Currently achieving cult status amongst *Sideways* devotees, Pinot is the notoriously finicky grape variety responsible for top Burgundy. It is being well made in California, Oregon, Washington and New Zealand of late, where its subtle cherry, strawberry and spice flavors are showing well. Pinot can be at once fruity and spicy, mellow and rich, and as such it pairs with a wide spectrum of foods from salmon and charcuterie to chicken and tuna to rich game-based dishes like venison. Sweetbreads and Pinot are a winning combination, as are most mushroom-based dishes.

Sangiovese

Italy's favorite grape, Sangiovese is the stuff responsible for Chianti and its bigger brother, Brunello di Montalcino, both grown in sunny Tuscany. The variety has rather high acid which makes it a perfect accompaniment to just about all Italian cuisine. Drink young Chiantis with pasta, sausages and other tomato-based dishes. Fuller bodied Chianti Classicos and Brunellos can stand up to grilled and roasted herbed meat dishes such as those featuring pork, steak, and various types of game.

Syrah/Shiraz

An extremely versatile grape variety, Syrah is currently enjoying something of a double life, with its traditional half making blockbuster peppery rich versions in its native France while its younger more adventurous half is experimenting with über rich and sparkling versions in Australia. To boot, curious American vintners calling themselves Rhône Rangers are making good versions of the stuff in California. Syrah is a medium- to full-bodied peppery red that works very well with meat-based dishes of all sorts as well as goose and duck, pork and sausage, and some hard cheeses.

Tempranillo

The main ingredient in Spanish Rioja, Tempranillo is a medium-bodied variety with rounded ripe red fruit flavors and some spice. It is usually aged in American oak, which lends it a smooth vanilla character to boot. There are several different versions requiring different amounts of time in oak before release, and the youngest, *crianza*, is a rather simple almost sweet fruity red that works well with most simple meat dishes and some curries. Older versions (*reservas* and *gran reservas*) pair well with roast pork and lamb.

Zinfandel

Famously popular in California and almost nowhere else, Zinfandel is actually southern Italy's Primitivo. The variety makes finished wines that vary immensely in character, but it is safe to say that they are generally full-bodied fruity reds with pepper and cola flavors. It is considered the penultimate bbq wine, as its natural pepper flavors are echoed in the smoke from the grill. As well, Zins work well with tomato-based bbq sauces, which themselves have a sweetness reminiscent of the wine's ripe red fruit. Zinfandel pairs well with spicy meat dishes, sausages and casseroles as well.