HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE

Six easy steps to pairing food and wine

BY CHRIS DENNETT

In the world of food and wine, one of the more daunting tasks for many people is that of pairing the two. When done well, food and wine pairings can border on the sublime. When done poorly, the pairing can be worse than forgettable. There are, however a few guidelines that can be followed that will help you make the most of your pairings.

Before I get into the specifics about pairing food and wine, there are two important things to keep in mind. First and foremost, the enjoyment of wine and food is one of the things that separate humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. It's meant to be fun, and it's meant to make you happy. Second, don't be afraid to try things that fly in the face of conventional thinking. Sure, there are traditional pairings in food and wine in the same way that there are traditional recipes. But the world of wine is one that can be heavily populated by irrationally traditional people with overly developed encyclopedic knowledge and under-developed creativity and forward thinking. So don't take yourself too seriously, be open to new ideas and flavors, and always trust your own palate. At my restaurant, some of the most successful pairings that my chef and I have made are ones that seem odd at first glance: for instance, white pepper-seared Ahi tuna with Syrah.

So here are six things to keep in mind while pairing food and wine that will help you be a success every time.

1. Taste the Wine First.

In my experience, this has made all the difference. While most people will decide what to make and then head to the store to grab a wine that will work with it, I believe it is much easier to pair food with a wine than it is to pair a wine with food. There are two reasons for this.

First, generally speaking, wine can vary more dramatically than food. For instance, the Cabernet Sauvignon grape can have a variety of flavors that depend on factors other than the actual fruit. The nuances of soil, climate, ripeness at time of harvest, and winemaker style can make this single variety jammy, vegetal, herbal, or gamey, to name but a few. While I guess technically the soil and weather could slightly change the flavor of broccoli, food is almost always grown so that it tastes the same. You will never find a farmer that grows their broccoli crop in such a manner as to magnify a particular aspect of the natural broccoli flavor – something that vineyard managers and viticulturists in this country will do with their grape varietals.

Second, and connected to the first, most of us are more familiar with food than we are with wine. Think of it this way: which can you more easily imagine, the taste of cherries, or the taste of malbec from Mendoza, Argentina? Because winemakers have different styles and use different fruit from different places, every wine will have something different happening. You can get a good sense of what to expect in general terms from particular varietals, but every wine is different, and the average person will have more success tasting a wine and imagining a food pairing with it than the other way around.

If you don't have time, or don't want to taste your wine first, you can almost always find reliable tasting notes online.

2. Consider the Flavor Interactions.

There are essentially three ways that you can play with the flavor interactions of food and wine. You can match a wine with a food that has similar flavors, contradictory flavors, or some combination of both. All ways are complementary when done right.

For example, if you are tasting a white wine that has good stone fruit flavors (like a typical viognier), you can choose to complement the fruit characteristic by matching it with something similar in flavor, like fresh or dried apricot with rich cheese (to balance the body, which I will address next). A contradictory flavor that would match well with this viognier would be a spicy Thai stir fry. Spicy and sweet are always good counterpoints and, while there may not be any residual sugar in our make-believe wine, the strength of the fruit will be perceived by the palate as sweet against the spice. Finally, to use something that has a little bit of both, any food with a heavy ginger presence would work well with this wine, since the mild sweetness of ginger will match the fruit of the wine, and the natural spice of the ginger will complement at the same time.

3. Consider the Relative Gravity.

Perhaps the most important aspect in food and wine pairing is the relative gravity or heaviness of the wine and the food you want to pair it with. This is where the traditional concept of red wine with red meat and white wine with white meat comes from. It's not that red always goes with red, it's that heavy always goes with heavy. You will typically match white wines with fish not because the meat is white, but because fish tends to be a more delicate protein with more subtle flavors, and white wines will not overpower the fish.

Choosing your protein for the pairing is so vital, because some are heavy (beef, lamb, duck, elk or other game), some are light (flaky whitefish, shellfish, and most poultry), and some can go either way depending on how you prepare it (pork, salmon, and meaty fish like Ahi or swordfish). The most important thing to remember is that you can always find something to match or contradict flavor, but relative gravity in both your wine and food are more or less static. They should always be matched. In other words, don't serve Tempranillo with ceviche, or Sauvignon Blanc with braised lamb shank.

4. Make the Food as Dynamic as the Wine.

Remember that your food, like your wine, should be well-balanced. The best pairings include all the various elements of flavor interaction and relative gravity. It allows both the wine and the food to shine and the sum to become more than its parts. But remember that balance is important, and that means not trying to do too much. The food should be dynamic not in its difficulty or complexity of preparation, but in its simplicity and complexity of natural flavors. Which leads us to our fifth and final step…

5. Keep it Simple and Respect Your Ingredients.

Food is good just as it is, and some of the best dishes are prepared simply, without a bunch of fancy preparations and complicated sauces. Don't abuse your food; let it speak for itself. For example, if you need to beer-batter your prawns, deep fry them and serve them with a sauce made of figs, cherries, morels, port, garlic, shallots, and cream in order to stand up to a Mouvedre, maybe you should choose a different protein for your wine. In my estimation, simple, fresh, quality ingredients always will be better in a pairing.

Both food and wine have enough going on with their flavors by themselves, you don't need to make it more complicated. Choose one or two things in the wine that you want to emphasize and stick to that, using one or two things in your food to accomplish your goal. You'll find that it makes pairing food and wine that much more interesting, since both have multiple facets. You might choose to highlight the red cherry flavor of your favorite Pinot Noir this week with duck in a cherry gastrique, and honor the same wine next week with an apple sage pork roulade that accentuates its more tannic tea characteristics.

6. Cook with the Wine.

Finally, give cooking with the wine you're pairing a shot. If you're pairing clams with a Chardonnay, steam them in the Chardonnay. You will find that most dishes will benefit from a touch of wine anyway, and what better way to bring the food and wine closer than to cook your food in the wine you're drinking?

Time to put it all together. At the beginning of this article I talked about a pairing that my chef and I made with Ahi tuna and Syrah. Here's why we did what we did, and why it was successful:

We seared the Ahi in white pepper, which was something we tasted in the wine (similar flavor interaction). Ahi is a meaty fish (matching relative gravity) so it could stand up to the body of a Syrah. We finished the dish with just a bit of some pickled onion that provided a nice sharp acidity to compliment the rich dark fruit of the wine (contradictory flavor interaction).

So give it a try, keep experimenting, and don't get discouraged if something you try doesn't work out perfectly. The real fun in mastering wine and food pairings is eating good food and drinking good wine.

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Squaw Lakes has new interpretive trail and a wildlife viewing blind

If you haven't been up to Squaw Lakes in a while you may want to make a trip. Thanks to two Eagle Scouts it now has a wildlife viewing blind and a new interpretive trail. Both seniors at South Medford, Garrett Gustafson and Lucas Asman-Prudell, completed their Eagle Scout projects at the lake last summer. Gustafson and Asman-Prudell, 18, are Ruch School alumni.

The wildlife viewing blind is on Big Squaw between campsites 10 and 11 at the north end of the Lake. It is 8' x 10', with a metal roof and a resting bench to sit and view wildlife without them viewing you. Gustafson would like to thank local businesses for donating over $1,200 worth of materials: Jacksonville Lumber, Economy Plywood, Hughes Lumber, Mainwaring Construction, Lowe's, Home Depot, Miller Paint and the numerous hands-on volunteers who helped with the construction.

Asman-Prudell created and refurbished a nature interpretive trail identifying native trees and shrubs. He installed boxes for his pamphlets at both ends of the trail. The trail is #928 and goes to Little Squaw or from Little Squaw back to Big Squaw.

Gustafson and Asman-Prudell are with Troop 7 based in Medford at the United Methodist Church.

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Photo from left to right standing in front of the Wildlife Viewing Blind at Big Squaw: Dave DeCarlow, Scoutmaster Troop 7; Lucas Asman-Prudell, Eagle Scout; Garrett Gustafson, Eagle Scout; Gary Leaming, Troop Leader; Dale Coleman, former Boy Scout; Tom Suttles, Troop 7 Scoutmaster; and Dog (Dog's name unknown).