

WINE GUIDE 101: Food & Wine Pairing

When it comes to matching food and wine the possibilities are, of course, endless but the good news is that there are no right or wrong answers. Sure, some combinations will be better than others, but you'll discover what these are through experimentation with your favorite foods and wines. So, out with the rule book and in with the freedom to improvise and have fun. Remember, too, that it's not just what you're cooking that matters but how you're cooking it. Here are some basic pointers that may help you on your way:

Wine should complement the food rather than dominate it, so one simple thing to keep in mind is "light food: light wine, heavier food: heavier wine". Soups, salads and light dishes will show best when accompanied by light, usually white wines. More robust foods with fuller flavors can handle bigger, stronger wines. Obvious, we know, but it really is that simple. Now let's take a look at some common foods.

Fish

Many wines can overpower the delicate range of flavors to be found in the fish group, so aim light and fresh that will let the flavor of the fish shine through. Here are some safe bets:

Sauvignon Blanc: New Zealand versions are particularly good since they are light zesty and lemony.

Sancerre & Pouilly Fumé: Also made from Sauvignon Blanc, these French wines are lean, grassy and excellent all-round fish wines.

White Bordeaux: Usually a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon (which gives it extra richness), this can stand up to richer fish flavors and sauces. It's particularly good with smoked salmon, but works with a wide variety of dishes.

Muscadet-Sur-Lie and Chablis: two French wines that are classic partners for Oysters and Mussels.

Chardonnay: Richer fish dishes call for weightier wines and many California and Australian chardonnays fit the bill nicely. It's best to avoid overly oaky styles, as they can overpower the fish.

Pinot Grigio: A good all-rounder, its neutral character makes it very flexible with fish and other foods.

Riesling: Particularly Australian versions which have lovely lime-juice flavors are a perfect match for fish. German as well as California Riesling have a sweet quality that pairs perfectly with spicy cuisine like Asian or Thai foods.

Pinot Noir: Yes, it's okay to drink red wine with fish! Pinot Noir works well with salmon, but try it with grilled fish or anytime you're having fish and just want to drink red.

Meat

Meat's more robust flavors call for hearty wines and there are few things as satisfying as a nice steak and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon. Here are a few starting points:

Beef & Steak: Cabernet Sauvignon is a classic partner for red meat. Cabernets from California, Australia, Chile, or Bordeaux all work very well. Merlot and Syrah/Shiraz, too, are excellent choices.

Lamb: Bordeaux and Rioja are great choices, here, but try your favorite red and see what you think.

Casseroles and Stews: Hearty, robust reds are usually best and there are lots to choose from Cotes-du-Rhone, Syrah/Shiraz and Zinfandel are all good bets.

Pork and Veal: Red and white wine can work equally well with pork. Aim for lighter reds like Pinot Noir, Beaujolais or Chianti, or softer reds like Merlot. Chardonnay is a good choice for a “porky” white.

Poultry: As the flavor strengthens from chicken to pheasant, so, too, should the wine. A wide variety of wines work well with poultry, particularly Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. A full-bodied Chardonnay can even handle goose. Strongly flavored poultry and game birds can easily handle re Brodeaux, Cabernets and Merlots.

Other

Pizza: Think red. Italian reds like Chianti, Valpolicella or those made from the Sangiovese grape are particularly good, but so is Zinfandel. Don’t over-think your pizza wine; just enjoy it.

Pasta: With creamy and fishy sauces, lean towards whites like Pinot Grigio and crisp Chardonnays like Macon-Villages. With red sauces, meat sauces and lasagna go with a hearty red. Any Italian will do as will Zinfandel or Syrah/Shiraz.

Vegetarian: Such a catch-all category that it really depends on the preparation and spices. If it’s an earthy, nutty dish, Pinot Noir could be great. If it’s lighter, with more green vegetables, then you might be better off with a white like Chardonnay.

Dessert

For many people, dessert wine takes the place of dessert, but if you choose to serve wine with dessert, here are a few pointers based on the type of dish.

Fruit: Either on its own or in tarts, fruit flatter sweet wines wonderfully. The acid in the fruit is a nice foil to the sweetness of the wine. Try Sauternes, Late Harvest Reisling or Muscat.

Chocolate: Hugely popular in desserts, but tough to match with wine. Many people like Merlot with chocolate and Tawny Port’s hazelnut character marries wonderfully.

Heavy Desserts: If the dessert is already sweet and heavy, try a light, refreshing glass of Moscato d’Asti or Champagne as an accompaniment.