

MAKE ME A MATCH



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match! For the first part of my professional career, I was involved with restaurants and hotels in the world of wine education, sommeliers, and wine waiters. Matching wine to food was an intricate, fun, and pretentious sport.

All wine professionals did it. Often, we had to match wines to every course of a banquet. That was fun! To do this successfully, one would need to know the ingredients, cooking procedure, and dominant features of each dish on the menu, and also be able to deconstruct the various aspects of the wines.

The challenge of finding a match is to elevate both the wine and the food. When you get it right, both taste better. It is a case of 1+1=3! The sommelier Derek Todd has said: “There is a magic space in that distance between the food and the wine. The ideal match fills in that space.”

Unfortunately, the emphasis the wine trade put on the importance of this was not lost on regular wine drinkers, who would be cowed by the responsibility of ordering “the right wine” that went with the food. This weighs heavily on the person ordering wine in a restaurant and buying wine for home use. It shouldn’t, but that is a downside of wine education. We should not put the fear of God into people. Where taste is concerned, there is no black-and-white, right or wrong; it is not that important.

I used to love the challenge of matching food to wine, but in my later years, I care about it a lot less. I don’t think it matters as much as I once thought. I tend to drink the wine I want with the food I want. Good wine goes with good food. It does not have to be complicated.

There is no doubt that wine should be part of a meal. It is part of a holy trinity of food, wine, and good company (friendship). If one aspect of the three-legged stool is missing, it is not the complete experience. The stool collapses.

Food tastes better with wine, and I far prefer to drink wine with someone else rather than on my own. I like the Italian attitude: wine is a fixture on the table, like salt or pepper. It does not have to be on a pedestal or talked about nonstop. It is just there, part of the meal, but modestly in the background.

DO YOU match wine to food or food to wine? Usually, one matches wine to food

in almost all instances. If you are organizing a dinner party at home or ordering in a restaurant, the main course would most likely be decided first.

For those who want to play the game, the most basic rule is “red wine with red meat, white wine with fish.” It is quite a good guide. The idea is sound, but as soon as you look into it, one is confronted by all the exceptions. Taste is personal, and expert opinions are varied. This is highly subjective, as all wine tasting is.

Most of the decisions are based on common sense. You won’t eat a rich stew or casserole with an unoaked, thin dry white wine. Nor would you have a rich, high alcohol, tannic red with a delicate fish dish. It is not rocket science. A light dish should go with a light-bodied wine. Similarly, a rich, heavy dish should go with a full-bodied wine.

Also, the cooking method will be very relevant. Light dishes may include fish and vegetables. Light cooking methods would be boiling and steaming, or cooking in the microwave. Light wines could be Sauvignon Blanc, Roussanne, Pinot Gris, a rosé or an Israeli Grenache light red.

It is important to match the flavors. For instance, a fish in a butter sauce would be well accompanied by a buttery Chardonnay. Likewise, steak in a pepper sauce will go with a peppery Shiraz. Also, an herbaceous Sauvignon Blanc will be a successful choice with grilled vegetables.

A medium dish would be one made from poultry, chicken, or turkey. Baking or roasting would be a medium-cooking method. A medium sauce may be based on butter, cream, or olive oil. Medium-bodied wines could be Chardonnay, Merlot, Syrah, and Carignan, Israeli style. Of course, I am generalizing to make the point, because in reality wines are made in different styles.

A heavy and weighty dish would be made from red meats, for example, beef and lamb. A more intense cooking method would be grilling, roasting, stewing, or barbecuing. Fuller-bodied wines include Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, and Petite Sirah.

The sauce is crucial. It is likely to be more important than the protein and be the dominant flavor. Think how these dishes made with the same fish differ: sashimi, grilled fish, fish in a cream sauce, and fish in a hot, spicy harissa sauce. Clearly, each would come in a different category. Think of wine like an additional corrective sauce. With wine, you have the last opportunity to balance the dish.

It is vital to identify the dominant ingredient in a dish. Think of a regular



LIGHT MEAL with a light wine: Rose is always a good option. (Barkan Winery)

hamburger. Let’s say, for convenience of kashrut, that it is vegan. This will include onions (which are bitter), tomatoes (acidic), blue cheese (salty) or smoked cheese (smoky), tabasco (hot), and ketchup (sweet). A complicated state of affairs, in a simple burger! If an ingredient dominates, that should be considered more than the sauce, meat, or fish. The obvious example is coriander, which would take over all flavors in a dish. Therefore, you have to match the wine to that ingredient.

We know that opposites attract. A fish in batter would require a white wine with high acidity. A blue cheese with a distinct saltiness would be perfect with a sweet dessert wine.

The cooking method can be key. Compare tuna sashimi (which is raw), tuna ceviche (with lemon juice), a tuna dumpling (simmered), smoked tuna (smoked), seared tuna (pan fried), tuna steak (grilled), and tuna tempura (deep fried). The weight and focus of the dish are different for each. So, it would not be an issue of matching the wine to tuna alone.

Cooking time can give a guide. Cold food is usually satisfactory with a lighter wine, as with food cooked for a shorter time. However, a dish cooked for a longer time will need a heavier wine. Remember, this is just a guide! Higher cooking temperatures will inevitably go



WITH BARBECUED meat, you need a fruity, full-bodied red wine. (Galil Mountain)

with a wine that has a higher alcohol content. Of course, boiled, steamed, or microwaved will be less robust than a grilled or oven roast.

REGIONAL MATCHES do work. There is a saying if they grow together, they go together. Think of tomatoes and basil! Some regional combinations could be a pepperoni pizza with Chianti; a



Provençal garlic dish with Provence Rosé; beef bourguignon with Red Burgundy; tapas with sherry; quiche with an Alsace Gewurztraminer, or Greek mezze with retsina. Remember this when you are in the Negev or Galilee. It is always good to drink wines of a region with local cheeses. Also, a Golan wine will be most suitable with beef raised on the Golan.

Some classic matches show the benefits of matching wine with food: foie gras with Sauternes; goat's cheese with Sauvignon Blanc; steak with Cabernet Sauvignon; lamb with a Bordeaux blend; blue cheese with a sweet dessert wine (think of Stilton and Port); Asian food with Gewurztraminer.

The only time you need to match the food to the wine is if you open that special aged wine that has been cellared and kept for a special occasion. Then, all the food

matching rules fall by the wayside. In this instance, the wine leads. You want to show it at its best, to give respect to the wine. In this instance, serve a dish with no complicated, intricate sauces, and no exaggerated use of herbs or spices. The cook or chef will need to take a back seat with no showing off.

TO SUMMARIZE, here are some tips. Generally, whites go well with fish or poultry. However, if the cooking involves roasting or grilling, then a red wine may be more appropriate. For salty food, avoid high alcohol wines. Sweetness plus saltiness is a good match.

If acidity or sourness is the issue, avoid tannin. Acidity matches acidity. Choose a wine with greater acidity than the food, so the wine does not taste flat. White, rosé, and sparkling wines can provide

Clockwise from top:
ALWAYS REMEMBER sparkling wine goes with everything beer does. (Adi Perze)

MATCHING FOOD to mood: Ice-cold Bartenura Moscato on the beach. (Shaked)

FINE DINING: Wine enhances the food and the experience. (Flam Winery)

acidity. If there is smoke, go with oak. Smoked foods with oak-aged wine work together.

A tannic, bold red wine is good with fatty meat or hard, aged cheese. Tannin does not go well with fish, and reds will not sit nicely with oily or "fishy" fish. Though there are always exceptions. The Portuguese will drink Red Vinho Verde with grilled sardines.

For spicy, hot dishes, avoid high alcohol and oaky wines. A touch of sweetness, say in an off-dry or semi-dry white wine, will tone down the heat and spice in a hot dish. Likewise, if there is sweetness, say in a pudding, the dessert wine should be just sweeter than the dessert.

There are three particular books that I regard as my personal bibles with regard to matching food and wine. One is *Red Wine with Fish*, by David Rosengarten and Joshua Wesson. It has been out of print for decades, but if you can find a copy, it is a pearl. Then there is *What to Drink with What You Eat*, by Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page. Finally, there is *Great Tastes Made Simple*, by Andrea Immer. They open up this whole world and explain all the possibilities. I give them all the credit for my explanations.

"Any wine and food pairing will have one of three outcomes: 'The flavor of the food is

more dominant than the flavor of the wine. The flavor of the wine dominates the food. The food makes the wine taste better, and the wine makes the food taste better.' The last is the rarest of outcomes, and the one I am always striving to achieve." So says master sommelier Alan Murray.

If all this sounds too serious, then note this slogan: "Match the wine to mood, not to food." There is a lot to be said for this. So, if you are having a barbecue, choose a fruity, fun wine. A beach picnic calls for a refreshing wine. A serious formal dinner calls for a serious wine... and so on. This is similar to another quote: "Match the wine to the diner, not the dinner." (Thank you, Tim Hanni, a master of wine). In other words, delve into all this if you want to, but if not, buy the wine you want!

Finally, I bow down to the great sommelier, retailer, and wine personality Joshua Wesson. He once came as a guest to Golan Vintage, the food and wine culinary festival hosted by the Golan Heights Winery in the late 1990s. He uttered the immortal words: "Champagne goes with whatever beer goes with!"

Not only is it true, it is also smart. I once drank Champagne for three straight days with every meal (in Champagne, of course). Not only did I stay sober, but it seemed to go with everything. So, my fallback advice is: If in doubt, drink traditional method sparkling wine! It will never let you down! ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines over four decades. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com