

Pitfalls and Challenges of Pairing Wine and Food

Wondering which wine to drink with your chicken *makhani* or *paneer tikka*? Follow the guidelines below and you are well on your way, writes **Lindsay Groves** as she proceeds to explain the basic principles



Fish is naturally high in umami. Using salt and lemon juice will suppress its effects on wine

Food and wine pairing is often construed as some mystical art form. In reality it doesn't have to be all that complicated. With a little guidance, practice and a healthy dose of imagination anyone can become a pairing pro. In this article, we look at the basic dynamics of food and wine pairing and how to go about creating your own edible match.

PHASE ONE

Avoiding major pitfalls

The first and most crucial stage when putting food and wine together is to avoid combining elements that have a detrimental outcome. Here's how you should deal with the following issues:

THE CHALLENGE: Sweetness

Sweet foods are disastrous when paired with dry wines, making the wine taste thinner, harsher and more acidic. When serving a sweet food, sweet wines are the only answer. Wines that are off-dry to sweet can be very versatile when it comes to food. Look for dessert wines such as Sauternes, German Beerenauslese or Trockenbeerenauslese Rieslings, Icewines, Vin Santo, Australian Stickers or wines that flaunt the terms 'late harvest' or 'vendange tardive'.

Tip: The wine must be sweeter than the food.

THE CHALLENGE: Acidity

Wines that have high levels of acidity can seem too sour, thin or austere. In order to make a wine taste softer, fuller and less acidic, select a food that is equally high in acidity. Wherever possible, use citrus instead of vinegar in a salad dressing as vinegar tends to be less wine-friendly. Examples of a successful pairing: Unripened goat's cheese and Sauvignon Blanc or salad in a citrus vinaigrette with a crisp Riesling.

Tip: Use foods with acidity to compliment high acid wines.

THE CHALLENGE: Bitterness

Bitterness in foods such as arugula, radicchio, endives, broccoli, *karela*, etc, can have a negative effect on wine. Acidity and salt will help to suppress bitterness. Without thinking too much about it, we would naturally add these flavours to leafy greens in the form of a dressing, helping salads and vegetables to taste better. When pairing foods displaying bitterness, avoid wines with significant amounts of tannin, as the tannin will feel more astringent and the bitterness in the food will seem more pronounced.

Tip: Add acidity and/or salt to suppress bitterness. Avoid tannic wines.

THE CHALLENGE: Umami

You may or may not be familiar with the term umami. It is what we call the 'fifth taste' along with sweet, sour, bitter and salty. A fairly recent discovery, umami literally translates as 'savouriness' or 'deliciousness' and is used to describe the taste of glutamates (think monosodium glutamate). Umami is found in high concentrations naturally in foods such as soy sauce, seaweed, fish, shellfish, mushrooms, cheese and meat.

So how does umami impact wine? Umami is particularly reactive with tannins and can cause an unpleasant metallic taste when combined with some wines. It is therefore advisable to avoid wines high in tannin. Salt can also be used to counteract any negative effects due to umami.

Tip: Use salt to suppress the effects of umami and avoid wines high in tannin.

THE CHALLENGE: Tannin

Tannin, which is found in various levels in all red wines,

can cause a sensation known as astringency. Tannin is present in the skins, seeds and stalks of grapes and can also be found in food items such as tea, nuts and some vegetables. If you are not sure what astringency feels like on the palate, try drinking some very strong, cold tea. It is a drying sensation that can feel very coarse and unpleasant in high concentrations.

The best way to tame tannins is to serve the wine with protein-rich food. Tannins are negatively charged molecules, whereas proteins are positively charged. The two will combine and leave the wine tasting smoother. (This is the same reason why egg whites are used to polish tannic red wines during the fining process). Meat and cheese are two excellent examples of foods that will complement tannic reds. When choosing cheese, it is best to pick something with a fair amount of flavour such as aged cheddar, Parmigiano, Reggiano etc or a blue-veined variety.

The fact we often add milk to make tea taste better supports the principle that protein will soften tannins. Something else we can add to tea is lemon. Acidity can work the same way with wine. Choosing food with some decent acidity will also help to make the wine feel more velvety, as will a judicious amount of salt.

Tip: Drink wines high in tannin with protein-rich foods. Acidity and/or salt can also assist in softening tannins.

THE CHALLENGE: Spice

Spice is a broad term. Many substances we throw into the spice category will not cause any issues when it comes to pairing them with wine. What does tend to be difficult, however, is heat from chili peppers. When dealing with chilies it is helpful to have some residual sugar in the wine as this will act as a buffer and will not aggravate the heat. Wines that are not necessarily sweet, but give the impression of sweetness with very ripe, fruity aromas also work quite well.

Spice in general tends to make wine taste drier. It can increase the perception of oak and will make tannin in red wines feel more astringent. Alcohol in the wine can also magnify the intensity of the spice, so it is best to choose a wine that is not too high in alcohol.

Tip: Opt for wines that have some sweetness or are made in a very fruit-forward style. Avoid wines high in tannin and alcohol. ♦