

Five Fundamentals of Successful Food/Wine Pairing – Savor the Surprises!



The inspiration for my comments this evening, titled “Five Fundamentals of Successful Food/Wine Pairing,” stem from the ongoing debate between wine sommeliers and master chefs: When planning a special meal, which comes first, the food or the wine?

Answering that question becomes all the more challenging when you consider the increasingly wide range of choices for buying wine and the number of tastes (new and old, ethnic and continental, exotic and contemporary) that are now available in the market.

Of course, there are some classic food/wine pairings that are always worth revisiting. But we thought it would be fun to explore some of the fundamentals of successful food/wine pairing.

It just so happens, this very brief lesson dovetails perfectly with the theme of the conference which is, “The Power of Connections.” Think about it: What better way is there to connect with people than over a fine meal? And by making the right connection with the food and wine, the meal can successfully fuel memorable conversations and deeper relationships.



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At a more general level, I’ve noticed that when people make valuable connections, whether professional, social or culinary, these often lead to unexpected and magical surprises. Indeed the spirit of this conference — and of this evening’s menu — is to savor the surprises wherever and whenever they happen to surface. “Savoring the Surprises” is the subtitle of my remarks.

Before getting started and by way of full disclosure, I must confess that although I have been trained as Certified Sommelier, I don’t know how to cook! Indeed, my culinary qualifications are virtually nonexistent (I’ve just about mastered microwave popcorn). Indeed, my sisters like to joke that when Raymond walks into a grocery store he often asks the grocer, “On which aisle can I find the toast?”

Now, on with the Five Fundamentals of Food/Wine Pairing!

Rule #1: Red Meat/Red Wine... White Meat/White Wine

Food/Wine Pairing Fundamental #1 comes from the Sommelier’s textbook: Pair red meat with red wine and white meat with white wine.

To put this in Silicon Valley computer-speak this is a very good ‘default setting’ and it explains why there is always consensus when a basic prime rib is served with a nicely aged Cabernet Sauvignon or a grilled chicken breast is accompanied by a glass of Chardonnay. These combinations are time-tested, low-risk and highly rewarding.

Rule #1 is all about complementary flavors and flavor profiles and, truth be told, there is a lot to be said for the simple color harmonies: red with red, white with white. These combinations look appetizing.

In fact, Principle #1 is perfectly applicable to one of the main courses this evening: the Tenderloin of beef with the St. André cheese and sweet potato focaccia. You'll want to have the 2008 Ramey Cabernet Sauvignon with this main course as it's really the pairing the chef had in mind. A true classic and it's beautiful to behold as well! The blackberry, black olives and saddle on the nose are ideal for this dish.

Slightly more creative is matching the seared black cod with the 2009 Ramey Napa Valley Claret. Claret is another name for a Bordeaux blend, so it has the juices of grapes other than Cabernet Sauvignon to soften the wine. Although it is not exactly consistent with Rule #1, it should be quite nice. If it fails for you, fall back on the 2008 Staglin Family Vineyard Estate Chardonnay. You can't go wrong with that pairing.

So, let's move beyond Rule #1, because it's sometimes fun to try to match the overall intensity of the food with the intensity of the wine and to contrast "layers of flavors," accents and gestures that are all perfectly orchestrated with an entire meal. In fact, this is the ultimate goal when pairing food and wine. It's not about one of the two driving the other; it's about the food and wine being planned in conjunction with each other.

You've probably noticed that when you experience a comprehensive, 4-5-6 course tasting menu at a fine restaurant the intensity of the flavors is a real hallmark of the meal. The light wines are always served before the more full-bodied wines; the dry wines are served before the sweet; the low alcohol wines are served before ones with higher alcohol; low tannin before high tannin; young before old; simple before complex.

This variety of wine selections also underscores why cooking methods and sauces are much more important than the color of the protein on the plate. And when you really 'double click' on the red meat/white meat differentiation, the rule clearly has its limits. For example, where do pork, salmon, and ham fit in?

So, you can use red/white rule as a default, but to quote Emeril Legasse, maybe it's time to kick it up a notch. And this leads me to Food Pairing Fundamental #2: The Conquest of Contrasts.

Rule #2: The Conquest of Contrasts!

The Rule of Contrasts is best captured with a vivid example: Why does foie gras go so well with Sauternes? (Assuming you can find foie gras; it's been outlawed in the State of California because some people believe it is immoral.)

The reason: The rich texture of the fatty foie gras works brilliantly with a slightly acidic, sweet wine like Sauternes. For all of you true cork dorks in the audience who have their own private stash of foie gras, it also goes very nicely with Jurançon or Monbazillac, and, of course, Champagne and foie gras is always a natural match. It's a perfect example of textural contrast.

Another classic in the conquest of contrasts category is Crottin, a famous French goat cheese and Sancerre, a region in the Loire Valley of France where the sauvignon blanc grape truly shines. The highly acidic, crisp wine beautifully contrasts the chalky, slightly dense cheese. Really magical!

Other classic contrasting food/wine pairs include:

- **Caviar and Champagne:** The magical popping of the eggs and tiny bubbles of the Champagne give a fabulous mouth-feel and two are always delicious to contrast with one another. By the way, Champagne goes with just about everything!
- **Dark chocolate and tawny port:** Sweet food contrasts with low tannin wine like tawny port
- **Stilton with vintage port:** Here is a highly intense, salty food contrasting with a highly tannic, sweet wine
- Which leads me to Fundamental #3

Rule #3: Where There's Smoke, Bring on the Oak

The best example here is smoked salmon and an oaked California Chardonnay like the 2008 Staglin Family Estate Chardonnay we're enjoying this evening. The rich flavors of crème brûlée and white peaches with hints of vanilla and oak spice are a wonderful fabric on which to enjoy something quite strong like smoked salmon. (Speaking of crème brûlée, one of my favorite Julia Child quotes is, "I believe every woman should have a blow torch.") Also, think of how perfectly matched cured meats, smoked ham or charcuterie go with wines that have spent time in oak barrels.

One of the lessons they teach at sommelier school is how to make a notoriously wine-unfriendly food like asparagus more wine-friendly. They say: Throw the asparagus on the grill and place some shredded pecorino romano cheese on top of before serving. Where there's smoke, bring on the oak! A nice pairing here would be something like a 2010 Rombauer Chardonnay.

While on the topic of smoke and oak, just a quick note about wine and barbecued dishes: Don't waste carefully aged, highly-nuanced subtle wines on smoky, often aggressive dishes. Subtlety gets lost. Instead, go for something that would win the approval of celebrity chef Bobby Flay: Serve a big, bold fruit and lots of spices.

My barbecue choices are wines like Morgan Monterey Syrah (perfectly peppery and spicy) or a Dry Creek Zinfandel. Yes, there are lots of tannins, but also tobacco, spice and brambly fruit flavors.

Rule #4: Beat the Heat with Sweet!

By 'heat' I don't mean barbecue heat, but rather spicy or piquant dishes. This rule addresses the larger issue of what to do with super spicy and widely available ethnic cuisine like Mexican, Chinese or Indian food.

My observation is that off-dry (slightly sweet) wines will effectively tame spicy foods and will often contrast with salty foods as well. Classic pairing here would be a Seghesio Zinfandel with a spicy enchilada. Or a dry

Trefethan Riesling with Chinese dish like sweet and sour pork.

The palate — in an artistic as well as culinary sense — really opens up when you introduce ethnic or exotic foods to the table. It's also quite fun to experiment.

Rule #5: What Grows Together, Flows Together

Finally, my favorite food/wine fundamental is really the most logical of all: What grows together, flows together. Finally, guests were offered a glass of the 2006 Ramey Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon for their dessert course of vanilla crème brûlée and rhubarb sorbet. It was a fine way to land a powerful and deeply satisfying meal.

It makes sense. If you have the chance to visit the Chablis region of France, which is just about an hour outside of Paris and where they make some of the most delicious Chardonnay-based wines, you'll notice that they fish for trout in the gorgeous river that flows through the village, a few yards from where the grape vines are thriving!

So it's no surprise that they serve sautéed trout in a beurre blanc sauce with a grand cru Chablis. This is another example of where "simplicity is the purest form of perfection" as wine writer Hugh Johnson may put it. They'll also have a starter like we're having tonight — tomato salad with a lighter weight Chablis.

(Speaking of beurre blanc sauces, another one of my favorite Julia quotes is, "... If you're afraid of butter, use cream!")

Shellfish is also a natural combination with Chardonnay and Chablis, which is itself a wine made from the chardonnay grape. Indeed, wine writers often describe Chablis as having the quality of crushed oyster shells, which happens to be the color of the soil in Chablis.

By the way, another wine option we are offering with the fish course is the 2009 Testarossa Pinot Noir from California's Central Coast. The cherry flavors, black pepper and clove are a natural match for the black cod.

It works for reds as well. When you next visit Tuscany, the vines that are making the glorious Sangiovese-based Chianti are a stone's throw from the tomato vines and fields of basil and garlic cloves.

What grows together, flows together. Taken together — and in keeping with the theme of this conference — we hope you savor the surprises of the meal we are about to enjoy as well as the other magical things that may surface from the connections you'll be making during the conference.

For now, I will simply say bon appetit!

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