

# Pairing Wine with Food

When chef and winemaker work together, the result is a dish that complements a wine's unique characteristics.

By Susie Selby

If you ask most winemakers why they make wine, food will almost always be at the heart of the reply. Sometimes we started enjoying wine before we appreciated it with food, but fairly soon we recognized the amazing symbiotic relationship between the two, and it truly is one of the tremendous joys of our occupation.

Although wine is a product of the vineyard, when winemakers have a true appreciation for the dynamics of food with wine they become compelled, each vintage, to make wines that are specifically designed to complement a vast array of food.

The first time a winemaker values the culinary relationship with his or her wines is normally when a chef is involved in a winemaker dinner. Early in our careers, we want to micromanage the process, falsely believing that the chef might make our wines taste less than optimum. Inevitably, we are pleasantly surprised by some shocking pairings, but we also learn quite a bit about our wines and our winemaking style based on the foods the chef chooses and the ease with which he or she creates dishes for the wines. One thing that becomes obvious quickly is that the more specific the flavors are in a wine, the more specific the chef must be

with the food. If the wines have particular stylistic elements, the chef will be challenged with creating foods designed around those elements.

An example may be a wine made from a vineyard that has a eucalyptus tree on the property, thus imparting a mint characteristic to the wine. The chef would have to choose a dish that will pair well with it and not compete with the minty flavor, even if it is just a subtle nuance. In other examples, the chef may be working with a Bordeaux varietal with heavy tannins or a Zinfandel with residual sugar. With



each additional identifiable characteristic in the wine, the chef must narrow down or find ingredients that will either parallel the flavors or complement them—the two basic techniques for food-and-wine pairing.

Winemakers are acutely aware and appreciative when a wine is so specific that the chef takes additional time to experiment and carefully create food to accompany it. In fact, we can understand the challenges firsthand when we are placed in that position—taking a stylistically specific wine into a restaurant and searching for dishes that will showcase the strengths of our product. It is through restaurants, chefs and sommeliers that we are able to learn which of our wines is universally food-friendly and why.

How does this translate into winemaking? Even if there is not a conscious effort made to create wines for food, there is frequently a subconscious effort that starts with the winemaker and ends up affecting the farming practices in the vineyard and the choices about which vineyards to contract with for varietals and blends. For instance, if a winemaker is choosing between a classic, grassy Sauvignon Blanc and a more typical and tropical California-style Sauvignon Blanc, he or she would be inclined to work with the vineyard managers to assure the outcome of the flavors. The farming decisions that guide this process include pruning, leaf-pulling, crop yields and fruit thinning.

The choice of vineyards to contract with for a blend is a major decision. The winemaker has to decide which vineyards will constitute the base wine for a blend and which vineyards will be utilized as blending tools or layers of complexity. For example, if a winemaker is contracting fruit

for Chardonnay, there are many options to consider. French clones in rocky soil will produce more minerality, while Clone 4 (the California classic clone) has a tendency toward a more butterscotch flavor. If there is a desire to add a floral element to the blend, a small percentage of the Spring Mountain clone, which is a Muscat/Chardonnay hybrid, may be contracted.

As you can see, winemakers and wineries do have choices, and these choices will ultimately come from the source of the grapes. But once the fruit has been secured and the winemaker has worked with the vineyard managers to determine farming techniques, the decision on when to pick the grapes becomes important.

The sugar levels chosen when picking determine the alcohol levels, but there is a greater thought process that must take place. Winemakers who make wines for food intuitively know that lower-alcohol wines are more complementary. However, flavor development happens as grapes continue to get ripe, and frequently, in California, the wine will not have desired flavors if grapes are picked too early. There are specific varietals, such as Zinfandel, that have no viscosity or intensity of flavor unless picked when the sugar, and thus the alcohol, is quite high. Other varietals, such as Cabernet Franc and Merlot, can have much higher vegetative qualities until they get to higher sugar levels. Fortunately, after the fruit is picked and brought into the winery, the winemaker has more decisions and options, which ultimately determine the outcome of the wine.

Acidity is important, especially when considering how food-friendly a winemaker

wants a wine to be. However, there should not be an automatic assumption that wines have to be high in acid to pair well with food. High-acidity wines such as rosé or un-oaked Sémillon make sense when one is deciding on acid additions. On the other hand, a winemaker can manipulate the body of a wine by limiting the amount of acidity. A Cabernet Sauvignon must be rich in texture to pair well with heavier meat dishes, and this is frequently accomplished at slightly lower acid levels.

One more key factor that directly affects food-and-wine pairing is the use of barrels and the amount of time in oak. If a winemaker decides to put wine in barrels, it must be determined whether to use French or American oak and the percentage of barrels that are new. Utilized properly, barrels can add subtle flavors to the wine, which gives the wine more interesting food-pairing opportunities. In addition, the oxidative exchange while the wine is in barrels contributes greatly to the mouthfeel of a wine.

As you can see, there are many critical choices to be made throughout the winemaking and viticultural process. It is important to remember that the cumulative result of all of these decisions is a great bottle of wine that is a thoughtful combination of art, science and nature. If you ask most winemakers what the best reward is at the end of the day, it will be savoring their wines expertly paired with wonderful food. That is at the heart of winemaking—knowing that our wines can create memorable meals and occasions.

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