Pairing Food and Wine

Considerations

Do you recall a time when something was such a perfect food/wine match that you’ve never forgotten it? It’s like the wine and food “pops”, both enriched by the other. I can remember three. I was at a Winemaker Dinner in Portland where the chef paired our off-dry Gewürztraminer with a pear tart for dessert. I saw that on the menu and began to worry. We don’t make a “sweet wine”, I ruminated, which says a lot about where I was in my understanding. The dessert, of course, was the highlight of the evening. The wine came alive in a way it could not have done without the tart, and vice-versa. I’ve re-created that experience as best I can with a recipe featuring a fresh pear pie and our current off-dry Gewürztraminer. You can find it in our recipe section. I had my own supply of pears, picked them full size but not ripe, and simply kept them in the refrigerator until about 6 days before I needed them to be perfect for six pies. Sort of scary, but it worked.

Another time was a huge wine function where spaghetti with meat sauce was being served. What? The Pinot Noir is gone? Grumbling mightily, I looked around for something red and found a dry blackberry wine. Those were the days when fruit and berry wines were still prolific in the Willamette Valley. Perfection! That experience jolted me off my Pinot Noir high horse to think about pairing in a more thoughtful way.

The Oregon wineries used to do a marketing event in Chicago each year, celebrating the very short release of Copper River Salmon from Alaska, paired with Oregon Pinot Noir. Copper River Salmon are part of the King Salmon family, and very similar to Oregon’s King, though even richer. Wild King, thick cut and extremely fresh, simply grilled with a bit of butter, lemon and garlic is made for Pinot Noir. I still remember the first time I interacted with fellow “foodies” at this event.

As I look at these three examples I see several principles at work. Starting with the pear tart, the flavor profile of ripe pears with Gewürztraminer is complimentary, since ripe pear can be picked up in the nose of many off-dry, spicy Gewürztraminers. Also, the tart, being egg-based and not overly sweet, is surprisingly versatile with Gewürztraminer. In this case the wine is full enough to complement, and also dry enough and with enough good acid to offset the richness of the tart.

The spaghetti dish would have been delicious with Pinot, but I learned something from that dry blackberry wine I was privileged to be “stuck with”. Spaghetti sauce, with its richly flavored tomato base has a sweetness that is unmistakable. That blackberry wine, with its relatively soft berry sweetness, provided a complement to the sauce, yet was bone dry in terms of residual sugar, providing a nice foil to the richness of the spaghetti. Pinot is such a flexible wine with food that it is a sure bet in most cases, but the softer, ripe black spectrum of berries “popped” in this case and surprised me.

With the salmon, Pinot works because of its relatively soft tannins (tannin is often associated with bitterness – tea that has steeped too long). The red raspberry and spice spectrum of medium-bodied Oregon Pinots holds its own with the texture and richness of the fish, and provides a mouth-filling counterpoint of acidity, the ultimate contrast to the oily, high fat content of the fish. A big tannic red would taste bitter to the detriment of both the wine and the salmon.

What follows builds on the concepts of contrast and complement, both important in matching food and wine, while looking at basic taste considerations. It must be said that this can be wonderful tableside conversation with good friends. Did the match work? Oh. Well! Let’s just pull a bottle and see if that is
even better! Oh the joy of having a winery as your wine cellar. And, just know that for every rule there is a terrific exception.

- **Acidity**

We have already mentioned acidity in relation to Oregon wines. We are blessed with it! Because of acidity and moderate tannins, Oregon wines are easy to drink and pair well with a broad spectrum of food. Acidity, defined, is the tart/sour factor on the taste spectrum. One way to think of it is like bringing the brightness of lemon to a piece of fish…a splash of tartness to perk things up.

○ **Contrast:** Pinot Noir, for example, can cut through the fat of many meat dishes, particularly duck, quail, lamb, and chicken thighs, some of my personal favorites. The fruit and spice flavors complement, but the acidity provides a refreshing counterpoint to the richness of the dish.

  - For my own taste, the gamier the meat, combined with char from the grill, the more you go for a big red with more tannin in its arsenal.
  
  - Age of wine makes a difference. If you build a dinner around an older Pinot, go more for complementing the wine with your protein choice and particularly, any sauce. Grilling a steak would potentially overwhelm an older wine, whereas roasted quail would complement.

○ **Complement:** Pinot Noir is a vegetarian or vegan dream with roasted vegetables, beans, and grains of all sorts. The middle pallet of concentrated fruit and spice bound by acidity harmonize better than any red wine I have experienced. Grüner Veltliner is a great summer wine with all things vegetable and grain, a relatively new variety produced in Oregon.

○ **Complement:** Sharp, tart dishes such as salads with vinaigrette, tomatoes, leeks, peppers, or fresh oysters all need a wine with similar sharpness. Unoaked cool climate Chardonnays can be very complementary to oysters or salads. Pinot Blanc, or dry Riesling also can complement a salad, particularly if softer vinegars such as raspberry are used, or the addition of beets, or including fresh fruit, nuts or feta cheese.

- **Sweetness**

Pinot Noir and barrel aged Chardonnay:

The perception of sweetness is not from residual grape sugar left in the wine, but rather from the fruit spectrum itself. Barrels also add sweetness, and certainly alcohol gives an impression of sweetness. As an example, our barrel-aged Chardonnay is a fine match with fresh halibut, whether grilled, pan-fried or poached. The full-bodied roundness of the wine complements the richness of halibut, and also provides counterpoint with acidity.

Off-dry whites: White wines with under 2% residual grape sugar and little or no barrel time include Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris from Bethel Heights. The amount
of residual sugar is somewhat determined by vintage, and clearly our winemaking style leans toward dry wines.

- **Contrast:** Pinot Blanc can be a fine counterpoint to spicy Asian food. Gewürztraminer is often suggested to pair with spicy food but that is more often than not incorrect. Gewürztraminer is so definite in its taste profile that we often prefer it with pork, or roast turkey, or with grilled sausage, all reflecting the wine’s German heritage. A favorite match with Gewürztraminer is with the seafood chowder and Gumbo soup recipes on our website. And, when we make a wine with at least some residual sugar, there is fresh pear pie to consider.
  - We presently make a dry sparkling rosé, and it is an interesting wine to pair with Thai dishes or oysters or mussels.
  - Pinot Gris with just a touch of residual sugar is really nice with fresh shrimp. The sweetness of each complements, but the bright fruit and acidity of the wine gives depth to the experience.

- **Complement:** There are some examples that are legendary: fresh corn on the cob with Riesling is one of those. The sweetness of both get into a duet that makes you want to sing along. Fresh crab with Riesling does much the same thing.
  - Often the sauce or accompanying condiment is the true complement to the wine. Pork tenderloin, for example, with a fresh rhubarb compote is really nice with Gewürztraminer. Fish tacos with fruit based salsa works well with Chardonnay or several of the off-dry whites, including Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc. So many choices.

**Saltiness:** Here we are mostly talking about contrast. Think of the principle of sweet and sour, or peanuts and chocolate.

  - Pinot Blanc with Roquefort or other blue veined cheese provides one example.
  - The brightness and citrus of Pinot Gris can be lovely with Camembert, with its tangy fragrance.
  - The sweet/sour aspects of many Asian dishes can be enhanced of off-dry whites, as we referenced above, but also a young, fruity Pinot is a very solid choice for many meat dishes that have sweet/sour components. Korean ribs, or potstickers with sautéed cabbage can be enhanced by Pinot.
  - Pinot Noir is often a better match for foods that have a salty impression than a more tannic wine, since tannin heightens the perception of salt.

**Oak:** Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are our wines aged in oak for significant time. Oak imparts tannins, which balance the natural acidity of our wines. Pinot, a softer medium bodied red, takes on oak and stays well integrated without diminishing the solid core of fruit. The oak brings out interesting flavors and aromas including toast, smoke, cola and vanilla.

  - Complement: The texture of Pinot noir and Chardonnay is smooth and round with the addition of oak. Grilling meat is a nice complement in this case, especially with wines under five years old,
when the oak may be more pronounced. Oregon is a haven for wild mushrooms, and whether sautéed or included in a reduced meat sauce, the complement to Pinot is delectable. Our West Block Pinot, having a hefty dose of Wädensvill clone, is a treasure of woody forest floor aromas and spice. A mushroom terrine with the West Block is a great combination.

Contrast: One of the best dishes with barrel-aged Chardonnay is risotto, especially butternut squash risotto. The richness of the dish is matched in weight by the wine, an important concept I haven’t discussed, but the contrast comes with the acidity of the wine balancing the richness of the dish.

Alcohol: Alcohol is what we associate with the weight and body of the wine. Most Oregon wines are considered moderate in alcohol, though in a warm vintage we sometimes hit 14%. Most of us are relieved when the wines remain in the 13% range, which is a perfect place to be when pairing food and wine. Salty and spicy foods are exaggerated by alcohol, making our off-dry whites so delicious and uncloying.

Marilyn’s rules of thumb:

- If your main course has a sauce, pay attention to the sauce in your matching considerations as the top priority. That is where the complement or contrast will be most pronounced.
  - When cooking with wine as part of your sauce reduction, for example, don’t feel you have to use the same wine you are pairing it with, especially considering cost. Matching red and white is usually important, but you can choose a clean fruity wine appropriate to the dish and be just fine.
  - Hold off on too much lemon or vinegar when using wine in your sauce……let the wine speak first. And watch the salt! A few coarse crystals at the end may be all you need.
  - If your reduction seems too bitter, don’t underestimate adding a dash of sugar.
  - A blend of stock reduced alone to half volume, and then adding half the volume left in wine and continuing the reduction brings out lots of flavor. Often a swirl of butter at the end is all the fat you need, other than pan drippings which you almost always want to add, especially if the meat is roasted or sautéed.
  - Keep notes on your recipe cards. They are invaluable while the memories are fresh.
  - Love herbs! I didn’t discuss them, but use them. Fresh thyme; rosemary with lamb; oregano and cumin……all work very well with Oregon wines, and particularly with Pinot.
  - Choose foods based on the season, when they are at their peak, and hopefully available close to home.
  - And remember, wine is food.

A fellow culinary sojourner,

Marilyn