

Who matches wine to food?

17 May 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

As one who has experienced both, I can tell you that it's much more fun to be married to a restaurant critic than to a restaurateur. After a few years during which sleep would routinely be interrupted by calls from security systems or sous-chefs detained by the police, I was all in favour of my husband Nicholas Lander's migration more than 20 years ago from one side of the swing doors to the other, and foresaw a life of flitting from one grand restaurant to the next, while being described in print as 'my companion'. What I didn't realise was that he would become such a keen cook that he does a considerable amount of his restaurant reviewing at lunchtime without me - but I can hardly complain of being fed badly.

So, all in all, I probably eat out less frequently than you would expect the wife of the *FT*'s restaurant correspondent to. But at the end of last month, I was able to fulfil my imagined role as Mrs Lander to the full. By a fluke of diary management, in just 10 days I was lucky enough to eat at arguably the two most famous restaurants in the world, Noma in Copenhagen and El Bulli on the Costa Brava, and to share a London stage with one of the most famous chefs, Heston Blumenthal of The Fat Duck and Dinner, while co-presenting the delights of teatime and sherry - as well as squeezing in meals at nine other restaurants of note.

It was our 40-course dinner at El Bulli (they were very small - honest), our last ever because the place is to close for good as a restaurant at the end of this summer season, that set me thinking about the increasingly fashionable subject of food and wine matching. It is typical of the almost naively honest spirit of El Bulli, a reflection of its guiding light, supremely playful chef Ferran Adrià, that our young sommelier Ferran Centelles was so unlike the stereotype of over-confident wine waiter.

On the principle that we would need a good appetite for the eating marathon that is a meal at El Bulli, we thought we'd start with the greatest appetite stimulant of all, a glass of fino, but couldn't decide which to choose: Fernando de Castilla's Antique Fino, Hidalgo's La Panesa or a Piedra Lunga fino from Montilla-Moriles. Ferran the sommelier brought bottles of all three and poured a small measure of each into long-stemmed tulip-shaped glasses, confessing that he didn't really understand the older, darker fino, the Antique. (This is not standard wine waiter behaviour.)

In the event, at least one of these light, dry sherries went extremely well with most of the tiny dishes that emerged with such elan from the kitchen - particularly with a series of creations inspired by Japan, notably the miso soup in the form of an alginate globule. But as the meal progressed - and before the point at which we surrendered and asked please, could the menu be edited a little? - Ferran the wine confessed that he felt mildly embarrassed at not being able to help when he was, increasingly, asked whether they had tasting menus in which a wine is matched with each dish. These have become increasingly popular, and not just in the US, where they are now quite common. I'm all for them if they are compiled intelligently and sensitively by people who know exactly how each dish and each wine tastes.

At Noma the previous weekend we had been served 11 courses accompanied by carefully chosen wines (and six original soft drinks based on appropriate fruits, herbs and grasses in the case of the abstainer in our party of 14).

But as our El Bulli sommelier confessed, Adrià's style of food is so eclectic, and his courses often little more than a mouthful, that it would be practically impossible to field a new, suitable wine with each course. There's a great wine list at El Bulli and there has been a succession of great sommeliers there, but I think the best option is either to choose something as flexible as sherry, or simply to choose a bottle that appeals to you and alternate sips from it with cleansing gulps of water.

I have noticed at particularly ambitious restaurants that do offer multi-course pairing menus - I'm thinking of Noma, The Fat Duck and The French Laundry in Napa Valley here, on some of my most glorious expeditions as Mrs Lander - how long you generally have to wait until you are served a red wine. Fireworks on the plate seem often to call for the bright light of a white wine, or a sherry, or a sake. Chefs and/or sommeliers can seem reticent about suggesting something as dense, complex and distracting as a red wine.

The Bordelais are a glorious exception to this rule. They often serve red wine throughout the meal, whether fish, fowl or meat.

So how important is it to match the right wine with what one eats, or vice versa? My view is that in the exceptional case of paying three-star prices in a restaurant with a very limited, static menu, then you're justified in expecting the wine waiter to know each dish intimately and to be able to suggest several perfect matches at different prices. But I think that in general, the effects of a less-than-perfect food and wine match are overstated.

A mere handful of foods actually distort the palate - really fiery spices, asparagus, artichokes, and (a new one this) a certain sort of particularly round pine nut from China that can make everything taste bitter for days. Light, delicate foods can be a bit swamped by really heavyweight wines while light, delicate wines can look a bit scrawny with very rich food - and overall it is weight (alcohol level and density) that can be a lot more important than the colour of a wine.

My wine writing colleague, and Purple pager, Fiona Beckett is one of the best sources of advice on specific successful pairings on her website www.matchingfoodandwine.com, and the most talented exponent of the art of matching in the US is my friend Evan Goldstein whose latest book is *Daring Pairings*.

But I suspect that we all have miniature computers in our heads that, unbeknown to us, steer us towards suitable combinations of food and drink. And if by some terrible chance we happen to have a wine in our glasses that just does not go with what we are eating, what is the worst that can happen? Nothing tragic or world-shattering, that's for sure.

It's remarkable what a mouthful of something absorbent and neutral such as bread and a sluice of water can achieve between mouthfuls.

See also our free articles on [Food matching](#).

SOME RECOMMENDED PAIRERS OF FOOD AND WINE

With very many thanks to Purple pagers who made recommendations on our Members' forum and to my Twitter followers who also helped with this very non-comprehensive list.

LONDON

Le Cercle, SW1
Club Gascon, EC1
Fulham Wine Rooms, SW6
Galvin, W1
Kensington Wine Rooms, W8
Launceston Place, W8
The Ledbury, W11
Magdalen, SE1
North Road, EC1
Salt Yard, W1
The Square, W1
Texture, W1
Trinity, SW4
Viajante, E2
Vinoteca, EC1 and W1

Please note that sister restaurants to The Ledbury and The Square - Chez Bruce, The Glasshouse and La Trompette - are about to start offering a three-course menu with matching wines.

REST OF UK

Aumbry, Prestwich, Cheshire
Fifteen, Newquay, Cornwall
Gidleigh Park, Chagford, Devon
Hambleton Hall, Rutland
The Harrow, Little Bedwyn, Wilts
Ransoms, Ramsbottom, Lancs

EUROPE

El Celler de Can Roca, Girona, Spain
Hertog Jan in Belgium
Kiin Kiin in Copenhagen
La Liègeoise, Wimeroux
Mimosa, St Giraud
Saturne, Paris
Alain Senderens, Paris
Il Vino, Paris

ELSEWHERE

Appellation, Barossa Valley, Australia
[Aronia de Takazawa](#), Tokyo
Cru, Vancouver, Canada
Victoria & Albert's, Walt Disney World, Florida
& hundreds of more obvious restaurants in the US