The dark art of food and wine pairing

3 Aug 2011 by Matt Day

This article is the fourth in an irregular season of features written by previous winners of the Young Wine Writer Award. See also the first in the series, by Rebecca Gibb, the second, by Nicola Gutman, and the third, by Ray O'Connor.

Matt Day won the award in 2002. He still writes for various publications, including his own website www.daygustation.co.uk. He lives between London, where he holds food pairing masterclasses for the London Wine Academy at Corrigan's, Mayfair, and Tuscany, where he runs the Daygustation Wine and Cookery School. Purple pagers have contributed their thoughts and opinions on the topic of food and wine matching on the forum.

While all else is reddish black and white, food and wine pairing is still one of the murkiest areas in wine. Working as a wine and food consultant, I find there is often pressure to come up with new and innovative pairings that actually work. But what does success taste like? The basis of a good match is when the flavours and textures of the food and the wine work in harmony - hardly rocket science - so why do we make such a meal of wine and food pairing?

Firstly, the biggest problem as I see it is the lack of 'expert' communication on the matter caused by the divide between planet food and planet wine. Wine is virtually ignored in most food-led publications and TV programmes, not to mention the restaurant reviewers, who generally ignore the wine list. [With the notable exception of Nick Lander, of course - JH.] Wine writers write on wine and food writers write on food, as if the two fields were unrelated. Also, many chefs, although great wine drinkers, think in food and most sommeliers think in wine - rarely do you see a menu/wine list showing that there is a real dialogue between the cellar and the kitchen. What we need is someone who can bridge this divide.

'Can you please send me the *harmonisateur*?'

'Oui, bien sûr, monsieur!'

Soon every Michelin-starred restaurant will have one and, like a composer, a great *harmonisateur* turns the individual sections of the restaurant into a symphony of harmonious textures and flavours.

Secondly, availability of food-friendly wines is an issue. Visit many supermarkets and you will find a great selection of vibrant, oaky, fruity, drinking wines (Australian Shiraz, Argentine Malbec, Kiwi Sauvignon), but where are the food wines? Do you remember Muscadet or Vouvray or Chinon? There are lots of food wines on the verge of extinction, but the poor Loire Valley, whose wines are the antithesis of the modern fruit- and alcohol-driven blockbuster, seems to do particularly badly in the current full-throttle climate.

But what makes a good food wine? It would be a sweeping generalisation to say that Old World is best when it comes to successful pairing, so let me put it more tactfully! Hot-climate wines with riper fruit, softer tannins, higher alcohol and lower acidity are perfect 'drinking' wines, but not as successful with food. Colder-climate wines with more restraint, less overt flavours, lower alcohol and higher acidity tend to be too austere alone, but somehow come alive in the presence of food (think Chianti). But why?

Acidity is the key to a good food wine, whose purpose is to cut through the richness of food and cleanse the palate for the next morsel. In addition, it is much easier to harmonise a dish with a restrained Sancerre than it is to pair it with a pungent, unruly Marlborough Sauvignon. Finally, I find that wines very strong in alcohol will overpower nearly all dishes. Personally I don't see the point of wines above 14.5%. However expensive a wine may be, an excess of alcohol makes it one dimensional.

Remember that food can totally transform the flavour of a wine. In particular, proteins in meat and cheese can soften the tannins in red wines. Some wines seem at first too austere or one-dimensional but are miraculously transformed when paired with food. Austrian Grüner Veltliner is my ultimate 'food' wine - it has an almost symbiotic relationship with food - like a seasoning, the wine improves the food and the food brings out flavour in the wine.

Successful pairing is demonstrated very clearly when it comes to matching wines and cheeses. It is also simple - no need to be a Michelin-starred chef. Here are two classics for you to try at home. First, goat's cheese with Sancerre. On its own the cheese is too pungent and cloying and the Sancerre is too sharp. Together the wine cuts through the cream and the cheese softens the wine. Second, Roquefort with Sauternes. Alone the blue cheese is too sharp and the Sauternes too sweet, almost cloying. Together the sweetness balances the salt and an amazing harmony results. (Try both cheeses with a red wine, which should be a much less delicious experience.)

I admit that there is a degree of subjectivity in all of this, so could we use a more scientific approach? GH Mumm recently put their various champagnes through a gas chromatograph to isolate the key flavouring molecules in each. The analysis of Mumm Vintage 2002 showed high concentrations of naturally occurring ethyl crotonate (found in roast pork) and 2-nonanone (found in blue cheese). Working together, chef Iain Graham from the Caprice and flavourist Danny Hodrien developed dishes that shared this molecular profile. Roast belly pork on pain d'épice with dolcelatte sounds hideous on paper but was a remarkable and delicious pairing!

With a little common sense and a few simple rules (see my tips below), everyone can become a successful *harmonisateur* - from the darkness into the light!

Matt's tips for successful food pairing

1. Order: start any meal with the lightest white wines and work your way through reds to the heavier sweet and fortified styles. Don't save your best wines until the end of the meal though, as you won't fully appreciate them if you are half cut!
2. Menu: don't try to make one wine work for the entire menu: Jesus may have turned water into wine, but it is doubtful even he could make the same wine work with every course. If you are eating out in a good restaurant, ordering by the glass is the best way to satisfy everyone at the table.
3. Lead role: decide which element is the hero - if you have a bottle of very fine old claret, the best dish to show off the wine will be simply roast beef. Conversely, if you have a complicated fusion dish, pair it with a simple, fruit-driven wine.
4. Weight: look at the ingredients used and how the dish is prepared. Light dishes, are best paired with delicate wines, whereas fuller-flavoured dishes are better with heavier wines. A full-bodied white can work with pork or chicken. A light red can work with a meaty fish such as tuna.
5. Like for like: if you have a spicy food, try matching it with a spicy wine such as Gewurztraminer. If you have a wild mushroom or truffle dish, try it with a mature, fungal Pinot Noir.
6. Opposites attract: conversely, sometimes it is preferable to match opposites such as sweet port with salty Stilton.
7. Eat/drink local: of course Tuscan wines and regional dishes work together, they have developed together over time and so have a natural affinity for one other.
8. Sweet: never serve a wine that is drier than the food or you will end with a flat, dull-tasting wine. Rosé champagne with strawberries is one of the biggest mistakes as the strawberries are too sweet and clash with the dry champagne.