

The XYZ's of food and wine

Matching ethnic foods and Sonoma County Wines

Courtesy of the Sonoma County Wineries Association

Where angels fear to tread, wine drinkers jump right in. Recommend wine with ethnic foods?! — Mexican, American South West, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Japanese, Indian, Middle Eastern — Yes! Yes! Yes! Anyone choosing to enjoy wine with ethnic dishes embarks on a great adventure. There are no long-held traditions or rules to break, no stupid, wrong, or tasteless choices to be made.

Just as travelers gather addresses and contacts in preparation of a trip — great budget hotels and as-yet undiscovered restaurants — to give themselves some points of reference, the culinary adventurer needs to know at least a little menu jargon in the native language before take-off. We created this brochure to be a guidebook of sorts — a collection of tips to ease your way.

Strategies for Matching Ethnic Foods and Sonoma County Wines

1. Serve a wine you like whether dinner is burritos or mu shu pork.
2. If you are already in the habit of drinking a wine type with a certain cuisine or dish — for instance, very cold, off-dry white wines with Japanese food — continue in the same path. You will probably not change your preference.

3. Look for pleasure in the food and the wine, not for perfection. Some of our research yielded great matches. However, the quality and style of take-out foods can vary from restaurant to restaurant and night to night. Plus we usually order dishes with such different flavors — for instance, scallops with black bean sauce, oyster-sauced vegetables, and chicken fried rice — for one dinner. No single wine can be an ideal partner to all those foods, while many will do an admirable job of tasting very good with such a menu.

4. The diversity and subtleties of a cuisine are rarely represented in carry-out or even restaurant food. For the purposes of this brochure, we assumed that most of your experience, as is ours, is with take-out and less expensive restaurant cooking. With such straightforward — albeit often spicy! — fare you want straightforward simple wines. If you cook ethnic foods at home from any of the top-flight cookbooks available, there is a much broader range of wine choices that becomes available.

5. Take into account the amount of heat or spiciness, sweetness, saltiness, or sourness of the dishes. The secret of successful wine and food pairing lies more in the structure of the food and wine than in the flavors of either.

For instance, chicken chat, an Indian appetizer, is quite sour while Tandoori chicken is spicy and aromatic. A dry Rose does not work with the appetizer but does with the Tandoor while a Gewurztraminer goes well with both dishes. High-tannin wines and chili heat, especially, seem to wage war with each other. You want to choose

wines and foods which won't argue with each other.

Excessive chili heat, sweetness, saltiness or sourness will prevent any beverage from tasting good much less performing its duty of refreshing you after several bites of food.

6. A note about salt: ethnic cuisines are often high in salt compared to Western diets. Many Oriental dishes rely on soy sauce or fish sauce, both high in salt, for their characteristic flavors.

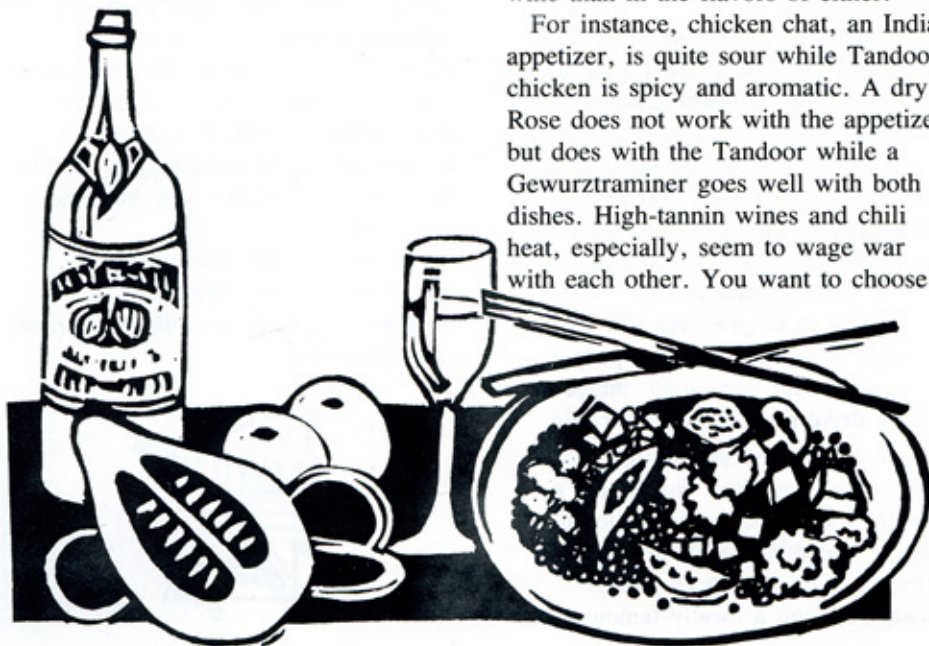
Salt has several aspects which are important to account for in menu planning with wine: while a little salt perks flavors, the high salt in ethnic cooking can block taste receptors in the mouth. The effect may prevent you from tasting anything very clearly without an intervening bite of bland, salt-free bread or rice. Salt plus high alcohol in wine can cause the wine to taste bitter. The same effect happens with salty foods and high-tannin wines. Sweetness can moderate the perception of saltiness.

7. A general profile for wines to serve with spicy cuisines would be: young, fresh wines with moderate alcohol, low tannin, straight-forward fruitiness, and often some residual sugar couples with sprightly acidity.

The low alcohol and tannin content eliminates "clashing" between the food and wine.

When chili heat meets strong tannins, the effect is the same as when two clashing colors are set next to each other; the colors appear to vibrate along their border — a far from restful effect! Full fruit flavors built on a base of good acidity cut through the food flavors and keep your palate refreshed. A little sweetness in the wine adds weight helping otherwise delicate wines to stand up to the strong food flavors.

8. The cooking techniques and spicing are more important factors in matching wines to ethnic foods than the "main" ingredient. For instance, grilling, smoking, and barbecuing all



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intensify food flavors; the flavor of a red chili sauce dominates whatever meat it covers.

9. Liquids will efficiently disperse heat throughout the mouth forcing the afflicted diner to drink a great deal for relief. A mouthful of rice or bread acts like a sponge, soaking up chili heat.

10. When there are more than two for dinner, think about opening several different wines and let everyone find a favorite. The 'empty bottle test' will help you direct future wine choices with similar foods.

A Few Suggestions for Specific Cuisines

ORIENTAL

These cuisines can be hot from chillies and pepper, salty from soy and fish sauce, sweet from sugar, and sour from vinegar and lime. Pick out the dominant flavor(s) in the dishes when making wine selections. In restaurants and carry-out, the food is usually on the sweet side; even hot dishes are often hot and sweet.

In general, we found that the easiest matches (including beef dishes) were made with white wines, roses (blush wines), and sparkling wines, though some dishes, such as tea duck, worked with reds.

Gewurztraminer and ginger are a natural as are Gewurztraminer or Sauvignon Blanc with peanut-sauced

dishes. When the sesame flavor dominates (e.g.: sesame seed-coated shrimp toast) woody Chardonnays make a good match.

CHINESE

Choose simple, forward, slightly sweet or off-dry wines. Roses and Gewurztraminers are the most flexible, followed by Rieslings and Chenin Blancs. For the latter two varietals, the best success will be found with wines which display unstinting fruit flavors; this is no place for shy wines! Chardonnays can work with some dishes especially if the wines are in the big, round, buttery, oak, tropical fruit style.

Cabernet, Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Zinfandel — in a light, simple, low-tannin style — are all serviceable with tea duck and Peking duck. Warning . . . Go easy on the plum and hoisin sauces . . . too fat a spoonful spread on a crêpe to roll around mu shu pork or duck will kill any wine!

JAPANESE

Choose very cold, off-dry, fruity white wines and all types of sparkling wines, especially with sashimi and fuller, fruitier styles, like Blanc de Noirs, with sushi.

THAI

Many prepared restaurant Thai dishes are either very hot, salty, or sour. If a choice is offered, choose medium-hot versions.

Rose is a workhorse wine for Thai cooking; assertive Rieslings can be a good bet, too.

Gewurztraminer provides some love/hate matches so proceed carefully with this varietal. Dry whites and reds are generally to be avoided.

VIETNAMESE

Vietnamese cooking includes a broader range of flavors than Thai, probably because of its proximity to China and its French colonial history.

Again, the best advice is to drink very cold, fruity, slightly sweet Roses and Gewurztraminers. The Rieslings are not as strong performers for this cuisine but Chardonnay proves to be more flexible, making matches with curries flavored with lemon grass and fish sauce.

One of the best Vietnamese restaurants in the world is in Paris, Tan Dinh. Its co-owner and wine buyer, Robert Vifian particularly likes supple, rich Merlot-based wines from Pomerol with his restaurant's cooking. His recommendation of several wines from an outlying region of Pomerol where Merlot takes an even softer, sweeter full fruit expression shows that what seems at first a contradiction — red wine with Vietnamese food — is still in line with our general profile. Specific matches depend more on wine style than wine color.

Food of the quality at Tan Dinh is rarely available in the United States. When it is, take advantage of the opportunity to drink Syrahs, ripe and soft Merlots, richer Pinot Noirs and full-bodied Sauvignon Blancs.

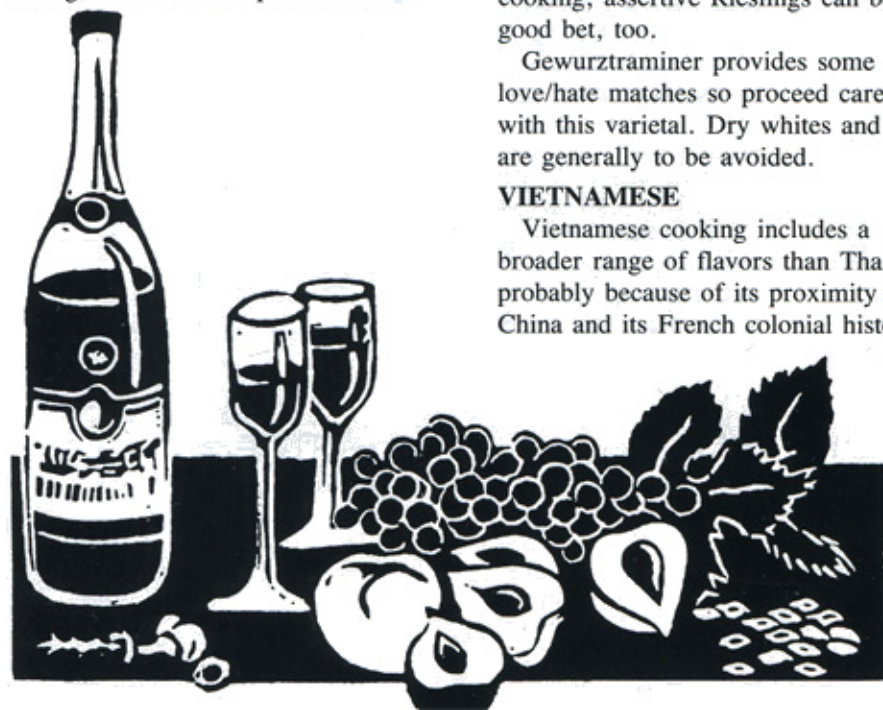
MEXICAN

Honesty is always the best policy: It is difficult to really taste any beverage with standard-quality take-out food. Very cold, fruity, full-bodied Sauvignon Blancs and Roses with good acidity balancing some residual sugar work well. Chili heat will drown aromatic wines such as Rieslings and Gewurztraminers.

The lively juiciness of fresh, grapey Gamays taste generally good with all dishes. Pinot Noirs with spice and stamina perform well, too. Cabernet and Merlot are less successful because their tannins fight the chillies. Young Zinfandels with bold, rich fruit and soft tannins would be another area of exploration with Mexican food.

SOUTHWESTERN

Southwestern cooking blends the spices of Mexico with the modern American food ethic commonly called California cuisine. Thus, the range of wine possibilities broadens tremendously depending on the cooking style of the individual cook or restaurant. Many Sonoma County wines, with their well-defined flavors,



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find themselves happily at home with Southwestern foods.

Choose forward, fruity wines such as Rieslings, Gewurztraminers, and Sauvignon Blancs and reds such as Gamays and other light, spicy wines including claret-styled Zinfandels and Syrahs. Try sparkling wines, too, especially with seafood, and a Chardonnay if the dish features a fruit sauce. Pinot Noir with its characteristic flavors of smoke, spice, fruit, and herbs combines wonderfully well with Southwestern cooking.

Warning . . . Remember high-tannins wines and chilies can clash. Save the Merlots and Cabernets for dishes where Chilies are a flavoring, not a major event.

INDIAN

The complexities of Indian cuisine, built from an endlessly varied combination of exotic spicings, loses its subtlety in a restaurant format. It also tends to be heavier and oilier than if cooked at home. Wine choices should take these qualities into account.

In general, choose full-bodied sparkling wines and straight-forward reds made for current drinking but with some strength and structure such as Merlots, Zinfandels, and Syrahs, and some Cabernets. Watch the tannin content and keep it moderate to low! Drier, full-bodied Roses also work well, except with sour dishes such as the appetizer, chicken chat. Fruity, off-dry Gewurztraminer again proves itself to be quite flexible especially with appetizers, Tandoori dishes, and dishes cooked with spinach. Sauvignon Blanc can be controversial; full-bodied, rich versions show best. Gamay appears to lack the stuffing necessary to partner Indian food while heavier-style Pinots work well.

Tandoori dishes blend spicy, aromatic seasonings with the special fragrance and flavor imparted by the oven itself. They are particularly interesting with wine, forging relationships on several levels. For example, full, yeasty sparkling wines, Zinfandels, and Gewurztraminer work by meeting the dish on one or more levels.

Warning: stay away from dishes heavily flavored with mint! A real wine beast.

MIDDLE EASTERN

Middle Eastern food leaves a delicate, sweet impression on the palate because of its reliance on sweet spices such as cinnamon, dried fruits, nuts, and its long-cooked stews. Fruity, soft wines, both red and white, can work very well. The caution here is to choose drier versions of Roses, Rieslings, and Gewurztraminers. Matching sweet wine with sweet food (e.g.: sugary pigeon pie, B'stilla) can end up being cloying instead of refreshing. Light, fruity, fresh and simple reds like Gamay find a welcome home with the cuisine, as well as simple Cabernets and Pinot Noirs.

BARBEQUE

The message is in the sauce. It is usually strongly flavored and sweet with brown sugar or honey. Cooking over mesquite, hickory, oak, fruit wood, or briquets adds new flavors, too. Wines need to be both fruity and rich, for example, big Zinfandels, Petite Sirahs, and Syrahs (all minus excess tannin). Roses work well, too, especially when the weather makes drinking reds too heady. Try rich, oak-aged Sauvignon Blancs with seafood.

FRIED FOODS

What is inside the batter matters less than the batter itself and the frying. Sparkling wines are simply terrific with fried foods of all sorts. Another choice would be any crisp, dry, fruity white — or even light red — wine as long as the emphasis remains on crisp.

