



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

PERFECT MATCH

WE ACCEPT that wine is the perfect partner with food. When we achieve the ideal match, both food and wine should taste better than either would if consumed on their own. It is a cultural necessity, a sign of good living; and countries such as France and Italy have established their traditions around bringing food and wine together at the table.

However, in Australia, because our cuisine is a melting pot of ideas from all over the world, the matching of wine with Australian food is not surprisingly a complex matter and very subjective. Everyone has their own tastes. Often it depends if your interest lay in cooking the food or drinking the wine as to what ends up on the table. Literally a clash of cultures can occur when, say, a Thai green curry meets a Barossa shiraz. The thought makes my stomach quiver. Some of our past approaches have been all too simplistic. I remember one retailer sticking images of chickens and fish against different wine styles as one early attempt of assisting the consumer. Ah...salad days, but at least it was a start.

The wine should have some noticeable acidity on the palate to cut richer, fatty foods and generally give freshness and relief to the palate.

Many wine commentators suggest matching this wine with that food, but it can be a very difficult route to follow in educating drinkers on the subject. I believe it is more important to firmly put down some ground rules and then to apply them to each unique occasion. Working out a dish's intensity and match it with a similar intense wine is a good starting point and ground rule. Take for example cooking methods. Steaming is a delicate method of cookery, while roasting is heavier. Both can apply to chicken so the meat is not the major factor. Sauces applied to dishes can be approached the same way, look at their chemistry – tomato-based sauces have moderately high acidity, how will this react with the wine's acidity? Cream sauces are fatty, while veal stock jus sauces are rich and

flavoursome. Garnishes or even vegetables can occasionally dominate the dish rather than meat being used. So look at the entire plate and take it all into consideration and then estimate the overall weight and flavours of a dish and match it to a similar weight and flavoured wine. Pinot noir generally is a lighter wine against a cabernet sauvignon or shiraz. But pinot noir can have immense amount of flavour. An oaked chardonnay is heavier than a light, dry riesling. But this again is too simplistic. You need to remember that climate, winemaking techniques and ageing can change the weight and flavours of a grape variety. So your knowledge of both cooking and wine is essential when approaching the task.

Looking closely at the structural aspects of the food and wine is also important. Food containing acidity may make a wine taste less acidic and bitter, but more fruitier. Food that has sweetness will make wine taste drier, bitter and more acidic. The old adage with sweet desserts is to choose a wine with equal or more sweetness than the food. Dishes containing chilli go well with low alcohol wines with some sweetness to offset the heat of

the spice. Foods containing umami need special attention. Because it is so flavoursome, the wine needs to have lower levels of tannin and less oak as these flavours will only be intensified with the food. Salt is a wine-friendly additive in food and increases the perception of weight in a wine and lessens other sensations such as acidity and astringency.

Taking wine to a casual dinner party or a BYO restaurant can be a nightmare. Half the time you don't know what is on the menu and in a restaurant you could be pouring it to friends that have chosen different dishes. So consider selecting an all-round food-friendly wine.

We love rating wines. So why not give them a food rating? I've invented a scale called the FFR or Food Friendly Rating. It is simply a five-star scale.

So what kind of wine scores well on the FFR? Well, it varies for red and white wines. For a red wine it needs to be generally below 15 per cent alcohol. Wines above 15 per cent abv add heat sensation to the palate and these wines generally are full bodied in weight, and food-friendly wines should not dominate the food and wine marriage. Remember, that usually we go out to appreciate the food first and the wine second (not sure about this point sometimes). The wine should have some noticeable acidity on the palate to cut richer, fatty foods and generally give freshness and relief to the palate. Some old-fashioned, but well thought out comments on this subject refer to the wine's role as a palate cleanser. The tannins in the red wine should be well integrated and on the soft side, they should not dominate the palate. Overall the wine should have subdued aromas and flavours, and definitely not be fruit-driven or fruit-sweet to taste. To qualify and pick up these attributes the wines have often had some time to develop in the bottle. The wine tends to be medium bodied not full-bodied.

Some of these attributes apply to white wines. They definitely need the acidity as well as not being too alcoholic, which is not normally a problem in whites. They can have some sweetness and don't all need to be dry. The aromas and flavours again need to be subtle and subdued.

A wine that scores poorly on the FFR means it suits only a narrow band of dishes. It may be a great wine to glug down and have many admirers, but when matched with inappropriate food either the food or the wine will come off second best. Normally it is the food that suffers.

On the other hand, sometimes a wine takes centre stage. If you are gathered around a table to open a special old wine you should eat a simple dish so as not to compete with the wine. For example, cabernet merlot blends are a favourite wine to go with lamb. If you are opening an old, expensive left bank Bordeaux, for example, then choose a simple roast leg of lamb seasoned only lightly with rock salt, fresh rosemary and garlic, so as not to dominate the wine.