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ACHIEVING THE PERFECT MATCH FOR THE PALATE

THE IDEAL match of food and wine should be one that is made in heaven, and like a good partnership the result of the marriage should benefit and enhance both parties. Making a successful marriage takes plenty of experience if you want to avoid the divorce courts!

A key skill is to be familiar with the wine's components and the food's composition. Chefs with wine knowledge often are best placed to match both ingredients. When matching a dish, it is essential to consider the cooking method, accompanying sauces and strongest, most influential ingredients. Consider the humble chicken - a white meat that can be either smoked, delicately poached, roasted or deep-fried. When it's smoked you can match the flavour with an oaked white wine that shares some of the same aromas; if the chicken is pan or deep fried the wine's acidity becomes critical to cut the fat, which often means

levels of acid and subtle aromas; the kind that comes from bottle maturation.

Indian food is one of the greatest challenges for wine matching. Its rich and mouth-coating texture and elaborate spices are so intense you should keep the wine simple; don't open your prize possessions in the cellar. The wine should have some flavours, but not be multi-dimensional - perhaps a New Zealand sauvignon blanc. Keep the alcohol low, as the spiciness and heat of a dish will only be accentuated by the alcohol, doubling the hotness on the palate. The flames from the dish can be tempered with sweetness in a wine so here we can choose an off-dry riesling or even an off-dry rose.

Our winemakers have a wealth of experience in food and wine matching. So I asked a selection of winemakers of key varieties what they have discovered.

A young Hunter semillon needs delicate handling, and Hunter winemaker Andrew

with our sauvignon is very fresh yabbies. Just make a light mayonnaise to use as a dip and you will find it a real delight."

Old vine grenache can be a challenge with its robust flavours and high alcohol. Barossa Valley boutique producer Troy Kalleske remembers a great match at a dinner in San Diego. "The old vine grenache was matched with baby arugula (rocket) salad, spicy tuna, red pears, spicy walnuts and gorgonzola with a rich, stout chocolate dressing. A somewhat weird combination but it worked so well with the grenache!"

In the Canberra region, Tim Kirk makes one of Australia's leading shiraz viogniers at Clonakilla and likes to serve it with interesting game meats. "The wine's profile tends to savoury spices and red fruits with fine tannins in a medium-bodied frame. Something equally fine and medium-bodied such as squab or pheasant is a good fit. Partridge or guinea fowl can also work well."

Peter Althaus from Domaine A in Tasmania's Coal River Valley makes a classic cool climate cabernet sauvignon and, following the meat with protein guide, recommends beef Wellington. "It's also a very good match with Swiss gruyere, a match used often in Bordeaux." A wine that can be drunk with a main course and finished off with a hard cheese is a smart match.

Rainer Breit from Curtlewis in Geelong reveals a wealth of experience in matching his pinot noir with food. "Our pinots have always been on the more savoury side of the Australian wine profile and as such the traditional match with Peking duck has not been so successful. My absolute favourite is the reserve pinot with a spicy warm Thai salad such as duck larb (minced duck with the traditional salad of hot chilli, coriander, fish sauce, lemon grass, red onion, lime juice, kaffir lime leaf and, importantly, some palm sugar for balance).

Rainer's comments demonstrate that food and wine is all about bringing out new flavours. It's a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

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a different wine - maybe an unoaked chardonnay or even a semillon. If the chicken has been stewed with tomatoes then the wine changes colour and can be a light red, which needs to match the acidity of the tomatoes.

Weight is another essential consideration. Generally you should match wine and food of a similar palate weight. Here we can find a home for full-bodied shiraz, which needs robust foods such as barbecue meats. Wines with high tannins such as cabernet sauvignon and nebbiolo need meats high in protein, so grilled steak is a favourite.

Over-oaked and alcoholic wines are often the most difficult. Dense, fruity wines can also be a challenge as they will dominate food. When you eat out you look forward to the food and expect the wine to play a supporting role. So, with that in mind, my favourite wine would be below 14.5 per cent alcohol, have soft tannins with good

Thomas makes one of the best, the Braemore. "With its freshness, vibrancy, delicate variety purity, low alcohol and crisp, citrus-like acidity it makes a perfect match with freshly shucked oysters," he says. With an aged semillon the dish can be more complex. Phil Ryan from Mount Pleasant found that at a recent degustation dinner at Tetsuya's, which featured his 1998 Lovedale, "the roasted scampi with herb and citrus oil; ravioli of octopus, rice and tomato; and the signature dish of confit of Petuna ocean trout served with konbu and fennel was perfect".

The best type of sauvignon blanc to match with an array of food is a savoury one with some barrel work. Dominique Portet from the Yarra Valley makes an excellent example.

"Our sauvignon blanc is made along the European style, with slow fermentations to maintain a fresh bouquet, aged a few months in new French oak barrels until the structure and wood are in balance. My favourite dish