



# Wine Pairing 101

By Bobby Lee Lawrence

At times entertaining at home can be very stressful, and the last thing you need is to worry about what wine to serve with the fabulous dinner you are preparing.



Countless dining experiences have been ruined because the wine served did not match the food elements. Wine and food belong together or, at the very least, they can make each other taste better. Remember, for every food action, there is a wine reaction. Have you ever noticed that if you drink wine by itself it has a certain taste, then you take a bite of food with the wine and it tastes different? The reason is because wine is like a spice; elements in the wine interact to provide a different taste sensation. Armed with this basic information, here are some guidelines to help you avoid disasters and maximize the enjoyment of the wines you select.

Let's start by debunking the old myth, "white wine with fish, and red wine with meat"...no longer true. The sophistication of wine production today has created wines that pair well, even if they appear to be the wrong choice. For example, there are Chardonnays that are heavily "oaked" and will still stand up to many light meat dishes, and some Pinot Noirs that work very well with fish, such as salmon. What really matters is how the dish is prepared, what sauces are used, and the other the components of the meal.

Trying to give you wine pairings for all the many dishes presented at occasions such as dinner parties, weddings, etc. would be impossible. Instead, let's discuss what you should look for when making your selections. First of all, remember the basic flavors found in wine are found in food as well, and the flavors of the food and the wine must balance. Our basic tastes are sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. There is one other category

called “umami,” found in foods such as mushrooms, soy sauce, and aged cheeses. Salt will have the most effect on the flavor of the wine. Salty and sour tastes in food make the wine seem milder, while sweet and savory make the wine taste stronger. For example, the salad, traditionally served prior to the main course, may have a vinaigrette dressing containing items with acidity or the sweetness of fruit. This must be taken into consideration when selecting the wine; it means that you will need to serve more than one wine. For example, the vinegar’s sour flavor comes from acetic acid and will wreak havoc with the wine’s balance, making it taste dull and flat. Some vinaigrettes contain sweetness in the form of honey or sugar. When paired with a dry table wine, the sweet elements clobber the wine’s fruit flavor, making it taste thin, overly dry, and bitter.

Also, consider the alcohol content as you select your wine. If the dish being served is rich meat or chicken or fish that includes cream, a full-bodied wine with an alcohol level of thirteen to fifteen percent is appropriate. A light fish, such as a sole, served without a sauce, will do best with a wine containing seven to ten percent alcohol, like an Italian Pinot Grigio or a dry Riesling.

Now let’s match some flavors. You can take two approaches here. Reason tells you a spicy dish should have a high-alcohol red wine. The other approach would be to counterpoint the dish by serving a low-alcohol, fruity wine such as a Riesling or Gewürztraminer to tame the flavor. Beware of mushrooms. They don’t love tannins (that little bite in the back of your throat when to sip a wine) or acidity. Pair them with a lively Rosé or Dolcetto.

If you are an **Italian food** lover, keep in mind that olive oil and tomatoes are common ingredients. The reason that so much Chianti is served in Italian households is because the acidity in Chianti is a good match to the tomatoes and cuts through the olive oil.

There are some important variables to consider when serving beef, most important are the cut of **beef** and the cooking method. Fatty beef needs a wine with high tannins to cut through the fat. An excellent choice here would be a Cabernet Sauvignon. If the cut is a filet, go with a lighter wine such as a Super Tuscan or a good Pinot Noir. Always be mindful of any sauce being served with the beef.

If you are serving **pork** consider the seasoning. If the seasoning is heavy, serve a Zinfandel or Shiraz. If it’s a “hands off” preparation, try a lighter wine such as a Riesling or Pinot Noir.

**Seafood** can be a real challenge. Be careful to check what else is on the dish. Lemon and butter, for example, require a white wine with little or no oak. The fattiness of the fish should determine your choice of wine.

One of the most popular entrées being served these days is **chicken**. Here, all bets are off! Any wine, red or white, will work well. Roasted chicken served with a Pinot Noir is a heavenly choice. This applies to duck and goose as well.

This brings us to **dessert**. Now is not the time to struggle. You made it through the meal and will now serve the pièce de résistance. For the most part, sweet white wines will do well with any



dessert. Late harvest Rieslings, Eiswein, etc. are excellent choices. The exceptions would be fruit tarts, chocolate cake, and flan; red wine is a much better choice here.

I will leave you with the following advice - when in doubt, serve champagne. There is a reason why at a wedding, besides the traditional toast, champagne is served. It will match with almost any food, and it also has a way of making you do silly things when you have too much. ✨

