

CHEFS

QUARTERLY



VERSATILE WINE ATTRIBUTES

BY MARK SHIPWAY



The idea of seasonal selections when it comes to wine is perhaps not as important as you might think and are certainly not as significant as creating seasonal food menus. Seasonality in wine is based strongly on the false notion that consumers drink a significantly higher proportion of heavy reds during the winter months that they do in summer. In reality there is very little variation in annual drinking patterns when measuring against season and roughly the same quantity of Barossa Shiraz will be drunk over the summer month (or Pinot Grigio over the winter) as the reverse. Wine drinking trends do wax and wane though and as with food, it's important to remain in touch with what is currently hip or might soon become so. Of far greater importance than season is to list wines that really do complement your menu and strange as it may seem, this is a key point quite often overlooked.

But where to start? Of all the many elements that can be taken into account when searching for wines to put on a list, a crucial one to keep in

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mind, is versatility. That means selecting wines that have as many applications in terms of food pairing as possible which in itself makes the server's job of recommending a wine a lot easier.

The next obvious question is what attributes should a wine have to make it a versatile food partner? Perhaps the most important attribute is acidity. Wines with higher levels of acidity generally make better food wines, not only because they cleanse the palate between bites of food, but because high acidity is key when pairing with dishes containing significant sour components (e.g. berry fruits, tomatoes, vinegar, lime or lemon juice). Acidity in wine is also critical in providing 'cut' to oily or fatty foods. Wines that contain higher levels of acid usually have cooler climate origins where the grapes do not get too ripe. White grapes that are a safe bet in the versatility stakes include Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling.

Pinot Grigio, with its delicate fruit, light body and high acidity make it a perfect foil for just about any white meat, fish, light pasta or salad dish. It is invariably bland & inoffensive but has the huge advantage of rarely creating a clash. Hopefully the current fad for Pinot Grigio will lead to appreciation of more characterful Italian grapes like Verdicchio, Garganega or Pecorino. Sauvignon Blanc is characterized by vividly fruity and pungently vegetal flavours that best with strongly flavoured dishes especially those involving fresh green herbs, tomatoes, goats cheese and vegetables. Riesling has long been neglected in the fashion stakes but it seems that finally this noblest of grapes might be finally arriving in the general wine-drinker's consciousness as something to try. Riesling's finessed fruit, crisp acidity and light to moderate body make it the ultimate food-pairing grape. The important thing to remember with Riesling though is the varying levels of sweetness it gets made in. Dry is better although a hint of sweetness can off-set a hot spice.

When it comes to high acid and red wines, then the country that reigns supreme is Italy with wines made from Sangiovese, Barbera, Corvina and Nebbiolo. All have great acid structure and cope extremely well with those tricky salty and sour flavours. The savory flavours in Italian reds are also very complementary and simple Italian red wines combined with dishes containing tomatoes is one of those matches that almost seems too perfect to have happened by chance.

Pinot Noir is another high acid grape and has such food friendliness that every wine-list should contain at least one. Pinot Noir can be thrown quite happily at all kinds of food and is often the happy compromise for a table that orders both meat and fish. Unfortunately, Pinot Noir with the required attributes is never cheap.

Finding versatility in fuller-bodied reds is not such an easy task as these styles tend to be characterized by three elements that don't work so well with food: soft acid, high tannins and oak flavours. If any of those three elements are key to the wine style, they will clash heavily with salty, sour and sweet ingredients in food. Grapes that do find provide some versatility as well as weight include the Spanish cornerstones of Tempranillo and Garnacha. Alone or

in combination, their supple tannins and earthy, spicy flavours provide a good match for dishes like shepherd's pie, Irish Stew, Merguez and Chorizo sausage. **CQ**

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