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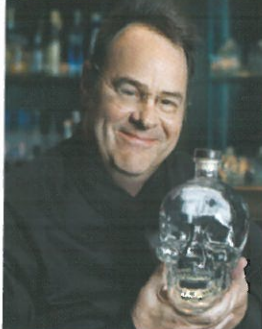
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# What is a Good 'Food Wine' Anyway?

BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW

**I**t's only natural: As long as people have had questions about wine, people have had questions about what wines go with what foods. Perhaps as an exercise in verbal shorthand, wine professionals have come to define some wines as "food wines," denoting that some types of wine are more tailored to enhance food than others.

With the proliferation of available wines in recent years, it makes sense to revisit the concept of wine and food pairing. The best "food wines"—whether the liquid is dry or sweet; still or sparkling; white, pink, orange or red—share certain characteristics:

- Significant acidity
- Tannin that is neither flabby nor astringent (for reds)
- Reasonable and integrated alcohol
- Pure flavors
- No to moderate oak use

These attributes render wines more flexible with food pairings. Additionally, these factors must work together. Overall balance is a critical component. Over-use of oak is the number one disqualifier. A lavishly oaked Chardonnay or Sangiovese may make for interesting sipping, but often not for good food matching.

Furthermore, some wine styles may make good "food wines" but be fairly restricted in their pairings. Amarone for example, complements a raisiny dessert or a blue cheese, and that's about it.

Muscadet works with seafood like oysters, clams and sole. Period.

The wines detailed below, while not exhaustive, represent some of the most consistently successful "food wines," highlighting not only their key characteristics, but also the rationale that makes specific pairings work.

## SPARKLING

### Brut Champagne (France)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Light body, marked acidity, fine persistent bubbles, layers of complexity.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Yellow apples, red berries (when black grapes used), chalk, brioche, toasted hazelnuts.

**Top Food Matches:** Popcorn, baked oysters, smoked salmon, caviar.

**Reliable Brands:** Bollinger, Charles Heidsieck, Krug, Taittinger.

**Why This Works:** Ultimate "food wine," given the double, palate-cleansing effects of racy acidity and CO<sub>2</sub>.

### Dry Lambrusco

(Emilia-Romagna, Italy)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Purple-red in color, medium- to full-bodied, refreshing acidity, dry, faintly bitter, lightly tannic, exuberant and medium-sized bubbles, medium-low alcohol.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Forest berries, violets, pencil lead, roasted coffee beans.



**Top Food Matches:** Salumi, barbecue, duck terrine, mushroom pizza.

**Reliable Brands:** Cantina di Sorbara, Ceci, Lini 910, Medici Ermete.

**Why This Works:** Hearty and earthy in flavor, Lambrusco holds its own against rich, gamey foods with its vivacious acidity and refreshing bitterness.

## WHITES

### Dry Riesling

(Alsace, France; Austria; Australia)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Medium- to full-bodied with an oily texture in Alsace and Austria with medium-plus to racy acidity. Light-bodied, searingly crisp and rather low alcohol in Australia.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Honeysuckle, chamomile, stone fruits and leesy notes in Alsace and Austria. Lime peel, grapefruit, peaches, shale and hay in Australia.

**Top Food Matches:** Alsace and Austria: *baeckeoffe*, *choucrouste garnie*, *spaetzle*, pot roast and baked apples. Australia: sushi, shellfish, salad, Pan-Asian foods.

**Reliable Brands:** Hugel, Zind-Humbrecht; Hirsch, Brundlmayer; Grosset, Yalumba.

**Why This Works:** Alsatian and Austrian wines have the heft to match rich foods along with the high acidity to cleanse the palate. Australian wines work best with light, lean dishes. Dry Rieslings pair with all the foods sweet ones do and more. (Note: Currently trendy in Alsace to make off-dry wines; double-check if wine is dry or off-dry.)

### Off-Dry Riesling

(Germany; Washington State)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Light-bodied, light sweetness balanced by crisp acidity

**Aromas & Flavors:** Peach, white flowers, citrus, petrol.

**Top Food Matches:** Spicy food, creamy cheese, pork sausage, butternut squash soup.

**Reliable Brands:** Dr. L, Nik Weis Urban; Chateau Ste. Michelle, Columbia Crest.

**Why This Works:** High acidity allows Riesling to pair widely, from light to fairly rich foods, because it cleanses the palate.

*Within categories like 'Whites' or 'Lighter Reds,' wines can often be interchanged and still provide a good match. The best—and most fun—way to become comfortable with mixing-and-matching wine and food is to open two bottles per dish!*

Its low alcohol is good for spicy food since it doesn't spike the heat. Sweetness complements creamy dishes well.

### Albariño (Rias-Baixas, Spain)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Mineral, medium-bodied with modest viscosity and bright acidity.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Apricots, apple peels, minerals, fresh herbs.

**Top Food Matches:** Crab cake, shrimp salad, glazed ham, double and triple crème cheese.

**Reliable Brands:** Burgans, Condes de Albarei, Martin Codax, Pazo de Señorans.

**Why This Works:** Albariño has a generosity of pit fruit aromatics that lend it to pairing with foods containing sweetness. Its viscosity also matches with moderately creamy foods.

### Grüner Veltliner

(Niederösterreich & Wagram, Austria)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Light- to medium-bodied, chiseled acidity, no viscosity, taut mouthfeel.

**Aromas & Flavors:** White pepper, lentil, grapefruit, crushed rocks.

**Top Food Matches:** Wiener schnitzel, flakey fish, green bean salad, steamed artichokes.

**Reliable Brands:** Domäne Wachau, Grooner, Hirsch, Leth.

**Why This Works:** Grüner's neutral fruit character helps it work with hard-to-pair veggies like asparagus, artichokes and fresh green beans.

### Fumé Blanc / Sauvignon Blanc

(Napa & Sonoma, California)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Medium-bodied, refreshing acidity, creamy mid-palate, light oak, supple fruit.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Citrus, passion fruit, honeysuckle, cut grass.

**Top Food Matches:** Grilled chicken, smoked trout, sushi, pasta primavera.

**Reliable Brands:** Chateau St. Jean, Dry Creek Vineyard, Frog's Leap, Robert Mondavi, St. Supéry.

**Why This Works:** Faintly smoky (fumé means smoked), this style of Sauvignon Blanc works well with grilled & smoked foods. Pronounced acidity helps cut through heavier foods with cream sauces.

## ROSÉ

### Grenache Blends

(Southern France & Provence)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Pale pink to deep salmon, medium-bodied with medium alcohol, bouyant acidity, no tannin.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Strawberries, watermelons, raspberries, garrigue, laurel leaf.

**Top Food Matches:** Pasta with tomato-based sauce, quiche, fatty fish, Indian curry.

**Reliable Brands:** Château d'Acqueria, Château d'Esclans, Château Minuty, Mas de Gourgonnier.

**Why This Works:** The perfect crossover between white and red, rosés are great for moderately weighty foods with a pepper spice component.

## LIGHTER REDS

### Pinot Noir (Burgundy, France;

Willamette Valley, Oregon)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Medium- to full-bodied with pronounced acidity, smooth tannin and little to moderate glycerol.

**Aromas & Flavors:** Cherries, herbs, roses, forest floor.

**Top Food Matches:** Meaty fish, truffle risotto, pork roast, beef bourguignon, beet salad.

**Reliable Brands:** Joseph Drouhin, Marquis d'Angerville; A to Z, Willakenzie.

**Why This Works:** The ultimate red-for-food wine given its powdery, inobtrusive tannins and mouth-watering acidity. A vast array of delicate aromatics.

## WINES FOR CASUAL FOOD



This being modern America, lots of people, by necessity and/or choice, eat rather simply and casually. Chances are good that many wine shoppers are hunting for something to serve with dinner tonight—and they are probably not cooking pheasant. With that reality in mind, here is a flip-side view of the “food wine” concept—starting with some American staples. In these scenarios, simple is often best, and there is still considerable flexibility. These basic dishes also represent an opportunity to look really smart when your customer comes back again (and again) because what you suggested was great with whatever was on the table that night.

FOOD	WINE
Salad	Pinot Grigio; Sauvignon Blanc; rosé
Quiche	Dry Riesling or other light white wine; rosé
Spaghetti & Meatballs	Medium-bodied Italian red like Chianti
Creamy Pasta	Italian white wine with good acidity (Soave, Vermentino, Orvieto)
Burgers	Côtes du Rhône, Merlot, Zinfandel or other medium-bodied red
Salmon	Hefty white (Chardonnay or Viognier) or light red with soft tannins (Pinot Noir)
Grilled Cheese	Fruity red like Pinot Noir or Nero d'Avola
Meatloaf	Medium-bodied Merlot- or Cabernet-based blend
Sausages	Full-flavored Syrah, Rioja, Malbec or Zinfandel
Roast Chicken	Spanish red; or crisp white like Sauvignon/Fumé Blanc
Chinese Take-Out	White with good fruit and acidity; off-dry styles often work well (Riesling, Chenin Blanc)
Pizza	Barbera, Valpolicella or practically any Italian red
Vegetarian	Grüner Veltliner, Sauvignon Blanc; fruity but not tannic red

### Cabernet Franc (Loire Valley, France)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Pale colored with brisk acidity, lean mouthfeel and lightly grainy tannins.  
**Aromas & Flavors:** Soft-stemmed herbs, fresh-cut firewood, blueberries, plums, wild blackberries.  
**Top Food Matches:** Fowl (pigeon, partridge, pheasant, Cornish hen), Portobello burgers, mole-marinated flank steak  
**Reliable Brands:** Bernard Baudry, Catherine & Pierre Breton, Olga Raffault.  
**Why This Works:** Loire Cabernet Franc shows a rusticity that seamlessly works with earthy or umami-heavy foods. Lifted acidity keeps the palate refreshed.

### MEDIUM-BODIED REDS

#### Chianti / Chianti Classico (Tuscany, Italy)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Medium-bodied, bracing acidity, sandy tannins, well-structured mouthfeel.  
**Aromas & Flavors:** Red cherry, fresh cranberry, underbrush.  
**Top Food Matches:** Spaghetti à la Bolognese, baked cheese-stuffed shells, bistecca Fiorentina, pizza.  
**Reliable Brands:** Antinori, Badia a Coltibuono, Castello di Ama, Fontodi.  
**Why This Works:** Highly structured by acidity and tannins; the wines are so refreshing that they usually require food.

#### Tempranillo (Rioja, Spain)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Often pale in color and medium-bodied with balancing acidity, dusty tannins and a plush mid-palate.  
**Aromas & Flavors:** Mulberries, strawberries, leather, tobacco leaves, dill.  
**Top Food Matches:** Baby lamb, potato stew with chorizo, mushroom empañadas, Manchego cheese, lentil stew.  
**Reliable Brands:** Baron de Ona, Marqués de Murrieta, Conde de Valdemar, Ostatu.  
**Why This Works:** Often moderate in acidity and in body with gentle tannins, Rioja works broadly with succulent foods.



### FULL-BODIED REDS

#### Cabernet Sauvignon Blends (Napa & Sonoma, California)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Full-bodied with mouth-filling fruit, high acidity & strapping tannins.  
**Aromas & Flavors:** Blackberries, cassis, eucalyptus, bell pepper, cedar.  
**Top Food Matches:** Prime rib, ribeye, beef chili, venison.  
**Reliable Brands:** Beaulieu Vineyard, Clos du Val, Heitz, Jordan.  
**Why This Works:** Cabernet Sauvignon has the brisk structure to clean the palate of dense and fatty foods. Its full-on flavor works best with robust food.

#### Mourvèdre / Monastrel (Bandol, France; Jumilla & Alicante, Spain)

**Best Food Wine Style:** Full-bodied with elevated alcohol, broad and sometimes aggressive tannins, sinewy texture in French wines and voluptuous texture in Spanish versions.  
**Aromas & Flavors:** Full-bodied with elevated alcohol, broad and sometimes aggressive tannins; sinewy texture in French wines and voluptuous texture in Spanish versions.  
**Top Food Matches:** Steak fajitas, braised short ribs, meatloaf, Peking duck (Spanish only).  
**Reliable Brands:** Domaine Tempier, Château de Pibarnon; Bodegas Juan Gil, Primitivo Quiles.  
**Why This Works:** This grape's leather quality lends well to red meat pairings. French wines tend to show firm tannin, while Spanish wines are softer. ■

Christy Canterbury is one of seven female U.S. national Masters of Wine and an author, speaker and wine judge based in Manhattan. Previously she was the National Wine Director for Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group and the Global Beverage Director for Culinary Concepts by Jean-Georges.