

A close-up photograph of a wine glass tilted at an angle. A piece of dark chocolate is being poured into the glass, creating a dynamic scene. The background is plain white.

wines for food

WHAT ARE you bringing to the table?

Good wines for food range from classic European styles and their New World alternatives to far more obscure offerings. **Patricia Langton** quizzes a selection of sommeliers and restaurateurs

WHAT MAKES a good food wine? The overriding factor, irrespective of wine style, is acidity. Wines with higher acidity tend to be more compatible with food – and less enjoyable without it – as it balances the richness in food and refreshes the palate. The best wines for food are also generally more structured but that shouldn't mean an excess of oak, tannin or alcohol. Indeed wines suffering from any of these three tend to be rejected by sommeliers and restaurateurs who give food and wine matching serious attention.

Turning first to white wines, a number of lesser-known French grape varieties spring to mind for many in the on-trade. Chenin Blanc wines from the Loire are

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once again being recognised for their great compatibility with food helped along by South Africa's contribution – old-vine Chenin wines are widely acknowledged as being among the finest wines from the Cape's vineyards.

Doug Wregg, of on-trade supplier Les Caves de Pyrène, says: "We have found that Chenin is a critically under-rated grape. It has the volume in the mouth allied to striking acidity and minerality that can work with fish, light meats and cheese. It is not easy to drink by itself, but is softened and sweetened by food."

North of the border, South African Chenin Blanc is starting to feature on wine lists. At Castle Terrace and sister restaurant The Kitchin, food and beverage director Philippe Nublat has been won

over by the style. He says: "South African Chenin Blanc aged in oak has complexity, great flavours and it offers good value."

More obscure white varieties such as Grenache Gris and Grenache Blanc, generally found in the south of France and to the north-east of Spain, are also increasingly popular for wine lists and good candidates for stronger flavoured fish dishes.

"If you get it right, White Grenache might be quite rustic, austere and rich to start with, but with food it becomes much softer and elegant," says Edouard Oger, head sommelier at Gidleigh Park hotel in Devon. He's particularly enthusiastic about the White Grenache from Barbara Fores in Spain's Terra Alta which is

describes a "fantastic" match to Gidleigh's salted cod, lemon purée, chorizo and crab salad.

The team at London's Vinoteca restaurants is permanently on the lookout for interesting wines for its ever-changing selection of by-the-glass wines. Recent successes include Chacolí and Vinho Verde as well as Greek whites which all boast a

strong local identity, pair well with fish and are now more appealing thanks to contemporary winemaking.

Greek wines such as Semeli's light-bodied white from the Moscofilero variety and the richer Assyrtiko made by Hatzidakis are now a regular feature on the list after a good initial response. "The wines have surprised customers. They are clean, fresh and very aromatic," says Vinoteca's Brett Woonton.

He also notes that, perhaps after being devotees of New World and notably Australian wines, many customers are turning back to European wine regions for "more iconic wines and grapes that are different". Vinoteca's list therefore features some of Australia's more unusual wines to regain interest, especially where

Feature findings

- ▶ The best food-matching wines are those that are well structured with high acidity. Chenin Blanc has high compatibility as do Grenache Gris and Grenache Blanc.
- ▶ Italian reds are generally great for the table, particularly Nebbiolos and wines from southern regions such as Campania.
- ▶ While European wines tend to be more food-friendly, New World Pinot Noir, Chilean Carmenere and a variety of styles from New Zealand fare well.
- ▶ Catalonian Carignan wines are gaining in popularity, and are a great match for grouse, venison and partridge, while wines from the Douro add diversity to lists and are an ideal partner for game.

whites are concerned. Woonton adds: "[The Madeira grape] Verdelho can be great if it's grown in the right place and we also like Tahbilk's Marsanne and Australian Semillon is a good food-friendly wine."

ITALY'S TRUE COLOUR

If one country stands out for red wines for the table it has to be Italy where reds featuring relatively high acidity are made for food. Indeed Italy's attraction seems to be as strong as ever. Nebbiolo-based wines from northern Italy are still a must-have for many quality establishments but there is much more on offer and some great value for money can be found further south.

"The Nebbiolo grape meets all the criteria. Not only the wines of Barolo or Barbaresco but Gattinara in Piedmont or Valtelina in Lombardy for a softer version," says Romain Audrerie, head sommelier at Bistro du Vin in Soho and Clerkenwell. He also points to popular styles from southern Italian regions such as the Aglianico wines of Campania. Woonton agrees, crediting Barolo producers with "fresher, cleaner styles" ▶

Tips for listing “unknown” wines

▶ Trial “new” wines by the glass

Offer wines made from unfamiliar grapes and lesser-known regions by the glass to encourage trial over a limited period as a special feature. Customers may feel more inclined to try a wine that they’ve never heard of if they don’t have to buy a whole bottle. Food matching suggestions can also help.

▶ Decant wines

More intense reds such as those made from Cabernet Franc, Carmenere, Mencía and Tannat should be decanted to allow them to open up and be more approachable at the first sip.

that are more restaurant friendly, though never cheap” and finds Aglianico wines “more polished than they used to be and good value”.

Wines featuring more obscure grapes appear in Bistro du Vin’s “Unusual Reds” section of the wine list. Italy gets another entry here with wine made from the Gaglioppo grape which is native to Calabria alongside a (Loire) Pineau d’Aunis, a Mencía from Spain’s Bierzo, a Blaufränkisch from Austria and a Touriga

NEW WORLD RED RELUCTANCE

For the main part European regions are still favoured over the New World for food-friendly style but there are some notable exceptions. Wregg says: “Many New World wines are too clunky for food. Argentine wines are fine with a huge lump of grilled meat but what else? Ditto Aussie Shiraz.”

He’s far more enthusiastic about New World Pinot Noir and particularly the variety of styles that New Zealand offers: “Central Otago Pinot Noirs are quite masculine – great with venison and stews and those from Canterbury are more feminine and a good match for feathered game,” he says. Oger also credits New Zealand along with Australia, the US and Germany for matching France in the Pinot Noir stakes and often at better prices.

Audrerie targets certain New World regions for food-friendly styles. “Cooler climates enhance the acidity and freshness in wines so you need either altitude or a maritime influence [in the New World].” He’s a fan of European-style Syrah from Hawkes Bay and Pinot Noir from Australia’s Mornington

Peninsula or Tasmania and wines from the coastal regions of Chile including Leyda, Limarí and San Antonio valleys.

Meanwhile Oger makes another point. He believes that it’s a question of viticultural practices and working in close partnership with the chef: “Grenache and Syrah blends can be over-extracted and too high in alcohol and it doesn’t matter where they are from. But if you manage

your vineyard carefully and harvest your grapes at the right time then you can end up with one of the best wines made on earth. Yes, some of them will have a very dry tannin structure that can be a bit unpleasant for some people with an

intense spicity, gamey earthiness but if you have the right dish on your menu you will achieve the greatest food and wine experience.”

Other New World favourites include Chilean Carmenere which can work a treat if accompanied by meats including lamb that can stand up to the great depth of character offered by the best examples. Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc grape varieties can also perform in warmer New World regions as varietal wines with impressive personality.

What else could New World producers do to improve their food-friendly credentials? Nublat would like to see more blends coming from the New World to offer “something a bit different”. A New World favourite that he uses to illustrate this point is Caballo Loco. Made by Chile’s Valdivieso, this red is a blend of undisclosed red grapes and, atypically, made in the solera system blending wines from different vintages. Not only does Caballo Loco wine offer a good story for customers but it’s a great match for grouse, he says.

FROM CATALONIA TO PORTUGAL

Returning to Europe, wines featuring Carignan – from southern France and north-east Spain – are now an increasingly popular choice for wine lists thanks to improved quality and tannin management. Some may place blends from Carignan in the “rocket fuel” bracket, but in the right environment Carignan blends can work well, especially with some bottle age and as more wintry wines.

Oger is clearly a fan. He says: “Carignan is doing fairly well in the south of France and also in Spain – I generally think that the wines made in Catalonia are just superb. They might be quite high in alcohol and tannin but if

SERVED AT THE RIGHT TEMPERATURE CARIGNAN WINES BECOME GENEROUS, COMPLEX AND INTENSE WITHOUT BEING OVER-EXTRACTED AND OVERPOWERING

Nacional from Portugal’s Ribatejo.

“Mencía and Blaufränkisch are perfect alternatives to Pinot Noir – with smoky mineral characters, ripe red cherry fruit and peppery notes – and much better value,” adds Audrerie.

you serve them at the right temperature then you get a wonderful experience: the wine becomes generous, complex and intense without being over-extracted and overpowering. The wines are great with grouse, venison and partridge.”

Finally, is Portugal getting the attention that it deserves and can this country serve up food-friendly wines? The wines certainly seem to have many of the necessary attributes: its armoury of indigenous grapes ensures a strong regional identity and both whites and reds offer food-friendly styles at a range of prices. Furthermore, the country has a small niche in retail which means that customers are unlikely to make comparisons with off-trade prices and may relish the idea of trying something new.

Danny Cameron, of Raymond Reynolds, an importer of premium Portuguese wines, adds: “Portugal is a very good option for the high-quality dining pub. The wines can easily add diversity to compact lists as well as larger ones, and are ideal for doing by the glass allowing more risk-aware consumers to experiment without the investment in a whole bottle.” If you still need convincing, try some seasonal game and one of the contemporary red blends from the Douro. *db*

More good grapes and wines for food matching

WHITE

- ▶ Dry whites made from Austrian Grüner Veltliner
- ▶ Barrel-aged Sauvignon Blanc from the Loire, Napa Valley and New Zealand
- ▶ Albariño, Godello and Verdejo from Spain
- ▶ Loureiro from Spain and Portugal
- ▶ Arinto and Encruzado from Portugal
- ▶ White grapes and wines from Alto Adige, Italy, including Gewürztraminer and Pinot Blanc
- ▶ Dry Riesling wines, especially from Austria, Australia and Alsace, and German Riesling in all its guises
- ▶ Muscadet sur lie
- ▶ Fiano di Avellino and Greco di Tufo from Campania
- ▶ Gros Manseng from Jurançon, south-west France

RED

- ▶ Cabernet Franc (Chinon and Bourgueil Loire wines)
- ▶ Baga, Tinta Roriz and Touriga Nacional from Portugal
- ▶ Fer Servadou from Marcillac
- ▶ Northern Italian varieties Freisa from Piedmont and Teroldego from Trentino
- ▶ Tannat from France and Uruguay
- ▶ Mencía (Ribeira Sacra and Bierzo in Spain)