

## HERBS AND WINE

A multitude of flavors and essences can be found in edible herbs. Not only can these add a fresh and delicious element to your food, but they can also help to add harmony between your wine and food.

Each wine is unique and ever changing. It is important to taste each wine on its own to identify the flavors and aromas that make up the character of the wine. Use those flavors and aromas to decide which herbs and which ingredients or cooking techniques you will use to match the wine with food.

With every variety of grape, I find there are certain flavors or food ingredients that just seem to go well together. They become classics. Using a more scientific approach, we find chemical reasons for these natural affinities. However, everyone has his own personal preferences, and that is the most important element in making good wine and food combinations.

The flavor dynamics of wine and food can be exciting to discover. Look for flavors that either complement or contrast one another. For example, suppose you have a pasta with light cream sauce. You can enjoy a number of different wines with that dish, often for a number of different reasons. A fresh, young Fume Blanc is a contrast to cream, butter, smoked or rich foods because of the natural wine acids and its crisp, refreshing character.

By contrast, a Chardonnay might offer a complementary flavor because of the smooth, round richness of the wine. This is especially true if the Chardonnay has undergone complete or partial malo-lactic fermentation. During malo-lactic the wine's malic acid is replaced by lactic - the acid that is found naturally in milk and milk products. Since like flavors have a natural affinity, it should be no surprise that we tend to like big Chardonnays with cheeses and rich foods. Herbs play an important role in the way foods complement or contrast with wine. The proper

marriage makes a stunning combination as opposed to something that is merely okay or average. I think of herbs as "fine tuning" the match between food and wine.

Keeping a pasta dish as our constant, let's change the sauce and style of preparation to tailor each to specific white wines:

FUME BLANC can typically be described as fresh, with grassy, herbal flavors. We could take pasta with a light cream sauce and choose herbs from the grass family such as dill, tarragon and chive. The addition of these herbs to a relatively plain white sauce or olive oil sauce will make the union a natural. Simple isn't it?

CHARDONNAY tends to need herbs that are more delicate, sweet and subtle such as basil, parsley or lemon grass to add to the light cream sauce, which makes this complementary.

Again, keeping a pasta dish as our constant, let's change the sauce and focus to red wines. If we have a tomato sauce with garlic, we could enjoy this dish with a number of different red wines. I'm sure they would all taste pretty good together in varying degrees. But again, the rest of the ingredients and herbs can make all the difference between a great meal experience and an average one.

PINOT NOIR can be a great match if there are mushrooms, wild mushrooms, basil, garlic, or even a little cream in the tomato sauce. The mushrooms tend to accent the subtle, earthy characteristics of Pinot Noir, while basil highlights the gentle floral and natural fruit. Garlic would add complexity.

MERLOT is nice with a tomato sauce that has more fruity characteristics, such as those made with sun dried tomatoes. Some red wines are enhanced by foods with marjoram or oregano and parsley as an accent for freshness.

CABERNET SUVIGNON can be a good choice if paired with Mediterranean flavors such as grilled bell peppers, onions, eggplant, garlic, fennel and rosemary. Combining these similar and complementary flavors can make a straightforward tomato sauce tailored to suit the finest Cabernet wines.

ZINFANDEL is delicious with a variation including black olives freshly cracked black pepper. Even capers and sage usually harmonize beautifully. Take advantage of the natural tendency of Zinfandel to be reminiscent of raspberries and fresh black pepper.

All of these herbs and spices are accent flavors for these varieties, but of course meats, sausages, poultry, seafood and other vegetables can be used in the dishes as well. However the base sauce, herbs and character of preparation should influence the overall flavor perception more than the meat that is added.

Remember that herbs are quite different depending upon whether they are fresh, dried, frozen, raw or cooked. Some herbs, especially when dried, need to be heated or to be dispersed in a liquid to release the flavor of the oil's essence. Fresh herbs versus dried herbs in food is as great a contrast as using fresh flowers versus dried flowers on your table. One of the best attributes of using herbs when cooking is that you no longer need to rely on butter, cream, oils or fats to make food delicious and flavorful. Because of this the use of herbs can give healthier foods that support a vibrant lifestyle.

Obviously, this is just a small example of how you can use herbs to pair your wine and food. Our hope is that you will experiment a little for yourself and enjoy the tastes that are in store for you!

Developed by Holly Peterson Mondavi, Food and Wine Dynamics, Napa Valley ©All Rights Reserved