

The first thing to remember about food and wine matching rules is that there are no rules! If you want to drink an Australian Shiraz with fish, go ahead if that's what you like and it makes you happy. Mood, situation, place and company have so much to do with your enjoyment of an occasion or meal, if you're in the mood for Champagne, drink Champagne. When in a wine producing area, drink local is generally good advice too.

Having said that, some wines complement some foods better than others, so what follows are a set of pointers to help you make the right choices, but don't forget to choose what you want, not what you think you should be drinking.

Characteristic	Commentary
Weight	<p>Try to match the <i>weight</i> of the food with the weight of the wine. Rich, heavyweight foods, like red meat casseroles need full-bodied wines, such as the Australian Shiraz we're trying today.</p> <p>Normally it is powerful red wines that are the favoured choice but it is the weight of the wine, not the colour or flavour, which is the most important consideration. Full-bodied white wine (new world Chardonnay, Rhône Valley whites) are usually a better match with meat than a light-styled red wine (such as Beaujolais)</p> <p>Lightweight food like poultry and fish are complemented by more delicate wines (some Italian whites, Riesling, Muscadet). Whilst a white wine is the instinctive choice light, low-tannin reds (Beaujolais, cheaper Barberas) also work.</p>
Flavour Intensity	<p>Flavour intensity, although similar to weight, is not the same thing. A big bowl of boiled pasta or potatoes without a dressing or sauce is heavy in weight but light in flavour. As opposed to red or green peppers which are lightweight but very flavoursome. The same goes for wines; the Riesling variety makes lightweight, intensely flavoured wines whilst Chardonnay makes heavy (full-bodied) wines that are lightly flavoured.</p> <p>Quite often it is not the dish's main ingredient that is the dominant flavour. In a chicken curry, the sauce will be heavier and fuller flavoured than the chicken. In this instance you need to match the wine to the sauce not the chicken which, of course, can throw out the white wines with fish and chicken, reds with beef and lamb adage.</p>
Acidity	<p>Both food and wine can have acidity. Tomatoes, citrus and green apples are high-acid foods. Certain grape varieties naturally produce high-acid wines, Muscadet for example. Wines from cool climates will have more acidity than those from hot climates.</p> <p>When vinegar or lemon juice is used as a condiment you will need to find a high-acid wine to complement it. A classic example is Champagne served with smoked salmon and a squeeze of lemon. Cheap acidic champagne incidentally goes very well with fish and chips as the acid in vinegar adapts the palate to being less sensitive to other acids, and makes the champagne taste softer and more agreeable).</p> <p>High-acid wines are also used to cleanse the palate when eating oily food. Even without the lemon, smoked salmon is made more palatable when the Champagne cuts through the natural oiliness of the fish.</p> <p>This is also why most Italian reds, like Chianti, have a distinctive bite: It balances the Italian diet in two ways. Firstly the acidity cuts through and contrasts with the olive oil that they tend to use in their dishes, and secondly the same acidity nicely complements the citric acid in tomatoes that they also use a lot in cooking.</p>

Characteristic	Commentary
Salt	<p>Salt is not a flavour you will find in wine. Salty foods are enhanced and balanced by a hint of sweetness, Parma ham and melon is a classic example. The same thing can be achieved with wine; Sauternes is a classic match with salty, Roquefort cheese.</p> <p>Salt exaggerates the tannins in red wines, so for salty dishes pick low tannin red wines like Beaujolais. Salt can also make very dry white wines seem sharp hence salty cheeses like Roquefort pair best with off-dry whites like Vouvray Demi-Sec or Sauternes.</p> <p>Salt works well with acidity, an example of this would be salty nibbles served with Champagne before a meal.</p>
Tannin (Bitterness)	<p>Tannins that are found naturally in many heavier red wines can have a bitter or astringent quality to them. Tannins cause your gums to pucker and dry when you drink wine. They are usually detected in red wines because tannin comes from the grape skins and stalks and they are not used in white wine-making. Wines made from different grape varieties vary enormously in tannin content, some varieties being naturally low in tannins and others high. Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, for example, have very thick skins and so make very deeply coloured, high-tannin wines.</p> <p>Tannin reacts with fatty proteins to produce a delicious smooth cherry like flavour and a soft feel in the mouth, so the protein content of red meat (e.g. lamb/ beef-steak) means that it will drink very well with more tannic reds like Cabernet Sauvignon or Rioja.</p>
Sweetness	<p>Sweet foods make dry wines seem over-acidic and tart. The general rule of thumb is to serve a wine at least as sweet or sweeter than the food being served.</p> <p>Many sweet wines have a good level of acidity, Sauternes and Côteaux du Layons are good examples. This makes them a very good match for rich foods like pâté. The acidity will cut through the fat in the pâté and the wine's sweetness will complement the richness of this food.</p> <p>As mentioned previously, sweetness also balances salt and so sweet wines are classic companions of blue cheeses e.g. Port with Stilton.</p>
Spice	<p>Matching wine with spicy food is always a minefield. One good option is to choose a spicy wine such as Gewürztraminer (Gewürz being the German word for "spice"), Pinot Grigio or Tempranillo (Rioja), Malbec, Shiraz/Syrah or Zinfandel.</p> <p>Alternatively, you could explore an <i>opposites attract</i> perspective by contrasting the spiciness of the dish with a refreshing wine. Drink the wine cold, look for acidity to cut through the richness of the dish, avoid tannin as it will taste bitter with the spices, look for a moderate alcohol wine as high alcohol can exacerbate the effects of chilli for example. Sweetness will have the opposite effect of moderating the chilli.</p> <p>A good example of a high acidity, white wine with moderate alcohol and some sweetness, a German Riesling is a very good match, so long as it's served chilled!</p>