

Chapter 1

The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts

In This Chapter

- ▶ Remembering why food and wine pairing matters
 - ▶ Outlining the basic strategies for pairing
 - ▶ Laying the groundwork for understanding wine styles
 - ▶ Mapping out world cuisine with appropriate wines
 - ▶ Considering some real-world scenarios
-

Most people eat and drink wine without much conscious reflection. It's nourishment, refreshment, and pleasure; the nuances of how food and wine affect one another don't enter mainstream thought. And eating food you enjoy with wine you like is just fine, that is, until you have that experience when both the wine and the food are transformed into something more. Even if you're not paying attention, the resulting combination is so good you can't help but marvel at what is happening, and how.

For me, I started to pay a little more attention to what I was eating and drinking, noting what worked and what didn't, and trying to understand. I wasn't obsessive, but curious. That's what pairing food and wine is all about — making the whole a little better than the sum of the parts. I'm still happy to eat and drink things I enjoy without much preoccupation, but I'm also after that magic whenever possible. I'm guessing that you are, too.

This chapter serves as your jumping-off point to the many different strategies of thinking about food and wine. Flipping through these pages can help entice you to read the sections of the book that are most interesting and relevant to you.

Why Pairing Wine with Food Really Matters

Even in the wine business, a lot of people I know don't get too fussed about finding the perfect wine for everything they eat all the time. Some even think pursuing the perfect wine pairing is pretentious — just eat food you like and drink wine you enjoy and get on with it. And it's true; the marriage of food and wine is hardly a matter of 'till death do us part.

But then again, what do you have to lose by gaining a better understanding of eating and drinking? People discover how to cook so they can eat better, or they discover about wine to appreciate what they taste a little more. Looking more deeply into anything to squeeze a little more pleasure from life is part of the pursuit of happiness. Figuring out which wines and foods create a bit of sensory magic together falls into the same category. If you're going to eat and drink together, you may as well do it right.

Besides, after you've grasped the basic concepts, making a more suitable wine choice takes no extra effort. The more you experiment, the more intuitive it will become.

Focusing on What Makes a Good Pairing

You needn't be a chef or a winemaker to get your food and wine pairings spot on (few sommeliers are either). Before getting started on the journey to perfect pairings, I have good news for you: There's no such thing as universally perfect in the first place. People are all a little different, both physically and psychologically. That's why you want to have a basic understanding of how your senses — mostly smell and taste — work, how they may vary from person to person, and why you can like a pairing that doesn't work for somebody else.

You also need to consider concrete components of food and wine and how they interact. With just a few basic principles under your belt, you can take any wine or dish apart and focus on the elements that can make or break the match. And that's really all pairing food and wine is; it's not effortless — anything worthwhile takes some effort — but neither is it Newtonian calculus (and the homework is more fun). The next sections map out some general principles and strategies for pairing food and wine.

Rules? What rules?

Some books outline rules for pairing food and wine. You may also have heard that pairing food and wine has no rules, and you should just drink whatever you like. Here's what I think: The old rules of food and wine pairing, such as "red wine with red meat" and "white wine with fish" are a bit like clichés. A cliché starts out as an idea of great insight, but then loses its force through overuse, and as times change, becomes less relevant.

And these food and wine pairing rules, like clichés, have become diluted through the proliferation of, well, food and wine. Chapter 6 does address the truth about these clichés, but what was once a simple matter regarding a handful of traditional wines and traditional dishes that generated these valid dictums in the first place, is now a wildly complex field. Dozens of red wines go well with fish, and just as many whites go with red meat. And what's more, people understand why.



Advanced technology and the expansion into new wine growing areas around the world have led to wine styles that didn't exist when the rules were made up. And food, too, is constantly evolving. Ingredients and techniques from one part of the world are appropriated by another, and new dishes are created everyday. With all this change, the clichéd rules start to fall apart. So don't forget them, but don't exclusively rely on them either. And the exceptions are the most fun to discover; if there's anything I've discovered about food and wine pairing, it's to have an open mind.

Relying on the senses

Enjoying food and wine isn't all about the physical senses. In fact, it has a strong psychological aspect as well, as I explore in Chapter 4, although the senses are still pretty important. Understanding what "like" really means in the world of food, wine, and sensory experience can help you focus on how to get there.

In Chapter 2, I go into some detail about how you smell and taste, and importantly, the difference between what can be smelled and what can be tasted, because people often confuse the two sensations. I also examine the tactile sense in order to understand the texture of both wine and food, which can go a long way to making pairings more or less pleasant. In fact, in my experience, texture is the starting point for any match; aroma and flavor synergy is the icing on the cake. As a result, I explore things like the burning sensation of chile peppers and the rough texture of wines, as well as strategies to lessen their effects.

Zooming in on some basic strategies

More wines and foods exist than you could ever count, with a frightful number of possible combinations. But after you strip away all the noise, you're left with only a small handful of things for your senses to measure up. Getting the most out of the interaction of food and wine can enhance your enjoyment, and there's actually a little trick to eating and drinking at the same time. Something dynamic goes on in your mouth when you're eating and drinking — taste and tactile sensations change depending on what you put together. Chapter 3 is your starting point for putting the senses into action. I include some experiments you can put yourself through to discover the possible outcomes when food and wine get together.

Eyeing some simple practices when pairing

There's no single right way to go about pairing food and wine. You may already have a bottle of wine that you want to showcase with the right dish, or you may have decided first what's for dinner and want to find the right wine to match; there are simple approaches you can take for each case. Some practices you can follow to find the right wine when you've selected your dish include

- ✓ Focusing on finding the best wine *style* for the dish and forgetting the grape
- ✓ Seeking a wine with similar flavor intensity and weight as the dish
- ✓ Figuring out what the dominant taste or texture element of the dish is and which wine style will best complement or contrast
- ✓ Selecting a wine in the same *flavor family* as the dish, which has a natural affinity based on complementary aromas and flavors



I offer details on how to approach the pairing in Chapter 5.

When you have your wine set up and want to select a dish to match it, you want to consider the following points:

- ✓ Recognize the wine's style profile and look for foods that complement and positively affect its taste and texture
- ✓ Consider the wine's principal aromas and flavors and seek complementary or contrasting flavors in the dish
- ✓ Choose ingredients and a cooking method (poaching, frying, grilling, for example) that match the wine's flavor intensity

- ✓ Select a dish with similar weight, such as heavy wines with rich, heavily sauced dishes, or light, crisp wines with fresh/raw/lowfat dishes
- ✓ Avoid dishes in which the main taste sensations and texture will diminish the wine's positive aspects



Chapter 4 can help you with your cooking and the combination of ingredients, and it can guide your food and wine matching from a flavor perspective.

Other useful tips to consider when pairing food and wine include

- ✓ Keeping the pairing local, which means you look for local foods and wines to pair together
- ✓ Matching the acidity in a dish with acidity in the wine
- ✓ Making sure the wine is at least as sweet as the dish
- ✓ Complementing or contrasting flavor and texture

Chapter 6 provides a complete list of pairing strategies you can immediately implement. There I also draw on the wisdom of the ages and outline several case studies in classic regional food and wine matches: how they arose and why they work. Understanding why they work is even more important than knowing that they do, because you can then apply the same successful principles to other combinations of food and wine. If you follow these basic principles, you'll never go far wrong when you bring food and wine together.

Aging wine

If you've ever wondered which wines you should be cellaring and which you should drink as young as possible, then you need to consider what I refer to as the *pillars of ageability* of a wine, which are the following:

- ✓ Acidity
- ✓ Tannin/extract
- ✓ Sugar
- ✓ Alcohol

The more of each, the more age-worthy the wine. And these elements also give you an idea of how long you can keep a wine after you've opened it before it spoils — rarely a problem in my house — but useful information to have in any case. And understanding how a wine changes as it ages, usually for the better but not always, can help in choosing the best types of foods to highlight those grand old bottles. Young and old wines like different foods, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

Serving like a sommelier

If one of the secrets of great food and wine matches is starting with great wine, it follows that anything you can do to make the wine more enjoyable is good for the cause. Sommeliers have several tricks up their sleeves for shifting your perception from good to great (they can't perform miracles like turn vinegar back into wine, but they can swing the odds in favor of appreciating the wine a little more).

You can use these tricks so you and your guests can appreciate the wine a bit more:

- ✓ Using the right glassware
- ✓ Serving at the best temperature for the wine style
- ✓ Knowing what wines to decant and how
- ✓ Serving multiple wines in the right order

Chapter 8 includes lots of practical information like these tricks to make you look like a pro who's been pairing food and wine and serving wine for years, and you may just end up enjoying that pairing a little bit more.

Understanding Wines: Just a Quick Overview

The key to understanding wine is knowing what it tastes like, at least from a food-and-wine-pairing perspective. And I mean the basic taste profile, not the nitty-gritty nuances of flavor, which is a secondary consideration. As a result, getting into the habit of forgetting the grape is a good idea (I know, I know, you've been trained to believe that knowing the grape will give you all the answers, but I'm suggesting you forget all that) and going on style when looking at the match from the wine side. In these days of globe-trotting grapes, you can quickly see how not all Chardonnays or Sauvignon Blancs or Cabernet Sauvignons are created equal — growing region and producer influence have a lot more to say. Light or full bodied, crisp and dry, soft and fruity, wood-aged or not are some of the considerations that trump grape variety when looking for the right match (although certain grapes do often lend themselves more readily to a particular style).

Part III is where I simplify the broad world of wine into style categories. Knowing what style category your wine falls into is critical to success. This means you either need to know the wine at hand or rely on the description of the merchant or the sommelier (if you're at home you can always crack open the bottle and have a taste ahead of the meal, and adjust accordingly).

There's no universal consensus on wine style categories, but here are the categories I find most useful. See all the details on white wine categories in Chapter 9, red wine in Chapter 10, sparkling wine in Chapter 11, and sweet wine and fortified wine in Chapter 12.

- ✔ **Lightweight, crisp, and lean whites:** These whites are lean and mouth-watering, like a squeeze of lemon or a bite of green apple. They're un-aked and hail from cool growing regions for the most part. Sommeliers often describe them as "mineral," meaning they taste like chalk or wet stone, which is a high compliment in the wine world.
- ✔ **Aromatic, fruity, round whites:** Most of the aromatic white grapes fall into this category. Aromatic wines lean toward being medium-full bodied with balanced alcohol and acidity, sometimes a little fuller and more unctuous, with pronounced aromas and flavors of fruits and flowers. Think of Muscat/Moscato, Pinot Gris, or Gewürztraminer, and you're in the right category.
- ✔ **Medium-full bodied, creamy, wood-aged whites:** This category covers the world's barrel-fermented and/or aged whites. Chardonnay is the most common candidate for the barrel treatment, but a handful of other grapes or regional styles are also aged in wood. Because of this process, they're often round and creamy-textured, with aromas and flavors derived from wood, like sweet baking spices and caramel.
- ✔ **Light-bodied, bright, zesty, low tannin reds:** These are the most food-versatile reds of the wine world. They have juicy, flavor-enhancing acidity, light body, and low tannins (not too rough or astringent). Most reds made without any barrel-aging fall into this category, along with certain grapes like Gamay and Pinot Noir. They're usually best with a light chill.
- ✔ **Medium-full bodied, balanced, moderately tannic reds:** This category groups a wide range of red wines that have more body and flavor intensity than zesty reds, yet they're well balanced on their own without excessive acidity, alcohol, or tannin.
- ✔ **Full, deep and robust, turbocharged, with chewy texture reds:** These reds are the heavyweights of the wine world: big, bruising, intensely flavored, well-structured reds. They're usually complex (lots of different aromas and flavors), while their chewy texture (from tannins) makes them age-worthy, too. Examples from the new world (outside of Europe) can have very ripe, jammy fruit flavor. Old world wines are usually a little more earthy and herbal-spicy. They're invariably aged in wood.
- ✔ **Sparkling wine:** These wines have *effervescence* — dissolved carbon dioxide. They can be fully sparkling, like Champagne, or more lightly effervescent like Moscato d'Asti. Sparkling wines are among the most food-friendly and versatile. I briefly cover all the methods to make wine bubbly in Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Sweet, late harvest wines:** This category is further split into straight up *late harvest* (grapes picked late when they're slightly overripe),

botrytis-affected (when grapes are affected by a type of beneficial fungus called *botrytis*, or *noble rot*), and Icewine, when grapes are picked when frozen solid. Each of these different categories has a different range of ideal food partners.

- ✓ **Dry and sweet fortified wines:** The addition of neutral alcohol to wine, raising the overall alcohol level to anywhere from about 15.5 percent to more than 20 percent, is what distinguishes this category. They can be either dry or sweet.

Each chapter in this part includes a list of grapes and regions that usually fall into each category, but the world of wine is made up of exceptions. In the areas of the old world where wines are named by their official appellation, that is, by a combination of grape(s) + place + production methods that results in a more or less consistent wine style, such as Chablis or Sancerre, you can have a pretty good idea of what wine style to expect from the label alone, as long as you've done your homework. Otherwise, the grape name alone on the label is only a starting point to figuring out what style of wine you're dealing with.



Occasionally I get stuck in a wine rut. I find a grape that I like and keep drinking it, finding as many different examples as possible. Of course, drinking the same wine type is okay. But then along comes something new, and I'm reminded just how amazingly vast the world of wine is and how much I have yet to discover. Finding a new grape made in the style that I like is as exciting for me as making a new friend: someone to share new experiences with, to learn from, and have fun with. Use the styles in this part like an Internet dating service, matching up personal profiles. If you recognize a few personal favorite wines in any of the categories, chances are that any of the others in the same category are at least worth a first date. And who knows, you may find a new lifelong friend.

I give some general pairing guidelines on what types of ingredients, cooking methods, and dishes work best with each wine style category, using a sort of free-flowing, stream-of-conscious, visual diagram that I devised for each. It's like a visual map of the thought process I go through — a kind of physical rendering of the intuitive process — if handed a bottle of category X wine and asked to match it with food. You can follow the web of thoughts and considerations and the possible directions I may go in for all the different styles. It's not intended to tell you exactly what to pair with each wine style (although specific dishes are included), but rather how to think about what to match. Hopefully these visual aids can spark the same kind of intuitive, creative thinking in your mind when you've got a bottle of wine in hand and are wondering what to eat.

Applying the Rules: Pairing Food and Wine around the World

Sometimes you just need an answer quickly, such as when you're planning a dinner for friends and you need a wine for the meal, and you don't have time or inclination to do the research for what pairs well. You can find a multitude of food and wine pairing tables in the chapters in Part IV.

These tables list traditional dishes from all parts of the world, along with the best wine style to match. There's a specific recommendation, too, though it needn't be followed slavishly — remember it's the style that matters most. And just to be sure you're covered, I offer an alternative style recommendation and specific pairing for each (there's often more than one wine style that works with a dish). This should cover a good number of the dishes you're likely to come across, whether you're going Italian, Indian, Mediterranean, or Mexican. This list shows which cuisines are covered in each of the chapters in these two parts:

- ✓ **The Mediterranean:** Chapter 13
- ✓ **North America:** Chapter 14
- ✓ **Northern Europe:** Chapter 15
- ✓ **Central Europe:** Chapter 16
- ✓ **Southeast Asia, Japan, India:** Chapter 17
- ✓ **Mexico and South America:** Chapter 18
- ✓ **The Middle East and North Africa:** Chapter 19
- ✓ **Cheese:** Chapter 20

Looking at Your World

You've just been charged with choosing a great restaurant for an avid food and wine lover. Or maybe you've been handed the thick phonebook of a wine list and are entreated to find the best value. Or maybe you've been designated to host the next family reunion, or organize the next office party, drinks and all. It's time to take a break from the theory of food and wine and consider some real-world situations.

Whether you're dining in or out, you can make sure you have an enjoyable experience with the wine(s) you choose. The following sections address eating out and eating in.

When you dine out

Dining out presents many opportunities for memorable food and wine experiences, as long as you're in the right place. When heading out to dine, these tips can help you find the restaurants that are most serious about wine, before you even sit down:



Look for visual cues that indicate a wine-savvy establishment, such as the following:

- ✓ The type of stemware on the table
- ✓ How wines are stored
- ✓ How the wine list is presented

I also provide some tips on figuring out what is on the sommelier's mind when he or she puts together the wine program, which can give you clues about what to order and where the values are most likely to be found.

After you pick a restaurant, you also need to know what to reveal to the sommelier — what he or she is hoping to get from you — and what questions to ask in order to get the best possible food and wine experience. Chapter 21 covers the dining-out scenario.

When you dine in

Being a good host is no mean feat. There's a real art to organizing an event, impressing guests, and making them feel welcome and well looked after. You don't want to run out of wine, but you don't want to over-buy either. And what exactly should you buy? It depends of course on the event; intimate family gatherings or large weddings require different strategies. Chapter 22 is all about hosting the party.