NOTE TO LEADER

BEFORE YOU START THE TASTING

- Print out the following materials:
  - Tasting Guide, one copy for the group leader
  - Tasting Mat, one copy for each taster
  - Pairing Principles, one copy for each taster
  - Tasting Grid, one copy for each taster
  - Tasting Methodology, one copy for each taster
- Chill the white wines to about 50 degrees F (10 degrees C). The two reds should be at cool room temperature or about 60 degrees F (15 degrees C)
- Put a Tasting Mat at each taster's seat
- Place a wine glass on each of the five circles on each Tasting Mat. Note that the circles indicate the specific wine to be poured into each glass
- Pull the corks and pour about 2 ounces of each wine into its respective glass, filling each glass about 1/4 to 1/3 full
- Give each taster a plate with the seven foods. Alternatively, you can serve each food family style by passing around a plate for each food at the appropriate time.
- Give each taster three handouts: Pairing Principles, Tasting Grid and Tasting Methodology

TASTING PROCESS

Following the Tasting Guide…

- Complete the Pairing Principles worksheet
  - Review guidelines for matching wine and food
- Complete the Tasting Grid worksheet
  - Taste white wines
  - Taste foods (except dessert items)
  - Taste white wines with food
  - Taste red wines
  - Taste red wines with food
  - Taste dessert items
  - Taste dessert items with wine

QUESTIONS? E-mail us at wss@mshanken.com

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INTRO: Embrace Your Dorky Side

When you took your first golf lesson, you probably paid attention to every minute detail; how to hold the club, how far apart to place your feet, where to start your swing, how much to bend your knees and when to switch your weight to your front foot and how much to turn your back foot and, well… you get the idea.

It was a fairly dorky endeavor. But now, after lots of practice, all the mechanics have become second nature and you can simply enjoy playing a round of golf.

Why are we talking about golf in a wine course? Because learning anything, whether it's golf or skiing or wine, requires some time and a lot of practice. It also requires being a little dorky.

With this tasting we're going to be really, really dorky and look at the individual components in wine and food. We're going to pay attention to every little detail.

Is this what you're going to be doing when you go out to dinner next week with friends? Hopefully not. But for now, when you're in this class or in the privacy of your own home, embrace your dorky side.

Warning

Mostly, when you go to a tasting, you expect everything to be delicious or, at least, good.

This is not that tasting.

Some of the combinations are going to be slightly awful. After all, how can you recognize a good pairing—and make good pairings—if you don't know what's not so good?

Consider yourself forewarned: this wine and food pairing lesson is going to rate high on the dork spectrum.I hope everyone has their lab coats and safety goggles handy.

Is there such a thing as a really awful pairing?

How many times have you had your dinner guests get up from the table and run screaming out of the room because the wine and food pairing was torturous?

Two or three times? I'll bet it's never happened.

If you want to worry about something, worry about something big, like the price of gas or global warming. Buy life insurance. Please don't worry about choosing the "wrong" wine or making a less than perfect pairing.

Most wine pairings are okay. Nothing great, nothing bad. Sometimes you'll come across a pairing that is absolutely wonderful, but that's fairly rare. So don't hold your breath; exhale and enjoy yourself.

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HANDOUT: PAIRING PRINCIPLES

Each taster should have two handouts for this tasting:
1. Wine & Food Pairing Principles
2. Wine & Food Pairing: Component Tasting Grid

Let's start by working through the Pairing Principles. This will give you some of the background you need to do the tastings.

Make sure you have a pencil because there are some spots for you to fill in.
Okay, here goes.

Preference

Do you love big red wines?

The response is usually split fairly evenly between the yeas and the nays. If you were in the "no" camp, any pairing with a big red is not going to light your fire.

Everyone's personal preference is different. I drown my hamburger with ketchup. My husband looks at me aghast.

Neither one of us is right or wrong; we each have our own personal taste preference.

When it comes to wine and food pairing, after you follow the ground rules, it's your own palate's call about whether a pairing is great or merely good for you.

White wine with fish, red wine with meat

What's behind this pairing strategy? Let's look at the handout: it says, body weight.

What is body when it comes to wine? Body is the weight of the wine, how heavy or rich it is.

For an analogy, think of the difference between the body of skim milk versus that of cream. How do they feel in your mouth? The skim milk is a lot lighter, more watery, not as thick. The cream is really heavy and thick in your mouth.

Look at the little chart on the handout.

If we're talking about a lightweight wine, which is lighter: white wine or red wine?

The answer: white is usually lighter in weight. So write "white" in the upper left box under Light Weight.

That means red wine is heavier. Write "red" in the upper right box under Heavy Weight.

Now for the food.

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Which is lighter: fish or beef?

The answer: fish. Beef is the heavyweight.

Write fish in the lower left box under Light Weight. Write beef in under Heavy Weight.

Balance is key. Lighter wines pair with lighter foods and heavier wines with heavier foods. Otherwise, the heavier of the two will overwhelm the lighter.

Salad example

- To illustrate the importance of balance, let's make a salad. Lettuce is pretty light weight. Roquefort dressing is a heavyweight.
- If you pour Roquefort dressing over that lettuce, how much of the greens are you going to taste? Not much. It's going to be all dressing.
- On the other hand, if you use lighter weight dressing such as a vinaigrette, you'll be able to taste both the salad and the dressing.

We've described matching the weights of food. This balance is also key for wine and food pairing. Pair a lighter weight wine with a lighter weight food so you end up tasting both the wine and the food.

Scent Components

Let's go on to the next rule, which is based on scent components. The idea is to create flavor bridges between the wine and the food, so first you need to evaluate the scents in the wine and the food.

Let's go back to that salad. I'll add a squeeze of lemon to the dressing. To make a flavor bridge, I would pick a wine with some lemon flavor.

Texture

Let's look at texture matches. Okay, wine is liquid. Food is served crunchy or solid. What textural matches are possible?

Wine textures range from silky to rough. The mouthfeel of food can also range from silky to coarse.There is a pair of examples on the handout; can you think of some more?

Classic Pairings

Many of these pairings are also regional pairings, which match local foods with local wines.

But, if you look at them closely, you can see that the pairings follow other rules, such as flavor bridges and texture. For example, both Sancerre and goat cheese have an herbal edge, so we're comparing flavors. The same goes for Pinot Noir, which echoes the earthiness found in mushrooms.

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Occasion and Effort

Did you see the movie, *Sideways*? In one scene, Myles drank his prize Cheval Blanc at a fast food restaurant out of a Styrofoam cup by himself. This is just wrong on so many levels. Don't get me started; I'll stick to the topic at hand: occasion and effort.

If you're going to have a picnic, picnic wine makes a great match. If you're celebrating a special occasion, this is the time to share a special bottle with friends.

Enough said. These are the important rules.

I've skipped over Components, which are at the heart of this tasting; you'll hear more about them than you ever thought you'd want to know.

Scents: Aromas and Flavors

Can you feel the nerd factor going up? We're into strange words and lists that are numbered and bullet-pointed…

Wine experts estimate that about 75 percent of wine evaluation comes from aroma and flavor. The average human can distinguish between thousands of scents such as vanilla, lemon, cherry, oak and earth.

Scents are distinct from tastes. I want to make that clear, so we're all on the same page.

Tastes

Compared to the world of scents, there aren't many tastes. We learned the four tastes in kindergarten or first grade. We taste them on the tongue. What are they?

Sweet, salt, sour, bitter. Only, in wine and other foods, we usually say "tart" instead of sour. Sour is usually bad, as in sour milk.

Write in the first four tastes on your sheet: sweet, tart, bitter and salty.

Each of tastes has an associated mouthfeel. The mouthfeel can clue you into a wine's taste components.

Let's start with sweet. When you have a piece of butterscotch candy, what is the mouthfeel that the candy leaves in your mouth? Is it crisp and refreshing, or is it sort of gooey and cloying and rich? You know the answer to that right away: who hasn't savored something rich and sweet before?

For tart, think of biting into a lemon. It makes your mouth feel really clean, refreshed and bright. There's nothing gooey here; it's crisp.

Bitter. What foods are bitter? Strong brewed tea. Coffee. Some green vegetables. Walnut skins. They all leave sort of a furry, astringent feeling in your mouth.

Salty. The level of salt changes the mouthfeel. Light salt seems round and soft. Heavy salt really dries out your mouth.

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Think of food examples for each taste. Here are a few:

- Sweet: honey, sugar, ripe fruit, fruit chutneys
- Tart: apples, citrus vinegar, tomatoes
- Bitter: green vegetables, broccoli, chocolate, tea, coffee
- Salty: olives, dried meats, dried fish, bacon

Finally, we come down to the fifth taste that's enjoyed some press since it was isolated a few years back: umami. It's a savory, yummy richness that does have its own taste receptor on your tongue. The mouthfeel is similar to sugar: rich and thick. You'll find it in foods such as sautéed mushrooms as well as aged beef and aged wines.

Components Soft and Hard

Make sure your lab coats are buttoned. And please adjust your safety goggles…

In wine and foods, there are soft components as well as hard components. See the boxes at the top of page 2 of the Pairing Principles handout.

Soft components make the wine or food seem softer in your mouth. Hard components make wine and food feel harder or harsher in your mouth.

So, when we're talking about a balanced wine, one of the important aspects of balance is the relationship between the soft components and the hard components.

If you have a wine with a lot of sugar and no acidity, it's going to be really flabby and not very exciting. You can have a really good wine with a lot of sugar, but that wine also needs to have sufficient acidity to balance the sugar.

If you've got balance, you've got a wine that works; it'll age, it'll taste good and feel good in your mouth, plus, it has the possibility of having a good finish, too.

Swing Components

Alcohol is the final wine component in the box. It's on a line by itself because, depending on the quantity, it can be soft or hard. At lower levels, alcohol is a soft component. At higher levels, it's a hard component.

For an example of alcohol's hard side, imagine taking a sniff of brandy, which has about 40% alcohol. High alcohol gives you a punch in the nose. It burns on your tongue. There's nothing soft about that.

Foods also have a swing component: salt. At low levels, salt perks up food flavors, making the dish seem more vibrant. At high levels, it can overpower the flavors and make the dish seem hard.

Component Interactions Chart

Usually, wine is more delicate than food; food tends to have a larger impact on wine than wine has on food. This chart highlights the effect of food on wine.

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Have you been to a wedding where a piece of cake accompanies the Champagne toast? This memory can cause a lot of people to flinch. Let's use the chart to find out what is happening with this combination?

The cake contains a fair amount of sugar. Look at the chart and, in the Food column, find sugar.

What does sugar do to wine? Sugar decreases the perceived sugar and fruit, while increasing the perceived acidity.

On its own, Champage is fairly low in fruit and high in acidity. The sugar in the cake makes the wine seem even less fruity and even more acidic.

The result: with sugary cake, Champagne can seem tart and thin and out of balance.

For my wedding a few years ago, I went for a slightly sweet Champagne that could stand up to the cake. It did the trick.

Scoring

Here's a simple scoring system we can use on the next part of this tasting (where we finally get to taste!).

That's about all the background you need to go through the pairing tasting.

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HANDOUT: PAIRING GRID

Let's move onto the second handout, the Pairing Grid.

You'll notice that the first three pages require that you fill in and circle information about the wines and foods.

The last three pages contain answers and explanations, so you can refer to them if you're feeling stumped.

Process

Start by tasting the first three wines—Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay—to determine each wine's key components. (Save the two reds—Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon—until after you've tasted the three whites with the first five foods. If you follow the grid and this step-by-step handout, you'll be fine.)

Then taste the first five foods—apple, lemon, cheddar, walnut, and beef—to determine each food's key components. (Save the two dessert foods—sugar cookie and chocolate—for later.)

Finally, taste the three white wines with the foods indicated on the pairing grid.

Champagne Example

With Champagne, for example, acidity is high and there are also low levels of fruit.

So, on the pairing grid, I would have circled both acidity and fruit, but I would have circled acidity a few times to indicate its relative importance.

Tannin, alcohol and sugar (unless it was a sweet style of bubbly) aren't really important, so I wouldn't have circled any of those items.

We have five wines in this tasting. They are chosen because they illustrate different styles of wines.

After you've gotten a handle on the wines and their styles, taste each food to determine the important components in each.

Like the wines, the foods are chosen because they illustrate key components in food.

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TASTE THE THREE WHITE WINES

Taste Wine: Riesling

This Riesling Spätlese should have some sweetness to it. Whenever I mention that a wine has some "sweetness," people start cringing. Mostly, they associate "sweet" with cheap and mass-produced wines; in other words, wines that they wouldn't be caught dead drinking. Let me anticipate some of your objections.

Sweet wines are plonk.
Sweet and cheap plonk are not synonymous. As for pricing, Château d'Yquem makes a rather famous sweet wine that sells for more than $500 on release.

Sweet wines are bad with food, or, they're only for dessert.
Sweet wines are great with food. Many foods contain fruit or fruit sauces or fruit chutneys. Dry wines are crushed by sweet foods, which make them seem tart and thin. As for spicy foods, wines with a touch of sweetness are a perfect complement.

Sweet wines are too sweet.
Sweet wines work when they have sufficient acidity to balance the sweetness. The level of sweetness in most off-dry wines is actually quite low; ounce per ounce, soft drinks contain about 5 times as much sugar.

Remember to use the tasting methodology you learned in the ABCs of Wine Tasting or Understanding Wine: see, sniff, sip, summarize. Go ahead and evaluate the wine to determine its style.

Q:

Did this wine have any fruit aromas and flavors? What are they?
Is this fruit component pronounced; is this a fruit-forward wine?
Is this wine sweet? Can you taste the sweetness? Is the mouthfeel slightly gooey?
Does the wine also have some acidity that keeps it from being completely cloying?
Does the Riesling have big tannins?
Is the alcohol level low, medium or high?
Is the wine light-bodied? Full-bodied? Or somewhere in between?

A:

Riesling Spätleses are known for their peach, citrus, mineral and floral aromas. On your Tasting Grid, under Riesling, write in the flavors you found in this wine.

And most Riesling Spätleses are fruit-forward, so fruit is a large component in the wine's balance. So, on your Tasting Grid, under Riesling, circle the component: fruit.

Most Riesling Spätleses have a fair amount of sugar, so this is our example of a sweet wine. On your Tasting Grid, under Riesling, circle sugar.

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Most Rieslings have significant acidity to balance the sugar. On the pairing grid under Riesling, circle the component: acid.

Look at the bottle and fill in the alcohol %. The amount of alcohol can clue you into the wine's body.

Speaking of which, most Riesling Spätleses are medium in terms of body.

Check the Tasting Grid Answer Sheet to make sure you've circled or written in the correct answers for Riesling.

Taste Wine: Sauvignon Blanc

Until about 1980, Sauvignon Blanc was best-known for making the French wine called Sancerre. Since then, Sauvignon Blanc has been planted around the world, from California to Chile to New Zealand. Most recently, Sauvie put New Zealand on the world wine map; they make some pretty amazing Sauvies that are crisp and refreshing.

Go ahead and evaluate the wine.

Q:

Did this wine have any fruit aromas and flavors? What are they?
And does this fruit component jump out at you?
Is this wine sweet? Can you taste any sweetness?
How crisp and tart is the wine? Does it have a lot of acidity?
Does the Sauvie have any tannins?
Is the alcohol level low, medium or high?
Is the wine light-bodied? Full-bodied? Or somewhere in between?

A:

Sauvignon Blanc is not known for being shy; this varietal's aromas and flavors are usually intense. They tend to have herbal, citrus, grapefruit, lemon, and gooseberry scents. Write your wine's scents in the Tasting Grid under Sauvignon Blanc.

If you're looking for residual sugar, you won't find it in Sauvignon Blanc.
Do not circle sugar on the Tasting Grid.

This varietal is usually quite high in acidity. On the Tasting Grid, circle acid. You can even circle it a couple of times to emphasize the acidity.

The acidity nearly overwhelms the fruit. But the fruit is important even though it can become more faint, so circle fruit on the Tasting Grid.

When it comes to body and alcohol, Sauvignon Blanc is usually middle of the road. Indicate them on your Tasting Grid.

Finally, check the Tasting Grid Answer Sheet to make sure you've circled or written in the correct answers for Sauvignon Blanc.

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Taste Wine: Chardonnay

Give the Chardonnay a swirl and sniff. It's quite different from the Sauvignon Blanc, and it's even more popular. You should also find some oak in this Chard; it's that toasty vanilla scent.

Q:

Did this wine have any fruit aromas and flavors? What are they?
And is the fruit component pronounced; is this a fruit-forward wine?
Is this wine sweet? Is the mouthfeel slightly gooey?
Does the wine also have some acidity that keeps it from being completely cloying?
Does the wine have any tannins that make your mouth feel a little dry or furry?
Is the alcohol level low, medium or high?
Is the wine light-bodied? Full-bodied? Or somewhere in between?

A:

Fruit is certainly important to the Chard. You may have found some citrus, apple or pear scents and maybe some tropical scents. On your Tasting Grid, fill in the scents and circle fruit.

If you did get a Chard fermented and aged in new oak barrels, you may have also found some scents that reminded you of toast or smoke or oak.

New oak gives it that toasty, vanilla aroma and flavor, and Chardonnay from a warmer region like Australia gets really ripe and will even have some tropical fruit flavors.

Whereas the Sauvignon Blanc was herbal and crisp, this Chardonnay is more tropical and rich.

To back up that richness, Chards need some acidity too. Make sure to circle acid on your Tasting Grid.

This wine might also have some tannins that leave a drying, furry feeling on your tongue. In addition to scents, new oak adds tannins. On your Tasting Grid, circle tannin, but lightly since the tannins are light.

Finally, fill in the body and the alcohol – and check your responses against the Tasting Grid Answer Sheet.

To sum up, we've just tasted examples of three key wine styles. The Riesling Spätlese has some sweetness and some acidity, the Sauvignon Blanc has a lot of acidity with citrusy and herbal scents and a medium body, and the Chardonnay is big, rich and oaky.

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Taste Food: Apple

Now it's time to taste the foods. Evaluate the apple, lemon, cheddar, walnut and beef to determine the important components for each. (Hold off on the sugar cookie and chocolate for now; we'll get to them later.)

Take a bite of the apple.
Is it sweet? Is it tart? Is it a little sweet and a little tart?

Granny Smiths usually have plenty of acid. They're also ripe fruit, so they have some sugar, too. There's a balance.

Variations

- It's always interesting to see how a Granny Smith is going to taste, because each apple is slightly different. Sometimes it's riper, with less acidity; sometimes it's less ripe with more acidity.
- What does this mean? Since foods--and wines--are so variable, the best pairing can also vary.
- Good chefs will always test the food as it's being prepared and, if it's for a wine pairing, they'll adjust the recipe to account for varations in flavor and acidity, etc. You might need to adjust your own pairings in the future.

So the apple contains both sugar and acid. Circle those components on your Tasting Grid. There's no fat or no salt in an apple.

Taste Food: Lemon

Taste the lemon.
Is it all acid? Or is there some fruit too?

As with the apple, the answer depends on the lemon's ripeness. Sometimes lemons are all about acidity. And sometimes they're riper, almost tropical.

Either way, you can be fairly sure that lemon is quite acidic. On your Tasting Grid, under lemon, circle acid.

Taste Food: Cheddar Cheese

Take a small bite of cheddar cheese.

Is there a lot of acid in cheddar cheese? Well, there is some, but it's not as important as some of the other components.
So what are the main components? Fat and salt. Circle these two components on your Tasting Grid.

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Taste Food: Walnut

What are the important components in a walnut? There's no sweetness and no salt. But there's fat, and also a little bit of a bitter component. It actually has tannins: it's the tannins in the walnut skin that impart much of the bitterness.

Taste Food: Beef

Roast beef is a combination of fat, protein and salt. Depending on the preparation, the amount of salt can be high or low. Since the beef is cold, the perception of fat is lower; hot beef tends to be juicier and richer.

On your Tasting Grid, circle both fat and salt.

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RIESLING

Taste Wine and Food: Riesling and Apple

Now it's time to start pairing the wine with the food. Start by tasting the apple, and then take a sip of your Riesling. Now another bite of the apple.

What's happening here? The sugar in the apple is going to decrease the sensation of sweetness in the wine, which is why the wine's a bit less sweet after you've had the apple. Go ahead and taste again if you hadn't noticed this the first time through.

So what would happen if you had a wine with absolutely no sweetness to it? It might seem a little acidic. We'll see what it's like with the Sauvignon Blanc. So when you have some fruit, some sweetness in your food, it's good to have a little bit of sweetness in the wine too because otherwise the wine can seem out of balance, a little too dry and tart.

Now turn to your Tasting Grid. How would you rate this pairing? No fireworks, that's for sure, and the wine lost most of its fruit. In fact, the lively fruit flavors and touch of sweetness in the wine were dulled or neutralized by the sugar in the apple, so I'd give this pairing a C.

Taste Wine and Food: Riesling and Lemon

Now take a lemon wedge and we'll pair it with the Riesling. Even if the lemon makes you pucker, notice each sensation in your mouth as you bite into the lemon and take a sip of the wine.

It's the lemon's high acidity that makes you pucker. Thankfully, the wine doesn't give you that same sensation. But because the Riesling doesn't have quite enough acidity to stand up to the lemon, the lemon may crush the wine. The fruit in the Riesling may fade quickly.

To me, this was worse than the Riesling with apple. I'd give this combination a D; you may prefer to it to the Riesling and apple combo. Go ahead and score however you see fit.

Taste Wine and Food: Riesling and Cheddar

Now let's go with something completely different: the cheddar cheese. No fruit in this to combat with the fruit in the wine. Cheese does have some acidity, but it won't register in your mouth the same way that the super tart lemon did. So is there hope that the fat and salt in the cheese will make a magical combo with the wine?

Take a bite of your cheese and let it coat your mouth. Now try the Riesling.

Uh-oh. Are you wondering where the magic is? Isn't white wine supposed to go well with cheese?

In this case, the cheddar is a lot heavier in body than the wine. The fat coats your mouth, and the Riesling can't reliably cut through it. The wine just fades away. The cheese overwhelms the wine, and the wine becomes, well, forgettable.

Don't lose all hope in the Riesling, though. We are going to come back to it with dessert.

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Pairings for Riesling

Can't wait until dessert to sip more Riesling? Then bring on white meats and spices. These foods love Riesling, and the feeling is mutual.

With spicy foods, the sugar in the Riesling soothes your tongue between bites. Many white meats are served with fruit sauces, which can be handled by Riesling. Finally, the acidity in Riesling cleanses your palate and leaves you wanting more food and more wine.

SAUVINGON BLANC

Taste Wine and Food: Sauvignon Blanc and Apple

Let's move on to the Sauvignon Blanc. If you'd like, cleanse your palate with some bread or a sip of water.

Sauvignon Blanc is a classic example of tart, acidic, crisp, herbal wine. Already your taste buds should be perking up.

As before, start with the apple. Take a bite, then sip the wine. Now take a bite of the apple again.

Yikes! Are you puckering? Having flashbacks to the lemon wedge? Just the little bit of fruit in the apple has crushed the little bit of fruit that's in this wine; this wine is now all acid, all tart. On the flip side, the Sauvignon Blanc makes the apple slice taste rounder and a little sweeter because the perception of apple acidity decreases after the Sauvignon Blanc.

The crisp acidity in the Sauvignon Blanc works beautifully with other foods—herbed goat cheese, for example—but when you have some sweetness in your food, whether it be fruit, chutney, ketchup or barbecue sauce, you need a little bit of sweetness in the wine. Otherwise, you'll be experiencing the apple and Sauvignon Blanc all over again, and no one wants that.

This is why one of my favorite wines is Riesling. Riesling has a little bit of sweetness, so it goes with just about everything.

A Sugary Aside

Don't get the perception of sweetness confused with the actual amount of sugar in a wine. Riesling, or even the Riesling that you previously tasted, has nowhere near the same amount of sugar as juice or soda.

Coca-Cola, for example, has 10 to 20 times as much sugar as Riesling. Chilled, the Coke tastes sweet but doesn't give you a toothache. But have you ever tried Coca-Cola that's at room temperature? You can taste the sugar a lot more. Keep this in mind when you're drinking wine.

Also, when we talk about the sugar in most wines, we're talking about a little, little bit of sugar. But sugar is the taste to which everyone is most sensitive, so a little bit of it goes a long way.

The other thing that Coke has, and this applies to Champagne as well, is bubbles. The bubbles increase the perception of acidity in any liquid. If you have a flat Coke, versus a Coke with bubbles, the Coke that is flat will seem a lot sweeter. With bubbles, not as sweet.

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Or think of sparkling water. It can taste almost bitter, albeit super refreshing, compared to flat water.

In Champagne, once again, the bubbles increase the perceived acidity. Which brings us back to talking about that wedding cake…

Taste Wine and Food: Sauvignon Blanc and Lemon

Let's return to our tasting: It's time for the lemon with the Sauvignon Blanc.

Focus on both the taste of the wine in your mouth and the aftertaste. Is one better than the other? Are either that exciting?

The assertive Sauvignon Blanc seems to have suddenly gone shy. The super acidic lemon kills the acid in the wine, and, with neither acidity nor fruit, the wine becomes uninteresting and dull. However, the aftertaste is a little interesting, if only because it leaves a creamy texture in your mouth. Who knew that a Sauvignon Blanc was capable of ever feeling creamy?

You had the acidity in the fruit, you had some acidity in the wine, but was either really interesting? No. Not horrible, no one ran out the room, but I'd give this pairing a C.

Taste Wine and Food: Sauvignon Blanc and Cheddar Cheese

Technically, we don't even have to try the cheddar. We can learn from our past with the Riesling and make some educated guesses: the cheese will be too rich, too big and too heavy for the delicate Sauvignon Blanc. As with the Riesling, the cheese will just make the wine disappear.

But go ahead and try this pairing anyway. Is it any different from the Riesling? Taste again: Sauvignon Blanc's herbal qualities will be more pronounced with the cheese than without.

Pairings for Sauvignon Blanc

Let's start with something classic: Sauvignon Blanc with oysters. Too predictable? How about scallops with beurre blanc and herbs? The wine itself had some herb flavors to it, so we're creating a bridge between the food and the wine, which makes the pairing more interesting. Sage chicken is another good choice for the same reasons.

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CHARDONNAY

Taste Wine and Food: Chardonnay and Apple

Now it's time to pair our foods with the Chardonnay. Cleanse your palate and then move on to the apple.

This pairing can go in so many directions. If you've purchased a really crisp apple without a lot of fruit, it could balance with the fruit in the Chardonnay and achieve a B. If you're tasting a juicy, fruity apple, it may completely overwhelm the fruit in the wine, leaving you with a bitter taste in your mouth. Literally. The fruity apple can also play up the oak tannins in a Chardonnay, leaving your mouth feeling a little dry.

Also, if your Chardonnay has a fair amount of oak to it, you might feel like you have a mouthful of wood chips instead of wine. Few people I know want to pay extra for an oaky Chard and then have it dissolve into wood chips.

Taste Wine and Food: Chardonnay and Lemon

Before you taste the lemon with the Chard, look back at the Component Interaction chart. According to the chart, the acid in the lemon is going to pump up the fruit in the Chardonnay.

Now taste the lemon with the wine. What happened? Does the Chardonnay taste better with the lemon than with the apple? Has your faith in Chardonnay been restored? Maybe this pairing isn't cause for huge celebration, but it's pretty decent. I'd give it a B.

Taste Wine and Food: Chardonnay and Cheddar Cheese

Now things are about to get really interesting. Look at your Component chart again. What should you expect to happen with this pairing? Now go ahead and taste.

After the apple and the lemon, the cheese brings the wine back into balance. The fat and the salt in the cheese push down the tannin in the oak a little and coat your mouth, so you're left with some fruit. This isn't an amazing combo, but it's not bad. For me, it's a solid B.

Keep this in mind when you taste the reds with the cheese. Everyone is always touting cheese and red wine, cheese and red wine, but cheese can work really well with white wines. Cheddar and Chardonnay, pretty decent. Sauvignon Blanc and herbed goat cheese, pretty spectacular. (Ok, it's true that we didn't taste that pairing here, but trust me on this one.)

Taste Wine and Food: Chardonnay and Walnut

If you're tasting with a group of friends, this is when the pairings can start garnering mixed reviews. Write down your own thoughts and then talk with each other—someone else might be tasting flavors that you're not, and vice versa.

Go ahead and taste the walnut. The skin of the walnut may be a little bitter, but then the fat in the nut is a little lush. Now sip some wine. What's starting to happen here?

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For me, this combination is in the A to B range, though I've had students who've scored it a D and never looked back. Before you jump to any judgments, though, pay attention to how the fat and the tannin in the nut work with the wine.

Chardonnay aged in oak barrels is lush, with vanilla, toast and nut undertones. The fat in the walnut will play with that lushness, and the food and wine will amp each other up. Plus, the walnut will create a flavor bridge with the nutty, toasty overtones in the Chardonnay. But the fun doesn't stop there. The fat in the walnut also cuts some of the acid in the wine, drawing out a little more fruit.

If you have a piece of nut with lots of skin, you may be wondering what all the fuss is about. This is because walnut skin is slightly tannic. Paired with a Chardonnay with a lot of new oak (and, thus, a fair amount of tannin), the nut will pump up the sensation of tannin in your mouth.

Instead of experiencing the lush, fatty Chard-and-walnut combo, you may be left with a dry mouth. If that's the case, try the pairing again, this time choosing a piece of walnut without skin.

Taste Wine and Food: Chardonnay and Beef

White wine and red meat? What kind of pairing is this? Well, educational if nothing else. Go ahead and taste these two together.

The tannins in the oak-barrel aged Chardonnay can stand up to fat, just as red wines with their grape skin tannins do. But even a full-bodied white goes better with lighter meats, and cold beef is lighter than hot beef. It's not an amazing combo, but it's in the C to B range for most people.

Pairings for Chardonnay

Borrowing from the Sauvignon Blanc, the sage chicken would go well with the Chardonnay, too. The chicken has a bit more weight than oysters or scallops, so it could afford to go with a wine heavier than Sauvignon Blanc, such as Chardonnay. Salmon steak would also work well. Salmon is a fairly weighty fish, so it can stand up to a weighty Chardonnay.

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PINOT NOIR and CABERNET SAUVIGNON
Taste the Reds: Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon

Now it's time to move on to the reds. We've got a Pinot Noir and a Cabernet Sauvignon. Let's go ahead and look at both of them together. Look at the color of each wine. Which is darker? The Cabernet Sauvignon, of course.

Color and tannin go hand in hand. Both come from the skins of the grape, so deeper color usually means more tannin, and lighter color, less tannin. Therefore, just by looking at these two wines, you can assume that the Cabernet Sauvignon is going to have more tannin than the Pinot Noir.

Also, Pinot tends to be the lightest in tannins of all of the reds. The grapes are nice and plump with medium-dark skins. By comparison, Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are really, really tiny and really, really dark. Think of the ratio of that little Cab berry (the pulpy inside) compared to the skin. There's not a lot of that pulp compared to all of the dark grape skin, so you're getting a lot of skin (and color and tannin) from each berry; way more skin than from a bigger, plumper Pinot grape.

When you're done studying the color of the wines, go ahead and sniff them. Pinot tends toward scents of strawberry and raspberry, while Cab may remind you of dark plums with a hint of vanilla. In terms of intensity, there's no competition: the Cab smells bigger, heavier, riper.

Now taste both wines. The Pinot will taste like it smells: bright red fruit, raspberry and strawberry. There may be a little bit of dryness signaling tannin, but nothing overwhelming.

The Cab on the other hand…whoa Nellie! The finish leaves the mouth feeling very dry and a little furry. There are a lot of tannins in this wine, and the fruit is dark, ripe, tinged with vanilla just like the nose. The Cab definitely has a bigger body than the Pinot Noir; it's a heavier wine. It usually has a little more alcohol, too. Check the label and see if this is the case with the reds you've chosen.

Pairings for Pinot

The Pinot and Chard are very, very different wines. The flavors are different, the weights are different. So you're dealing with two completely different types of food when it comes to pairing a main course with these wines.

For the Pinot, I wouldn't be afraid to offer it alongside the Chardonnay and salmon that was mentioned above. Some people will prefer the Chardonnay, others the Pinot, but you'll be hard pressed to find someone who doesn't sing the praises of one pairing or the other. Don't forget: a rich, oaky Chard can actually be heavier than a light, delicate Pinot. These two wines are swing wines, and they actually go with a lot of different types of foods because they're truly mid-range.

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PINOT NOIR

Taste Wine and Food: Pinot Noir and Apple

Now it's time to move onto the Pinot pairings. Get out those apple slices…

After all that talk about the flexibility of Pinot Noir, this combo is less than ideal. Sure, Pinot goes well with that weighty, slightly fatty salmon, but don't add a sweet mango chutney to the fish. The chutney will act just like the apple and kill this wine!

Why is that? The fruit in the apple (or a mango sauce) is too much for the delicate fruit in the wine. That pretty little strawberry flavor is absolutely crushed by the stronger fruit, and the wine tastes hard.

Taste Wine and Food: Pinot Noir and Lemon

You can skip the lemon if you want because you already know what's going to happen: the acidity in the lemon will crush the fruit, and your poor Pinot will taste tart and hard.

Taste Wine and Food: Pinot Noir and Cheddar Cheese

Let's go for the cheddar and the Pinot. Right away you'll notice that the fruit is back. Big time. The Pinot doesn't have that much tannin to it, and the fat in the cheese softens the acid in the wine, so the wine almost seems a little sweet. Even if this isn't a perfect pairing, it is neat to see how the balance between fruit and acid has so drastically shifted.

Once you've gotten past the fruit explosion, taste again for earthiness, a classic trait of Pinot Noir. There is usually a little earthiness in cheddar that will create a flavor bridge with the wine.

Taste Wine and Food: Pinot Noir and Walnut

The walnut is going to interact with the Pinot in much the same way as it did with the Chardonnay. There's the lush fat that cuts the wine's acid a little, but the walnut's slight bitterness can make the wine seem more tannic or bitter, too. Don't forget the flavor bridge--there's an earthiness to the walnut that matches the earthiness of the Pinot.

Taste Wine and Food: Pinot Noir and Beef

This pairing may make you think back to the cheddar cheese. As with cheese, the fats and proteins in meat combine to tone down the tannin in wine. If this beef were heated, the liquid fats and robust aromas would make it seem richer and heavier. Instead, when cooled, the meat seems less fatty and more salty.

For me, the pairing of cold beef with Pinot doesn't work. The salt combines with the tannin in the wine and pumps up that bitter sensation. But other folks aren't bothered by the salt, so they get the neutralizing action of the fat and the protein, and this combo works well for them.

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More Pairings for Pinot Noir

Pinot goes beautifully with duck. Try it with duck confit and fried potatoes for a casual French meal, or get serious and wrap the duck in bacon to add some fat and protein. The acid and tannin in the Pinot will rise to the occasion.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Taste Wine and Food: Cabernet Sauvignon and Apple

Now it's time to move onto Cabernet Sauvignon and… oh dear. Can we really pair this wine with a green apple?

Give it a try. The wine tastes tart and green, and is hard on the finish. Now take a bite of apple. The wine makes the fruit seem sweet, perhaps even more perfumed than before.

Skip the lemon. This combo does have the potential to make people run screaming from the room.

Taste Wine and Food: Cabernet Sauvignon and Cheddar Cheese

We know that the fat in the cheddar cheese is going to make the wine taste better, but what are the exact sensations?

For starters, the fruit comes forward more, helped along by the decrease in oak tannins. The fat and proteins also reduce the grape skin tannins, so the finish is softer and your mouth isn't left feeling dry and astringent. But the cheddar is heavy, almost gooey in your mouth as you chew it. The cheese might be too rich, preventing you from tasting the nuances of the wine and making it seem simpler than it actually is. You might drop the score from an A to a B, or this might be a magic pairing for you.

Taste Wine and Food: Cabernet Sauvignon and Beef

This is the pairing that everyone's been looking forward to, the no brainer. But think about how the cold meat and the wine actually interact.

Do you taste more fruit or less than when you paired the Cab with cheese? The wine will probably feel more in balance, back to itself again, when paired with the meat. But there are always a few people who liked the Cab and cheddar combo better. They miss that super-forward fruit.

However, you'll notice that the tannins and acid are in much better balance with the fat. And the meat is rich enough to bring out the wine's lushness.

Does your meat have salt or pepper on it? Salt will, as we know, amp up the tannins; ground black pepper will tone them down. So, even innocuous seasonings make a difference.

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Pairings for Cabernet Sauvignon

Everyone wants to pair Cab with beef, steaks especially. And why not? The juicy meat, with its fat and umami flavors, brings out the wine's lush fruit and oak. But go ahead and think outside the beef box.

Try a bottle of Cab with lamb, spare ribs or Parmigiano. If you're looking for something more exotic, buffalo and venison work.

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TASTE THE DESSERT FOODS

Taste Food: Sugar Cookie and Chocolate

Finally, it's time for dessert. We have a sugar cookie and a piece of dark chocolate. They both have sugar; they both have fat. What's the difference between these two? Chocolate.

Some people love chocolate and red wine, others hate it. But to understand these strong reactions, we have to look at what chocolate has in it.

There's no doubt that chocolate has lots of sugar. If you've got a wine without much fruit, it will be crushed by chocolate's sweetness. If the wine has some chocolate flavor to it, you'll have a flavor bridge, but the wine could also taste a little tart or tannic and drying.

Even if you have a wine with little sugar, you can still make it pair with really sweet food, whether that's fruit or chocolate. Higher alcohol increases the perception of sweetness, so a wine with only a little sweetness but high alcohol has a better chance of getting along well with dessert than a low alcohol wine.

TASTE THE DESSERT FOODS WITH WINE

SUGAR COOKIE
Taste Wine and Food: Riesling and Sugar Cookie

Now it's time to put the sugar cookie and the Riesling together. You can taste the sugar cookie; you can taste the wine. Neither is being crushed; neither tastes overly tart. Maybe the wine even brings out the buttery finish on the cookie. But both seem so much sweeter together than alone.

Taste Wine and Food: Sauvignon Blanc and Sugar Cookie

For the sake of comparison, try the sugar cookie with the Sauvignon Blanc.

It's a completely different sensation than the Riesling. The wine is too dry and tart; it's completely disjointed. And the fruit has disappeared.

You can prevent pairings such as these by adhering to one rule: always serve a wine sweeter than the dessert. You don't need it to be syrup; even sweet wines should have good acidity to keep them bright and interesting. But a wine that's sweeter than your dessert won't taste acidic with the food.

CHOCOLATE
Taste Wine and Food: Cabernet Sauvignon and Chocolate

Dark chocolate isn't as sweet as milk chocolate, and tends to pair better with wine. Once again, it's a function of sugar—how do the sugars in wine work with the sugar in chocolate? The more sugar in the chocolate, the more likely that a wine will taste tart or astringent.

Now, go ahead and taste.

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For some, the chocolate lifts the wine, magnifying the flavors in both dessert and wine. You might even taste chocolate-covered cherries when you first sip the Cab, as the chocolate picks up on the fruit.

For others, the wine is much too bitter. The sweetness in the chocolate only brings out the tannins in the wine. You're left with a dry, furry mouth and no chocolate. What kind of a deal is that?

If you're feeling brave, taste the chocolate with the Riesling. Do you like this more or less? It's probably fairly similar to the sugar cookie. But, maybe you like how the sweeter wine interacts with the chocolate, or maybe you're already rooting around for a different kind of chocolate---milk instead of dark, or a dark chocolate with less sugar. It really comes down to personal preference—and maybe a little experimentation—to find a great chocolate and wine pairing.

Pairings for Chocolate

If you want to pursue more chocolate pairings, I recommend picking a red Zinfandel. Red Zins can be real fruit bombs, with high alcohol that makes them seem sweeter, and really, really ripe fruit. While they may drown out other foods, chocolate has the fat and sugar to stand up to the Zin and even complement it.

CONCLUSION: Remember to Ask "Why?"

I hope you've enjoyed the tasting.

You may now remove your safety goggles and lab coats.

Remember to enjoy wine and food and, most importantly, the company and the conversation. But remember to think about the pairings and figure out why they work – or don't.

If you have any comments or questions, e-mail us at wss@mshanken.com.

Cheers!

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