

Wine & Seafood

A match made in paradise

BY ROGER MORRIS



Consider a solitary shrimp, destined to be a part of your lunch or dinner. Which wine should you drink with it? It depends on a number of factors. Will the shrimp be steamed, baked, sautéed in butter, or coated in spicy batter and deep-fried? Is it to be served with pasta, rice, couscous or steamed vegetables? Is the preferred sauce pesto, tomato or oil and vinegar?

Generally, the classic rule of pairing seafood with white wine still holds true. Since most seafood is generally mild in flavor and tender in texture, it benefits from a dinner companion that is also mellow without robust tannins, such as most white wines.

But even when the choice of a white wine seems to be the obvious answer, the question becomes which white wine? White wines can range from very aromatic and fruity, such as Riesling and Viognier, to those with more neutral flavors, such as Chardonnay and Trebbiano. Whites can also be very aggressive in acidity and green fruitiness, such as New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs, or mellower, such as Alsace Pinot Blancs. And there are times when a white wine clearly isn't the answer, and a red, rosé or sparkling wine (of either color) may be a better pairing.

If this sounds complicated, it can be but we can make a few generalizations to help you find pleasing pairings. Shellfish, especially raw oysters, go well with lighter, leaner wines such as Muscadet and Chablis. White fish such as cod and freshwater filets are usually well-served alongside a Chardonnay. With meatier fish such as salmon and tuna, look for a lighter Pinot Noir or a rosé. And sparkling wines with their cleansing bubbles go well with practically any seafood dish.

Beyond these basics, searching for the best wine and food pairings should be a pleasant learning game, not an overwhelming task. In fact, even for wine experts, the best pairing of food to wine isn't always important. Most days of the week, wine fanatics will drink the wines on hand with whatever is being fixed for dinner. It's not unusual to see owners of châteaux in Bordeaux match a filet of fish with red wine from their vineyards.

However, what most wine and food lovers strive for is getting a good match—hopefully the best match—when they're fixing a special dinner or having a party where good food and wine are part of the event. Then it's worth some thought and effort.

When pairing seafood and wine, choose a bottle the way you would a side dish.

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At those times, there are several things that enter into the comparison equation:

- The type of seafood that is the base of the meal
- The manner in which it is cooked or prepared
- Sauces and spices used
- Other kinds of food on the plate, either as part of the course or as side dishes

Experts in pairing, such as professional sommeliers, first determine the primary elements within a dish, such as flavors, degree of heat, spices, texture and acidity or fat content. Then they rely on their memory of wines tasted to best choose one that will either complement the food by extending its taste or by balancing it with a gentle contrast.

Even everyday home cooks make decisions like this all the time when choosing side dishes to go with their main courses. “I’m fixing hamburgers, so I’ll put on some French fries.” Or, “I’m fixing stir-fried chicken. Rice will go well with that.” The best way to approach pairing wine with seafood is not to search for a complicated algorithm, but instead to think of the wine as a side dish for the main course.

I asked Sandy Block, a Master of Wine who is the beverages buyer for the Legal Sea Foods chain of restaurants, to explain how a pro goes about pairing seafood dishes from his restaurant’s menu with selections from his wine list. What would he suggest to the customer who chooses, for example, blackened raw tuna sashimi from the menu?

“My first choice would be the DeLoach Block 1950 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 2014,” Block says. “This is a wine that I specifically blend with winemaker Brian Maloney to express soft cherry and spice flavors. Its silky texture and rounded red fruit are great foils for the raw tuna—meaty, but low in tannins, a quintessential ‘red wine with fish.’ Alternatively, I would choose [a Basque Spanish wine] Txomin Etxaniz Getariako Txakoli Rosé 2016. It’s a minerally, lightly spritzy, bone-dry rosé with vibrant red berry notes that cuts through the luscious raw tuna.”



This highlights that meaty fish, such as tuna and salmon, particularly if they are served rare or even raw, go well with a red wine that is lightly fruity but has good acidity and low tannins—the classic definition for a Pinot Noir or a rosé of substance.

And what would he pair with that old standby, lobster bisque?

“The Paumanok North Fork Chenin Blanc 2014, because the creamy, umami-rich bisque is wonderful with a white wine that features some acid, along with roundness of texture, and layered fruit,” Block says. “The pear, cinnamon and understated honey notes of this dry Long Island Chenin balance nicely with the hint of sherry that is used in preparing the bisque. Or, alternatively, the Ramey Cellars Russian River Valley Chardonnay 2014. In this case the nutty, almond-like flavors and soft apple fruit echo some of the same notes in the bisque.”

Rich, creamy seafood dishes such as bisques, chowders and casseroles pair swimmingly with a big white—a Chenin Blanc, including Vouvray, or an American Chardonnay that can stand up to them.

As Adam Petronzio, wine director at New York City’s Oceana Restaurant, points out, Champagne and other sparkling wines go so well with seafood that there is a temptation to use them all the time. For example, Petronzio takes a look at three of Chef Bill Telepan’s raw seafood selections—yellowtail sea urchin with horseradish; tuna tartare with pickled mushrooms, cipollini onion and bottarga; and halibut ceviche with lemon drop pepper and radishes—and chooses to pair them with an American sparkling wine, Caracciolo California Brut 2009.

“Champagne always makes me happy,” Petronzio says, “and I believe that Champagne [or sparkling wine] goes with everything. Chef Bill’s raw selection is very diverse, boasting lots of strong flavor profiles. Champagne is the perfect accompaniment. But sometimes I want more fruit with the strong flavors of the raw selections. Caraccioli Brut 2009 from Santa Lucia Highlands plays along with the tartares, crudos and ceviches without masking the flavors.”

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Petronzio also sings the praises of Chardonnay, a frequent pairing with lobster dishes such as Oceana’s lobster Bolognese spaghetti with light herbs, shallot garlic and tomato broth. Here he chooses the Hubert Lamy “Les Frionnes” Saint-Aubin 2014, a white Burgundy.

“Hubert Lamy’s wines represent what I love so much about Burgundy,” Petronzio says, “balance, finesse and elegance. This wine holds up well against the prominent flavors of the dish—Chardonnay is a classic pairing with lobster.”

But Laura Cole, owner, chef and wine buyer of 229 Parks Restaurant & Tavern in Denali, Alaska, where seafood is always a large component of the menu, has one warning about Chardonnay and seafood: Watch the oak. “I really like Chardonnay,” chef Cole says, “but I shy away from oaky Chardonnay because it can fight the delicate flavor of most seafood.”

Beyond Pinot Noir and salmon, are there other good red wine and seafood pairings? For Legal Sea Foods’ Faroe Island salmon coated in almonds with a white wine and butter sauce, Block says he often looks to a South African wine called Pinotage, a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsault. The Beeslaar Stellenbosch Pinotage 2014, he says, “is a mellow, lush, velvety red, beautifully extracted Pinotage that would not be too overpowering for this salmon dish. This one has an earthy, spicy edge that leaves the palate refreshed.”

Chef Cole says that spot prawns, a popular West Coast shellfish, can go with a number of wines, “even a Cabernet Sauvignon.” For Oceana’s grilled swordfish with pickled lemon, escarole and black pepper yogurt, Petronzio recommends a popular Spanish red, the CVNE Rioja Gran Reserva 2010. “Contrary to common belief, I believe that red wine and fish pair perfectly together,” he says. “CVNE is a classic Rioja with soft tannins, dark fruit and spice notes that pick up on the black pepper.”

There is another point Petronzio makes with this selection, one that those Bordeaux wine growers adhere to when they serve their reds with fish—choose an older vintage as he does with the seven-year-old 2010. As wine ages, it becomes mellow, both in its flavors and its structural aggressiveness. Choosing a tannic, fruity red for this dish would be a mistake.

Here’s another thing to keep in mind about pairing wines with seafood: Don’t be afraid to ask for help at the store. The staff has tasted almost every wine in the store before ordering it into inventory, and therefore has good knowledge of the great array of flavors they have on hand. And don’t hesitate to rely on your own memory. You remember the tastes of lemon sole or lightly grilled crab cakes or succulent sushi. Now search your memory for the liquid side dish—a bottle of wine—that best goes with any one of them. ▮

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BRONZED ALASKA SALMON IN A BASIL-WINE SAUCE

Makes 2 servings, Recipe and photo courtesy of Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute

WINE SUGGESTION: Oregon or California Pinot Noir

- 2 Alaska Salmon steaks or fillets (4 to 6 ounces each), fresh, thawed or frozen
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- blackened seasoning, to taste
- 2 tablespoons Chardonnay

Sauce

- 1 teaspoon chopped garlic
- ½ cup Chardonnay
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- salt, to taste
- 1 lemon wedge

1. Rinse any ice glaze from frozen salmon under cold water; pat dry with paper towel. Heat a heavy nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Brush both sides of salmon with oil. Place salmon in heated skillet and cook, uncovered, about 3 to 4 minutes, until browned. Shake pan occasionally to keep fish from sticking.
2. Turn salmon over and sprinkle with blackened seasoning, to taste. Cover pan tightly and reduce heat to medium. Cook an additional 6 to 8 minutes for frozen salmon or 3 to 4 minutes for fresh/thawed fish. Cook just until fish is opaque throughout. Remove the pan from the heat and add the 2 tablespoons wine. Swirl the salmon fillets in the pan, uncovered, until liquid is evaporated. Remove salmon from the pan and keep warm.
3. Place the same skillet back on medium-high heat and add the garlic and ½ cup wine. Simmer wine until reduced by two-thirds. Add the cream and basil; simmer sauce until thickened, about 2 minutes. Season with salt and add the juice of the lemon wedge.