



BEEF & WINE

A GUIDE
TO PAIRING
FOR PROFIT

ADVICE FROM
World-Renowned
Wine Expert

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SELL MORE BEEF. SELL MORE WINE.

The marriage of beef and wine used to be as easy as steak and something rich and red. While that idea remains a favorite classic, today's menus offer a brave new world of possibilities—and today's beef might mean anything from Thai steak salad

to fajitas or Tuscan braised short ribs. As for wine, thousands of brands are now available in the United States. At no other time in history have the possibilities of pairing beef and wine been so thrilling, so delicious, so limitless. So how can you make sense of all the options?

The truth is, there are no rigid rules. Extraordinary flavor affinities do exist, but they are not the predictable result of scientific principles. Rather, great matches are born from instinct, imagination, and a lot of fun experimentation. And when they happen, “wow” moments of beef and wine are like sensory fireworks. From a taste

*More than
50% of
full-service
restaurants
surveyed say
steak has a
positive impact
on the sale
of wine.*

“2007 Volumetric
Assessment of Beef in
Foodservice” study by
Technomic, Inc.*

perspective, they're the equivalent of $1 + 1 = 3$.

One thing is certain. Beef and wine share more than just flavor affinities. They're both about experience. More than most foods and most beverages, beef and wine are sensual and deeply rooted in pleasure and satisfaction. That adds up to a simple, powerful strategy for building check averages: sell more beef, sell more wine. It's a synergy that can give a boost to two of the highest-ticket items on your menu. And the more you know about pairing, the better it works.

*Funded by The Beef Checkoff

BEEF & WINE: PRINCIPLES OF PAIRING

After years of pairing different beef dishes and hundreds of different wines, here are some of the principles I've found:

- **Pair great with great, humble with humble.** Aged prime rib is far more satisfying when it's served with a wine of commensurate greatness. Similarly, pot roast feels just right with a juicy, humble wine.
- **Work with natural flavor affinities.** As any good cook knows, coffee and cream have an affinity for each other that coffee and basil do not. So trust your instincts when it comes to beef and wine. Beef's density and deep flavors have an affinity with rich, powerful wines. Fragile wines or extremely light-bodied ones may taste out of place.
- **Complex wines go with simple preparations.** Many of the greatest bordeaux or California cabernet sauvignons are best enjoyed with a high-quality but simple dish, such as a fine steak.
- **Robust seasonings require robust wines.** Beef dishes with bold/spicy/hot flavors are perfect for spicy, big-flavored wines. Which is one reason many Latin beef dishes work so well with zinfandel, and why certain "pyrotechnic" Asian beef dishes with lots of chile heat or piquancy from ingredients like garlic and ginger are so good with outrageously fruity gewürztraminers.
- **Watch "weight" when pairing.** Besides the intensity of the flavor, the sheer weight of the beef dish and the weight (or "body") of the wine should be in harmony. A light-bodied wine will feel about as weighty as skim milk in your mouth; a full-bodied wine will feel like half-and-half. If the beef dish is hearty and substantial, it will work best with a wine that's full in body.
- **Fruitiness in food and fruitiness in wine have natural synergy.** Dishes with a significant fruit component to them—a Moroccan tagine made with dried fruit, for example—often pair beautifully with fruity red wines like gamay (the grape that makes beaujolais) or Australian shiraz.

- **Tannin can be beef's best friend.** Tannin is a compound that comes from grape skins and seeds. Some grape varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, petite sirah and nebbiolo, are naturally high in this compound. Tannin acts as the wine's structure, and wines that are high in tannin are usually described as "big." Tannin tastes bitter (like dark chocolate or espresso) and feels dry (like fine-gauge sandpaper). High-tannin wines taste best with dense foods that are rich in both protein and marbling (like beef), which offset this bitterness and dryness.
- **Don't forget rosés.** Rosé wines, often overlooked, are wonderful with a surprising range of beef dishes. Rosés have the earthy, bold red-fruit character of red wine and the freshness and acidity of white wine. This combination is an enormous asset with certain beef dishes—especially those that include highly pungent ingredients, such as garlic. In the Mediterranean, for example, aioli and other garlicky foods are always served with a chilled dry rosé.
- **Balance salty with sweet.** Salty foods dull the flavor of many wines, making them taste neutral. This is an important consideration for beef dishes seasoned with a significant amount of soy sauce. Acidity can counterbalance a food's saltiness, but another brilliant strategy is to juxtapose that saltiness with a touch of sweetness. An Asian beef stir-fry seasoned with soy sauce, for example, is terrific with an off-dry gewürztraminer.

BEEF & WINE: PAIRING Q&A

1. *Beef and wine are a classic match. What makes them taste so good together?*

Beef and wine have an undeniable affinity for one another. The profound, meaty, complex, rich flavor of beef is complemented by a beverage that's equally complex, savory and rich. Nothing fits the bill better than wine. There's also the all-important issue of texture. Mouthfilling concentrated wines provide just the right counterbalance to beef's dense texture. Like the perfect gastronomic seesaw, a sip of the wine makes you want another bite of the beef, and a bite of the beef makes you want a sip of the wine.

2. Which wine varietal overall is most “beef flexible”?

Cabernet sauvignon. Among the most powerful and concentrated red varietals, cabernet sauvignon can also be elegant at the same time. For its part, beef has a flavor that’s bold and yet refined at the same time. In this way, cabernet “mirrors” beef, creating a whole that’s greater than the sum of the parts. Cabernet sauvignon also possesses a considerable amount of tannin, which gives it the structure and intensity to pair well with beef.

3. Does the cut of beef matter when choosing a wine?

Yes. Certain cuts of beef like flank steak and chuck are often very flavorful. They need a wine that’s bold and lipsmacking. Simple but fruity merlots and zinfandels work well, as do most inexpensive reds from Australia—which are super-fruity and usually soft as velvet. “Middle meat” cuts from the rib and loin—like tenderloin, strip steak and prime rib—are at their best with more sophisticated, complex (expensive) wine.

4. How do seasonings and spices impact a wine choice?

Seasonings and spices often act as a bridge to wines. As a simple example, sprinkling beef with some cracked black pepper helps the dish marry well with syrah/shiraz, which has a black pepper-like flavor. Herbs in a beef dish can underscore the hint of herbal flavor in many cabernet sauvignons and bordeaux. The seasonings to be careful with are hot chiles, which can make a wine taste hollow. Chiles need a cushion of sweetness to land on, so fiery-hot beef dishes often do best with a white wine that has a bit of residual sugar. Wines with a lot of oak flavor often need a bridge to connect them to beef. Toasted nuts, brown butter and sesame oil are all excellent bridges to oaky chardonnay.

5. What about cooking method?

Cooking method, too, should influence wine choice. One of the best American wine and food marriages is grilled steak and a big, oak-aged cabernet sauvignon. The flame-seared flavors and crusty texture imparted by grilling are echoed by the toasty oak of the wine. Similarly, soft, braised beef dishes taste best with wines that feel soft and seamless on the palate. That’s the principle behind beef stew and red burgundy (pinot noir).

6. Are white wines an option with beef?

Yes—depending on the dish, many white wines work very well, as do rosés. Thai beef salads and beef stir-fries are fantastic with minerally rieslings from Germany. Steak salads with greens and vegetables are terrific with sauvignon blancs, which have a “green” flair of their own. And with garlicky beef dishes, a dry rosé is a must-try experience.

7. How does marbling affect wine?

Since fat is a carrier of flavor, marbling gives beef richness. The more marbling the beef has, the more dense and concentrated the wine should be. A well-marbled piece of beef should not be served with a light-bodied wine, since the wine will taste frail next to all that beefy flavor. Instead, opt for a powerhouse—a wine that’s muscular enough to balance the richness.

8. If the wine is rare and expensive, what sorts of beef dishes would work best?

Simple, expensive ones. A beef dish with loads of ingredients and flavors happening all at once will take the limelight off the wine and make it taste neutral. A good rule of thumb is: The more expensive and rare the wine, the more you should opt for “luxury” cuts of beef (prime rib, tenderloin, ribeye and so on) and then prepare the meat utterly simply.

9. Are there a few best wine bets when the beef dish is humble (e.g., pot roast)?

One of the principles of good pairing is matching wines and foods of the same “status.” A simple pot roast doesn’t require a super expensive bordeaux. In fact, the two can feel wrong together. For example, you can pair humble, flavorful, no-fuss cuts of beef, like ribs, with humble, flavorful, no-fuss wines—juicy, inexpensive reds from Argentina, Spain or the south of France. However, when a fine New York strip or prime rib is being served, a more complex, expensive wine (such as a top-flight bordeaux or a great American cabernet) is definitely in order.

10. Last but not least, what’s the biggest “no-no” in beef and wine pairing?

The biggest mistake in pairing beef and wine is adding blue cheese to the dish. Blue cheese is one of the most powerfully pungent, salty and microbial foods. It makes most wines—red and white—taste dull and insipid. So save the blue cheese for dessert and serve it with a sweet fortified wine such as port.

UPSELLING TIPS

- Feature one or two wine recommendations on the menu, adjacent to beef menu items; consider one that's by the glass and one by the bottle.
- Conduct waitstaff tastings of great beef and wine pairings; the more your staff enjoys a pairing, the more likely they will be to sell it.
- Train staff to get in the habit of suggesting by the glass offerings with beef dishes, and provide plenty of descriptive language for them to bring the pairing to life: "We've got a really juicy, soft zinfandel that'll be perfect with that, for \$X a glass."
- Offer a taste of a by the glass wine when you bring the beef dish to the table. Tasting the wine with the beef dish is worth a thousand words and will likely lead to a sale.
- Offer wine flights of three or four small servings of wine so guests can experience the interplay of several wine flavors with their beef dish.
- Pair two different wines with two different beef cuts and offer as a small plate with wines to match.
- Invite winemakers to participate in special winemaker dinners focused on wine and beef dishes.
- Invest in supplemental education for your beverage manager so that he or she is well informed, can keep up with trends and is able to train staff to be comfortable suggesting beef and wine pairings.

Karen MacNeil is a writer, educator and winner of two James Beard awards. She is the author of the award-winning book The Wine Bible; the host of the Emmy Award-winning television show Wine, Food, and Friends; and the chairman of the Wine Studies Program at the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone.

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