

Taking the Heat

When paired with sushi or shaking beef, it takes a certain wine to hold its own. by Jordan Mackay

It's not hard to pair a Cabernet with, say, steak, but what happens when you add lemongrass and chiles to the mix? Now that ingredients such as ginger and fish sauce have become standard on high-end restaurant menus, I'm often asked the question, "What kind of wine pairs with Asian food?" But like the Zen koan, "What's the sound of one hand clapping?" I'm not sure there's really one right answer. It's more like you're supposed to sit in lotus position and ponder it.

white wines. "The issues are always the same—the sweeter the food, the more you want high-acid, low-alcohol, sweet wines," he says. "Every other kind of wine seems to clash."

The reason you won't see conventional California-style wines—especially reds, but even Chardonnays—is that they have a tendency to be high in alcohol with lots of oak. "They make food taste really bitter," says Ellenbogen. And don't shun sugar. "Dry wines just make spicy food seem hotter."



TASTE TEST: Ginger, lemongrass and chiles present a challenge for most wines.

The main problem is that Asian food is a sweeping category, encompassing many types of cuisine—from spicy Thai to mild Japanese—none of which have a history of being paired with wine.

Fortunately, there are some guidelines that can help. The fashionable answer to this dilemma is to pair Asian food with high-acid, off-dry wines. But are there other options? Not necessarily, says Mark Ellenbogen. "It's tough to reinvent the wheel here," he says. As the acclaimed wine director for the Slanted Door, Ellenbogen has developed a list that focuses on wines specific to chef Charles Phan's (see "10 Things You Should Know About Charles Phan," p. 68) Vietnamese menu, with a heavy dose of aromatic German and Austrian

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If you're looking to go beyond Riesling (the industry darling), try varietals such as Vouvray, Muscat and Gewürztraminer. They're more likely to be high in acid with a little sweetness. European regions are preferable, because they tend not to use much, if any, new oak on their wines. Another white grape to consider is Grüner Veltliner, a varietal rarely grown outside of Austria. Lean, with herbal and sometimes legume-like flavors, it makes some of the world's most flexible wines.

But in my opinion there's one wine that meets all the criteria: Champagne. It comes from one of the coolest regions in the Old World and almost always has a little sugar in it. Try it. Across the board, it works. x

What To Drink

Beyond Rieslings, here are some white wines you may not have considered that pair beautifully with a lot of different Asian dishes.

Domaine du Clos Naudin, Philippe Foreau Vouvray Sec 2000 (\$20), France

Made in France's Loire Valley from the Chenin Blanc grape, this wine sports fine acidity.

Willi Bründlmayer Grüner Veltliner, Kamptaler Terrasen 2002 (\$20), Austria

Notes of herbs, melon and spice. It could go head to head with green papaya salad—even kimchi.

Navarro Vineyards Gewürztraminer 2002 (\$16), Mendocino

Peach, spice, white pepper and lime flavors go well with dishes with rich coconut milk and lemongrass.

Heidi Schröck Muscat 2002 (\$18), Austria

Citrus, apricot, herbs and flowers and ringing with acidity.

Sushiwine (\$13), France

A bit sweet on its own; drink with a piece of spicy maguro maki, and you've got a match.

If there's anywhere to test out wine and Asian food pairings, it's at **Jai Yun** (923 Pacific Ave., 415-981-7438), a little restaurant on the outskirts of Chinatown. Owned and run by chef Nei' Chia Ji, it's developed a sort of cult status, and while short on atmosphere, it's long on astonishing cuisine. Bringing your own wine is fine (and there's no corkage fee).

Patrons are asked to choose prix-fixe dinners ranging from \$35 to \$60 per person. For that, you get an amazing array of fresh and unusual Nanjing-style dishes.

Bring Your Own Wine

Recently, a group of wine writers and I settled down to the \$45 dinner. With a **1999 Vouvray** sec (dry) from Foreau, we loved the delicate dish of sautéed abalone and egg whites. The masculine panache of **Bollinger Special Cuvée** handled a cold dish of cured beef as well as some spicy jellyfish and a floral, high-pitched Austrian **Heidi Schröck Muscat 2002** cooled the heat on the crispy eggplant with chile sauce.

It's best to go with at least six people; you're able to sample more dishes that way. Bringing along an assortment of white wines makes the experience all the more fun. —JM