



In Defense of...

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# Autochthonous Varieties

by Kirk Peterson

If it grows together, it goes together” is a commonly-repeated culinary proverb meant to act as advice for pairing regional food and wine. The rationale behind these words of wisdom is that a region’s cuisine and its wine have developed together synergistically over time, and thus inform and complement each other.

Luckily for food and wine lovers, this philosophy proves true far more often than not. It’s a much more useful and nuanced approach to the tired old white-with-fish-red-with-meat adage. Many of what are considered classic pairings—like duck and Pinot Noir (as in Burgundy), shellfish and Muscadet (coastal France), and tapas and Fino Sherry (Jerez, Spain)—are very much rooted in a “do as the locals do” ideological approach to matching food with wine.

Nowadays, our understanding of regional cuisine is more expansive and

detailed than ever. Where decades ago there were “Italian” restaurants, there are now acclaimed Friuli-Venezia Giulia restaurants and famous pizzerias named after highways in Campania with wine lists exclusively showcasing southern Italian labels.

Right alongside this renewed appreciation of micro-regional food has been an explosion in the availability of wines made from autochthonous, or native, grape varieties. Derived from the Greek words *auto* (one’s own) and *khthón* (earth), “autochthonous” represents a class of wine grapes that not only originate from a specific place, but are also almost exclusively associated with that area and have been for centuries (if not millennia).

The benefits to pairing these native wines with their indigenous cuisine are obvious. The greater the length of time any given food and wine pairing can coexist, the greater the

balance between them will be, as generations of diners, vintners, and chefs have tweaked them to their liking. Considering that wine is only made once a year, centuries are clearly preferable to decades—and millennia supersede centuries in regards to food and wine harmony.

But most importantly, these wines are celebrations of place, history, and culture. Many were not widely available on a global scale until recently—not because of lack of quality, but because they are specific, often made in preciously small quantities, and at times best enjoyed within their given context than outside of it. Beyond representing a refreshing authenticity and depth that is just now being revealed to a larger audience, they offer an opportunity to experience, with unprecedented precision and detail, what it *tastes* like to be there. And isn’t that the point? ■■