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Meet your match

Not sure about what wine to serve with dinner? Don't be afraid to go your own way.

THERE ARE PLENTY of rules when it comes to pairing wine with food. Most are helpful, but they fail to holistically tackle why we drink what we drink. Pairing wine is not just about considering the drink's partnership with food; it's about matching a bottle with the right people, on the right occasion, and for the right mood.

At a bottle shop

I'm having friends over for Christmas dinner. What should we drink?



A big dinner with friends is a great opportunity to try new makes and varieties of wine. You want to find versatile, food-friendly wines that don't cost a bunch of money. Choose a wide range of styles, too, to please every palate (if you don't like one, someone else will!). Look for some inexpensive bubbly, whites that balance fleshiness and strong acidity, a bright and dry rosé, and soft reds that are mild on tannin and oak. Let your favourite retailer guide the way, and commit to trying out new grapes. (Grignolino? Trousseau? Greco? Yes, please!)

Illustrations SIMON LETCH

At a restaurant

Can you pair a few glasses to go with our meal?



A restaurant is the place to get schooled on classic food and wine pairing. These rules are largely based on the structure of a wine: the non-flavour components that define it (like tannin, acid, sweetness and alcohol). Acid needs acid (tomato sauce and Chianti Classico); fat can be cut by tannin (steak and cabernet) or sugar (foie gras and Sauternes); richness in food needs to be matched by body and cut by acid (caviar and Champagne, lobster and chardonnay); saltiness can be cut with alcohol (olives and sherry, blue cheese and port); the list goes on... Next time you're out to eat, ask your sommelier to pair a half-glass of wine with each of your courses, and watch the magic unfold.

At a winery

When should we drink your wine?



Sometimes you already have the wine, and want to match it with the right food or occasion. A winery will be able to tell you how best to match their wine with food. Do not be afraid to ask when you buy. The occasion you plan to drink it on is just as important, though. That special bottle of syrah you got on your honeymoon to the Northern Rhône would be perfect with a burger, but you may not want to crack it open at a barbecue and watch it be guzzled down in plastic cups by your neighbours. Classify your purchases by "I want a taste", "I want a glass", and "I want half the bottle (and may even fight you for more!)", and stick to opening them when appropriate.