

WINE & SPIRITS  
*Master Notes*



# FINDING THE RIGHT MATCH

There are several golden rules to follow when matching wine with Southeast Asian food.

**M**atching wine and food is like trying to solve the meaning of life, or determining which hawker makes Singapore's best chicken rice: it's an endless argument with no correct answer, but that doesn't stop us from trying.

Restricting the food to Southeast Asian cuisine hardly helps limit the options, such is the multiplicity of styles, ingredients and flavours on offer here, from popiah to laksa, mee goreng to chicken rice.

Furthermore, many different dishes are often served simultaneously, and there's no way to find a single wine that will match everything on the table. Believe me, I've tried. However, there are a few golden rules that can help guide us towards an optimal experience.

## **PARTNERS IN WINE**

For the first rule, we need to define what an ideal wine and food match actually means. Simply put, it is finding the most complementary partnership of flavour – which therefore makes it a subjective and personal opinion. One person's harmony can be another person's misery, so the first rule is that we should be confident with our own preferences.

Even so, other rules offer guidance that should be universal. One of the most pertinent for Southeast Asian cuisine relates to spiciness. Supercharged chillies are a knockout blow for most wines, especially traditional European reds. Not only does the heat of the dish overcome any nuance of wine flavour, but it can exacerbate tannins, leaving your palate feeling astringent and unrefreshed.

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Hence the second rule: matching sweetness with spice. This is a tried and tested formula, and the usual suspects are single-variety white wines made from Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer and Muscat. The Alsace region of France offers the richest pickings for these grapes although they are not always made in a sweet style, so a little caution is needed when making a selection. Avoid anything labelled as “sec” or “trocken” (which means dry) and check the back label for any other mention of sweetness.

The third rule is to weigh up contrasting versus complementing elements. For example, take a slow-cooked, spicy beef rendang. Conventional wisdom would suggest a sweet white wine to go with the chilli, or a full-bodied red to match the richness of the meat. However, a light chillable red such as Beaujolais or Chinon might be just as good by providing contrast, with the refreshing, crisp red fruit cleansing the palate between mouthfuls of rich beef tastiness.

#### WHAT GROWS TOGETHER GOES TOGETHER?

As you can see, finding the ideal wine and food pairing is no easy feat – although some experts get tantalisingly close. *Wine and Food: The Perfect Match* is a book aiming to do exactly that, as envisaged by the head chef and the head of wine at 67 Pall Mall, the Members’ Club for wine lovers (disclaimer: I am working with the Singapore branch, due to open in late 2021).



#### FAILSAFE PAIRINGS

Here’s the tried version for matching wine with Southeast Asian cuisine. For the safest bet, anything sweet and sparkling usually works, with Prosecco and Moscato d’Asti both offering affordable options. For white, Vouvray demi-sec is a versatile semi-sweet style made from Chenin Blanc. For red, lightly-chilled Rioja is a good middle-ground option. Otherwise, you can’t go wrong with a cool, crisp beer!

One of the golden rules of wine and food matching is picking wine and food that come from the same region, following the logic that they must go together. This might work for Europe, where wine and food has co-evolved over many centuries – think Sancerre with Crottin de Chavignol or Cassoulet with Côtes du Rhône – but the logic doesn’t work so well in Southeast Asia.

That’s not to say the wine made here can’t be good quality; just that it isn’t made with local cuisine in mind. Most wine made in Thailand, Indonesia (Bali) and Vietnam is usually a modern, simple style resembling the powerful, fruit-driven styles made in Chile, Australia and California. The best type of match might be barbecued dishes such as satay or Korean bulgogi – but generally speaking, the local rule rarely works well with Southeast Asian wine and food.

#### STRIKE THE MATCH?

With so many factors involved, it’s little wonder that matching wine and food is more like abstract art than science. Whether you are looking for a simple midweek glugger, or picking a great vintage of your favourite SuperTuscan for a Friday night feast, the most important thing to remember is that your own taste buds never lie, and that the never-ending quest to find out what works is the fun part.

Writer, educator, Master of Wine and occasional pianist, Richard has worked in wine since 2001, first in London and now in Singapore as resident MW at 67 Pall Mall, the Members’ Club for wine lovers, opening later this year. He has written regularly for JancisRobinson.com since 2008, as well as judging, presenting, educating, tweeting and sometimes singing about all things vinous.



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