

Strike a Match

*Food and wine pairing advice from three of the East Coast's top wine professionals
by Kim Dietrich*

Selecting the perfect wine to go with your meal can be daunting, even for those who know a fair bit about the subject. But a little direction from those in the know – several of the East Coast's top sommeliers – can do a lot to boost your confidence.

Tips from the following wine experts will also point you in the right direction to expand your wine knowledge. Each of the sommeliers profiled here are certified through the Atlantic chapter of the Canadian Association of Professional Sommeliers (CAPS), a non-profit nationwide organization dedicated to promoting the sommelier profession.

For Newfoundland-based sommelier Jeremy Bonia, food and wine pairing often comes down to personal taste. His passion for wine began while working in a specialty wine store in Newfoundland where he discovered wine from many regions of the world. His wine knowledge has grown over the past five years while working as a sommelier at Bianca's Restaurant in downtown St Johns.

“I think the biggest mistake people make when trying to match food and wine is thinking that there is a proper wine for a particular food,” he says. “Most wine pairings are discovered by trial and error by sampling dozens of wines with a particular dish. While there is no right answer, there are some good suggestions from those of us who have gone through the rigours of searching for great matches.”

Though he admits it's unconventional, he enjoys Pinot Noir with salmon and trout. When he dines on cod – a Newfoundland staple – he prefers a lighter style white with good acidity like an Alsatian or German Riesling or a French or New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. With Italian cuisine, he'll often pour Chianti Classico or Riserva and when lucky enough to get his hands on some wild Labrador caribou, he might break out a Spanish Cabernet or a Chateauneuf-du-Pape. As a rule of thumb Bonia suggests trying lighter wines with lighter dishes. “If you really want to Shiraz or Cabernet with your fish, go ahead and enjoy,” he says. “Just don't expect to be able to taste the food.” He advises that when cooking always fall back on the dish's country of origin and pair it with a wine from the same place. In a pinch, check the back of the bottle for the winemaker's food pairing suggestions, as they know their own wines. To learn more, he urges people to attend tastings at local wine stores, shows and tasting dinners and most importantly, to simply drink more wine.

Linda Dickey recognizes the importance of constant learning when it comes to wine. She's a 2003 graduate of the Atlantic Provinces Sommelier program, the only professional wine and spirits training program in Atlantic Canada. Her job as general manager of Off Broadway Restaurant and 42nd Street Lounge in Charlottetown, PEI involves wine education, purchasing wine and maintaining wine cellars. She also attends every wine show she can, in particular, the Boston Wine Expo held in February and the Moncton Wine Festival in November.

Like Bonia, she advises matching light-bodied wines with light foods and fuller-bodied wines with heartier dishes. “Scallops in lemon butter would require a light delicate wine like a Riesling or Pinot Grigio, while a braised lamb dish would take a fuller wine like a Cabernet Sauvignon or a full-bodied California Zinfandel,” she says.

A classic Italian dish like spaghetti and meatballs pairs best with a Chianti – its acidity matches the tomato sauce – while a spicy seafood curry works well with a Gewürztraminer. “Two wines you can be safe to choose for food and wine pairing are Pinot Noir and Riesling,” she adds. “The acidity level in these wines make them very food friendly”.

Craig Michie is especially talented at pairing food and wine. As sommelier to Bishop’s Cellar, a wine, beer and spirits shop in downtown Halifax, he teaches wine appreciation courses, leads private tastings and helps customers choose appropriate wines. Last September, he represented Atlantic Canada at Canada's Best Sommelier competition in Montreal. The inaugural event brought together the winners of the provincial Best Sommelier titles to test their knowledge of wine, spirits and beer.

In Michie’s view, not all grapes are created equal. Often, a wine’s country of origin has a lot to do with its flavour, so matching food and wine regionally will work in your favour. However, some wines work well with a wide array of cuisines. “Sauvignon Blancs are great as they come in a variety of different styles,” he says. To complement the clean flavour of raw oysters, he suggests a minerally St. Bris from Chablis, while a goat cheese dish works well with the crisp fruit of a Sancerre.

On the red side of things, he prefers Pinot Noir for its versatility. “It varies enough in flavour and body to accommodate a full range of foods, again depending on its region and the winemaker’s influence,” he explains. “Light Pinots from burgundy work well with grilled fish, while bolder Burgundians can work well with a roasted red meat like rack of lamb.”

To further broaden your food and wine pairing knowledge, ask for advice when wine shopping and check out wine courses in your local area. And perhaps most importantly, don't be afraid to try your own combinations. “Keep in mind that there is so much to learn about wine and so much to taste,” says Dickey. “The one thing you learn early on is that you will never learn it all but you will sure have fun trying. Just keep practising and experimenting by trying new wines.”