

imbibe



## A world of food and wine

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### WINE

*Our palates have evolved to embrace cuisines from around the world. Isn't it about time we learned to match them properly with wine?*

Googling 'food and wine matching' brings up more than 72 million hits, and that's without counting the many variations of the phrase. Clearly we enjoy the notion of finding the perfect pairing, but why European foods, do things get a little repetitive?

'The traditional pairings are off-dry riesling, sauvignon blanc, unoaked wine or fruity rosé,' says Vidya Narasimhan, a freelance wine advisor for restaurants who specialises in Indian cuisine.

'Those are great, but I think there is time to be a bit unconventional now. Part of it comes from a very Western view of the world, and a Western view of the palate.'

At the introductory level of wine tasting, we learn there are six key taste components to inform our pairing decisions: salt, acid, sweet, bitter, fat and spice. For Indian and many other non-Western cuisines, spices play a big part.

Non-European dishes, lumped together and labelled as 'exotic,' tend to be paired with slightly sweet white wines to contrast the spiciness and make the dish more palatable. But palatable for whom?



'For the Western palate the food might be intensely spicy, but for a lot of people of Asian origin, it isn't,' says Narasimhan.

'It's a balance of fruit, acidity and mellow tannins (in wine) that bring out the spices of Indian food, and therefore having a white wine which is cold kind of dulls the experience. The richness of the food is what you need. Understanding this 'richness', and recognising that 'spice' is a rather uncomplimentary catch-all term, can allow us to expand our wine matches.

'It's very hard to generalise, but a lot of Indian cooking has dried herbs like cumin and coriander, like in garam masala. There is also fenugreek, dill and fennel seeds – very vegetal, herbal notes. Then there's turmeric and ginger. All of these have heat generation properties but they aren't necessarily heat,' explains Narasimhan.

Spice then, needs to be broken down into chilli spice on the one hand and culinary spices and herbs on the other.

### Keeping up with the curries

Mandy Mason, wine ambassador for BAME in Hospitality, is currently writing a wine and spice guide. She's another advocate for the industry building a greater understanding of the myriad flavours that exist.

'The way we eat in the UK has changed so dramatically, but the way we pair wines hasn't,' says Mandy.

'We are eating globalised dishes like curries, Thai food, Chinese etc – that we are cooking ourselves, not just going out to eat, and yet we don't really know how to match wines with them.'

Previously a food and beverage marketing manager, she argues that aside from everything else it makes financial sense for the industry to be more aware and inclusive.

'From a commercial angle, if the customers aren't comfortable with the product and you don't have diverse customers, you won't have a diverse industry.'

Mason continues: 'If I'm an Asian girl growing up eating Asian food two or three times a week at home, why don't I know what to pair with it?'

'There are four aisles in my local supermarket with wine that are automatically cut off to me at the moment [when I look at what to pair] with Indian food.'

The lazy language applied to non-Western cuisine also includes 'curry', says Mason. 'People don't think about what's in a curry, what's labelled as a curry, what countries make curry, and what flavours it has. You are stereotyping brown people's cuisine.'

'It's dismissive of a whole big part of the world's cuisine.'

Indeed, the term curry is used for dishes from places as far afield as Jamaica and Thailand.

So, how do we start to bridge the gaps in our knowledge of flavours and foods?

Gunpowder London is an Indian restaurant with two branches in the capital. Upon reopening in July, the owner switched its classic French and Italian wine list to a purely Iberian one.

For over 400 years, until 1961, the Indian state of Goa was subject to Portuguese colonial rule. Recognising this link, Gunpowder's owner could see the crossover of spices between the two cuisines, so cooking up dishes from Portuguese dishes with similar flavour profiles (for [more on Portuguese wines, take a look at this](#)).

### Mysteries of funk

However, flavours aren't the only consideration when it comes to matching. Non-European foods also tend to differ in their method of preparation and cooking.

'In most of our foods you will find something that is fermented, funky or pickled,' says Jay Morjaria, chef at the East Asian and Korean-inspired Jae restaurant.

'With Korean food there is a massive trend for natural wine. People associate Korean food with soju and beer, but I've found natural wine goes really well with those flavours.'

Morjaria continues: 'If you break it down, you have got umami, sour notes, these funky notes from the kimchi and the fermented beet paste.'

'There is a little bit of funk to the wine and little bit of funk to the food.'

This pairing with food characteristics, rather than flavour profile, is no different from matching something barbecued with wine that has smoky undertones.

Natural, and other non-conventional wines, were also the choice for wine consultancy firm Spencer & Smelskaya when brought in by West African restaurant Akoko to prepare a list.

'It was a really interesting challenge,' says sommelier and co-founder Ania Smelskaya.

'It was something I had no experience of, and I couldn't relate to any flavour combinations as something I have experienced before. It was a completely unique blend of different flavours.'

For Smelskaya, this led to a revelation.

'There is a difference with how certain spices affect your palate. Asian spices affect your front palate, so it's spicy at first,' she says.

'A lot of spices in west African cuisine are postponed spiciness. The spice kicks in at the end of your palate journey.'

The team found that wines with minerality first (instead of sweetness), and texture and tannin at the end (to balance and stand up to the spice), worked well – such as orange wines.

## A place at the top table

All this is not to say, however, that the onus should be entirely on the wine world to acquire knowledge about non-European cuisines.

The food industry, particularly writers and communicators, must help consumers familiarise themselves with a broader range of food cultures.

In a recent article for food newsletter *Vittles*, entitled 'decolonising restaurant criticism, part 2', the author Jonathan Nunn examines the diversity of restaurants reviewed by mainstream publications.

Collating the last 100 reviews before lockdown from the 10 most prominent UK food critics – who between them write for *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *Telegraph*, the *Financial Times* and the *Evening Standard* – Jonathan found 83% of the restaurants written about served Western cuisines (British, European, American, Antipodean).

Perhaps more shockingly though, more pasta restaurants had been reviewed than Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Japanese, East African, West African, and Caribbean restaurants. An unspoken hierarchy, with Western cuisine idolised above all others.

Reading these reviews allows us to visualise the theatre surrounding the act of going to a restaurant. Booking a table, dressing up, discussing with the sommelier which wine is best with which meal – it's upmarket sophistication, and so we establish a connection between Western food and refinement.

Non-Eurocentric food reviews, however, are much more likely to take the form of street food, pop-ups and takeaways. As such there is a disconnect between the food we see as worthy of taking the time to eat and the food that we don't.

Elaine Emmott is a chef of Jamaican heritage, who recently appeared on Netflix's *Crazy Delicious*. Talking about the lack of wine pairings for Caribbean cuisine, she says: 'It's assuming that black people don't drink wine and therefore they don't need to target us as a consumer. They don't think we are important enough or our food merits proper pairing, or merits a label on the back of the wine.'

With the food on our dinner plates becoming ever more diverse, it's time to re-evaluate the rules and outdated beliefs surrounding wine matching.

### Wine and food suggestions

#### Vidya Narasimhan

**Pairing:** Chickpea curry and other tomato-based curries with fruity reds such as mencia/merlot/Rioja crianza/sangiovese

*The freshness and fruit characteristics balance the spices, body and acidity while the mellow tannins complement the sauce, similar to Italian dishes.*

#### Mandy Mason

**Pairing:** Spiced lamb dishes with shiraz

*The wine isn't overly oaked, and so doesn't overwhelm the flavours of the dish, while the jamminess of the wine works with the spices in a similar way to mango chutney.*

#### Jay Morjaria

**Pairing:** Kimchi and natural gruner veltliner (Austria)

*The tropical, tree fruit and floral notes work with the complex flavours in the kimchi – which is a mixture of sweet, sour, spicy and salty. The acidity in the wine also matches the fermented characteristics.*

#### Ania Smelskaya

**Pairing:** Jollof rice with goat and natural saint laurent (Czech Republic)

*The method of cooking this dish means that there is a high level of smoky flavours. The wine has a touch of smokiness on the nose to match, but still has good acidity to cut through the fattiness of the meat.*