

## COMFORT WINES

What to drink with the spicy, fatty dishes we love

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Contra Costa Times

I can't tell my acorn from my butternut. For me, squash season is all about the Fry Daddy.

With the weather cooling, I give myself permission to indulge in the salty, fatty, deep-fried goodness of comfort foods. And thanks to a culinary scene that celebrates American cooking, I can enjoy an adult spin on mac 'n' cheese and wash it down with a balanced Pinot Blanc.

Why not a cold brew? Beer is great with comfort foods, but wine can be revelatory. Paired to cut richness, match mouth-feel and strengthen spice, wines with the right mix of fruit and acidity enliven dishes from fondue to fried chicken.

Serious sommeliers are indulging, too. Take Mike Pierce, wine director of San Francisco's Maverick. He gets giddy talking about the pairing of his lifetime: L. Mawby Brut Rose with chef Scott Youkilis' buffalo wings. (Instead of chicken, they use frog legs.)

"The spicy peppers in the hot sauce are astringent amino acids that cause bitterness and throw off wine," he says. "It's one of the hardest things to pair."

He first tried what he calls his Riesling crutch – the white German wine works with many foods because of its palate-cleansing ability — but he needed something more to cut the sauce's texture and spice. The tank-fermented Michigan sparkling, with its tart cranberry fruit, did the trick.

Pierce, who teaches monthly wine seminars at the Mission District restaurant, is a bit of a pairing geek. And proudly so. He tells me the buffalo wings story while chomping on Cool Ranch Doritos, and testing compatible wines.

"So far, this Russian River Valley Pinot Noir is doing the job," he says. Crunch.

Throw out a comfort food and he'll play wine association.

Chicken soup? Loire Valley Vouvray. Fried chicken? German Riesling. Macaroni and cheese? Oregon Pinot Blanc.

Comfort foods are fatty, and fat loves wines with low alcohol and high acidity, Pierce says. He's packing his list with low-production versions of these food-friendly wines, a trend at many small restaurants.

"There's a big backlash against the dark, extracted, oaky high-alcohol wines," Pierce says. "Those things compete with food. They create heat and tend to bring out sweetness. They won't marry with the food. They just sort of wash the food away."

But braised meat, or a slab of beef slathered in Cincinnati-style barbecue sauce? It's practically screaming for a big, black old vine Zinfandel to match the sweetness and texture of the dish.

"That (pairing) is God's gift," says Gaylen Richardson, wine director of Market in St. Helena. Mouth-feel is the first thing he looks for in pairing comfort foods.

"Acid is important," he says. "But that comfort thing boils down to mouth-feel. Who doesn't like that silky, elegant feeling in their mouth?"

From Market's menu, I plucked the ultimate comfort lineup – Fried Green Zebra Tomatoes, Crispy Skin Chicken Breast and A Very Adult Macaroni & Cheese – and put the pressure on Richardson.

For the tomatoes, dressed with Spicy Tomato-Almond Romesco Sauce, he recommends a California Blanc De Noirs. As with most comfort foods, which begin as a naked starch or neutral meat, the pairing becomes more about the sauce.

"The structure and weight of a Domaine Chandon plus the fruit is an excellent balance for the salad, which has a little mustard and Panko bread crumbs," he says, adding that it marries well with the tang in the tomatoes and cuts the sweet texture they gain from the sauce.

You can do whatever you want with chicken, and here chef Eduardo Martinez sears the breast and slaps it with a garlic-tarragon jus. "I like Merry Edwards Pinot Noir with this," Richardson says. "The tarragon gives it that anise and earthy flavor, a signature of Pinot."

With its Fiscalini Cheddar, Parmigiano-Reggiano and Hobbs Bacon, Market's mac and cheese is the richest Richardson's ever tasted, he tells me. That decadence calls for a balanced, Sonoma Coast Chardonnay.

"Something like Failla (a St. Helena winery, pronounced FAY-la) -- round but with plenty of acid and fruit, will cleanse the palate," Richardson says.

Cheese is a staple of comfort foods, be it Whiz or fondue. In "Perfect Pairings," author and master sommelier Evan Goldstein recommends floral, fruit-forward Gewurztraminer for Swiss-style cheese fondue.

New World versions, such as Mendocino County's Navarro and Claiborne & Churchill from San Luis Obispo, have the texture and bright flavors to work with cheeses from gruyere to raclette.

"The best wines that tend to go with fondue are white and aromatic," Goldstein says. "It's a fairly hearty, rib-sticking dish, so the wine should be big as well."

If you want a less "in-your-face" choice, Goldstein also recommends Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier. However, if you make fondue with fontina and white truffles, which add earthiness to the dish, you should go with a European bottling that has some age on it, and developed terroir.

Fondue's a good example of cooking with the wine you're drinking, an easy and quite comforting guarantee for a decent partnership. Think of the wine-loaded sauces in red-meat dishes. Is there anything more comforting than filet mignon and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon?

There might be, says Marian Jansen op de Haar, national wine director for Fleming's, the steakhouse and wine bar in Walnut Creek. Pairing red meat comes down to two things: a wine's style, and marbling – the comforting word for fat.

"More marbling equals more flavor, so something like a New York strip can stand a bigger wine, like a Napa Cab," she says. "With a rib-eye, you could go even bigger."

With a leaner cut, such as filet mignon, Jansen op de Haar favors a lighter red, such as Pinot Noir. For a steak dressed in peppercorn sauce, she recommends a peppery Syrah.

And erase any uncomfortable thoughts regarding white wine and red meat. Jansen op de Haar loves an oaky Chardonnay, such as Rombauer's, with grilled steak. Her ultimate go-to for many tomato-based comfort foods (think pasta with marinara sauce)? A dry rose, such as Sonoma County's SoloRosa.

"It (rose) is probably one of the most versatile wines," she says.

The ultimate, of course, is bubbly. I've slapped Champagne against fish and chips and washed down crab cakes with a California sparkling. It is in those marriages of salt, fat, yeast and fizz that I truly find my comfort zone.

## PAIRINGS

### Meatballs

2004 Qupe Syrah Santa Maria Valley, Bien Nacido Vineyard: This Syrah is the picture of balance. It has every element to match with the meatballs and the sauce: good acidity to cut through the fat; slight tannins to match the meatballs' texture; smoky, earthy fruit to handle the spice and sweetness of the sauce; and heavier weight to match the richness of the dish.

-- Maverick wine director Mike Pierce

### Shanks

SoloRosa 2006 California Rose: This dish is great with a moderate intensity red, white or rose, something that is not too tannic or oaky since it's braised rather than grilled. The tomato and herbs make it a great match with a wine that has some acidity and herbaceousness as well, such as the above bold rose.

-- Fleming's wine director Marian Jansen op de Haar

### Mac 'n' cheese

2005 Forman Chardonnay, Carneros: The crisp, clean apple and citrus flavors pair beautifully with the sharpness of the Fiscalini Cheddar. The fruitiness of the wine brings a refreshing quality, while the bright acidity cleanses the palate. This Chardonnay also has enough body to stand up to the richness of the dish.

-- Market wine director Gaylen Richardson

## COMFORT, WITHOUT FAT

Comfort food wine pairings got us thinking about the notion of comfort wines. Is there a wine that achieves the same feeling as a steaming plate of mashed potatoes? For some, it might be a low-alcohol red. For others, it's the high alcohol content that comforts. We asked three wine directors to define comfort wines:

Mike Pierce, Maverick: "A glass of Madeira, from Spain, with a lot of toffee and caramel flavors. It's like snuggling up to an old pipe. I just love sitting around and sipping it. Also Merlot. I'm trying to bring it back. It's cheap, at least right now, and you don't need food with it because it's complex and has a lot of fruit. It's a really satisfying wine."

Marian Jansen op de Haar, Fleming's: "Cold weather and comfort food to me is Pinot Noir. It is light enough that you can sip it when you come home and you feel like doing something good for yourself." She also likes rose Champagne, such as Veuve Clicquot's fairly new bottling. "It goes well with caviar. I don't wait until I have company. I just open it for me."

Gaylen Richardson, Market: "Price point is important. When you spend \$200 on a bottle, you're really going to analyze it, and that kind of takes away the comfortability. If you're spending less, you're not going to worry as much about the details. So for me, it's an inexpensive bottle of Rioja or a great, fruity California Zinfandel. When it's cold and chilly, that hits the spot."

-- Jessica Yadegaran

## A TAKE ON TUMBLERS

A discussion of comfort foods and wines is not complete without a nod (or frown, depending on your take) to wine tumblers, the latest trend in glassware. In Italy, where food is synonymous with wine, stemless glassware has been the norm for centuries. Here in the States, however, we didn't see legless bowls blow up until Riedel released its "O" series. Now, affordable copycats abound. Are they good? Certainly nothing says comfort like curling up next to the fire with a stemless glass of Port. It's fun, easy, and the missing stem means you're less likely to spill on that bearskin rug. That said, here are things to keep in mind when considering tumbling:

Tumble when:

You're packing a picnic. Stemless glasses can fit in any basket or backpack.

You're serving wine to big groups. Stemless glasses are dishwasher-friendly and you can pack a

bunch in one load.

You live in an urban space (read: small kitchen). Stemless glasses fit into any cupboard.

Don't tumble when:

Drinking white wines or light reds meant to be enjoyed chilled. Your hand transfers heat to the bowl. Same with stemless flutes and sparkling wines.

You're drinking a prized wine, unless you're using a Riedel or other wine glass producer's stemless ware. They are lighter, thinner and made of crystal, which helps agitate the wine, releasing more aromas than a regular glass would.

You're worried about someone seeing hours of smudgy fingerprints on your glass.

You care to seriously evaluate the wine's color and clarity. Those fingerprints will impair your ability to do so.

-- Jessica Yadegaran