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PIZZA'S NOT JUST CALORIES, SO THINK ABOUT THE WINE

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THE E-MAIL from my roommate came late on a Thursday afternoon. "We're ordering Zachary's and watching 'Grey's' tonight," he wrote. "Can we open a bottle of something?"

I did a mental scan of my wine collection and got to work: "Stuffed or regular?" I asked. "Pepperoni, or spinach and mushroom?"

Gavin never wrote back. I think the poor guy was looking for a "yes" or "no" rather than a discussion of the ideal wine for that evening's blend of cheese, bread and tomato sauce.

But when you live with a carb-addicted world-class athlete, you get to know pizza. Even a salmon and quinoa girl like myself can appreciate the nuances. Gavin's three basic food groups are Rustica, Zachary's and Pizzaiolo, all Oakland pizzerias, but the pies they spin are quite different. And so are their wine matches.

He often leaves half-full boxes in the kitchen, and despite my full belly of steamed vegetables, I'll nibble on a slice while washing my dishes. I have a Jewish mother, so wasting food is not an option. That's how I discovered the miracle of Domaine De Nizas Rose with a thin slice of parsley-sprinkled Rustica. The Languedoc wine has a wild bite to it, which matched well with Rustica's almost spicy, cured pepperoni.

I always like to think of the weight of a pizza, and find its complement in wine. I wouldn't throw this rose against a brick-thick slice of deep-dish Zachary's. Despite its high acidity and good fruit, the wine would be squashed. With monstrous chunks of marinated tomatoes, I open a big Syrah or California Zinfandel. Medium-to-full-bodied with gobs of pepper and berries, you can feel them dancing, as opposed to wrestling, with the tomatoes in your mouth.

Nickel & Nickel's Syrahs and Lodi's Seven Deadly Zins work particularly well with a pepperoni version, as would a huge, cigar-smoky Shiraz. If sausages or other smoky meats are involved, opt for Barbera, which hails from Piemonte and has unusually high levels of acid, making it ideal for tomato-based Italian dishes. Low-acid wines can taste bland or lifeless next to pizza, with its high-acid tomatoes.

After weight, that's the key to a good pizza pairing. You need a wine with moderate to high acidity that can cut the fattiness of the cheese as well as stand up to the acidity in the sauce. Meanwhile, you also need plenty of lush fruit flavors to help conquer what happens when tomatoes are stewed, roasted or otherwise cooked: They become sweet.

From there, it's all about the toppings. Much like the Thanksgiving dilemma – you're not pairing to a dull bird, but all those rich side dishes – the right pizza wine depends on whether you're downing a wild mushroom and goat cheese from Pizzaiolo (Pinot Noir, Soave) or one of those saladlike creations from Extreme Pizza (Sauvignon Blanc).

Plain cheese pizza practically begs for a balanced, medium-bodied Chardonnay. The toasty flavors complement the starring mozzarella, and the wine's acidity helps cut the fat. If you're big on bell peppers, spinach and olives, stick to crisp, zesty whites like Sauvignon Blanc, or even Verdicchio and Vermentino, that won't weigh down your love for veggies.

Once, away from my pizza nest, I ordered a white sauce pie with friends in Southern California. The lack of tomatoes expanded my options. With each bite I discovered that the havarti-covered

dough became the star, and the equally doughy flavors of Champagne paired perfectly. I almost texted Gavin with the news.

Then I realized we'd spent \$50 on the bubbly, double the price of the pizza. That brought me back to reality. Ideally, your wine shouldn't cost more than your pie (unless it's topped with truffles). Even the star of East Bay pizzerias, Pizzaiolo, with its wood-fired artisan pies, has plenty of options on its largely European wine list for under \$35.

But if you're just having a Tuesday night Papa John's, may I recommend a cheap Lambrusco? The Italian sparkling red from Emilia-Romagna just might be the culmination of my pizza wine investigations: The dark, brisk super-fruits could slay any tomato sauce, and even the greasiest mound of melted cheese is no match for this wine's plummy foam. Just ask my roommate.