

## BASICS OF ITALIAN PAIRINGS

Wine and food that originate from the same place have an element of harmony and elegance in their flavors and aromas. Here are general guidelines for Italian food and wine pairings. The wines and regions selected are some of Italy's best-kept secrets.

Mushroom risotto: Light to medium bodied red. Try fruity, floral Sicilian blends with Nero D'avola and Frappato.

Chicken (grilled): Try a crisp Pinot Bianco from the Veneto or a dry Verdicchio from the Le Marche. For chicken with cream sauce, try an Umbrian Chardonnay.

Pasta with tomato-based sauce: Light to medium-bodied reds, like a Barbera from Piemonte, can stand up to the acidity.

Barbecued meats: Powerful fruity reds like Primitivo from Puglia or earthy Montepulciano D'Ambruzzo are good choices.

Fish: With poached or grilled salmon, try the nutty lemon of a Soave Superiore from the Veneto. For smoked fish or sardines, try sparkling Lambrusco from Emilia Romagna.

-- Jessica Yadegaran

By Jessica Yadegaran  
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When Massimiliano Boldrini left Italy, the chef didn't stuff his suitcase with beloved bottles of Chianti or pricey Super Tuscans, but two vines of Fragalino, a native grape that has a natural strawberry flavor and produces a luscious summer wine.

"That's what I could sneak in," says Boldrini, who owns Berkeley's Riva Cucina, where he creates sustainable seafood dishes inspired by his native Emilia Romagna.

He's replanted the vines on his Napa property, a symbol of his dedication to l'abbinamento, the centuries-old Italian concept of matching food and wine. Italy has 20 regions, after all, and more than 2,000 indigenous varietals that date back three millennia.

For instance, Boldrini's central north region, with its subtle, rustic fare, is the fourth largest wine producing area in the country, though few of their wines are DOC (Denominazione di Origine) classified or have ever made it on your table.

While they do grow staples like Sangiovese, Trebbiano and Cabernet Sauvignon, the premier wine of Emilia is actually Lambrusco, in frothy shades of fuschia, made from grapes grown high on the trellised vines south of the Po River.

Meanwhile, Romagna gave Italy its first white DOCG (the highest quality classification of wine) with Albana, a medium-bodied wine that Boldrini's father, also a chef, grows on his farm between Ferrera and Bologna.

The almond flavors of Albana and the fruity effervescence of red sparklings are perfect matches for delicate summer dishes from Emilia Romagna. Seafood, and especially eel, Boldrini says, is particularly popular in his hometown.

After hitting the night clubs, he'd visit his sous chef's father, a licensed fisherman, around 4 a.m., select his cuts before the fish went to market, clean them, and go to bed. For dinner, he'd grill the eel and serve it with an Albana Di Romagna.

Now he and other chefs around the Bay Area are bringing the same authentic, regional pairings to local patrons and doing their best to highlight some of Italy's best-kept wine secrets.

"We want to get away from the typical suspects, Chianti, Barolo, Barbaresco," says Gianni Bartoletti, co-owner of San Ramon's Incontro, which showcases the cuisine of Puglia.

You can find traditional Sardinian food and wines at La Ciccia in San Francisco. Perbacco, also in the City, specializes in the pairings of Piemonte, with a touch of Liguria. Try the Ital-Cal flight to compare varietals and winemaking styles.

On a recent Monday afternoon, Boldrini marinated local, wild sardine fillets in shallots and Champagne vinegar and served them over parsley potatoes and Blue Lake green beans.

"You poach the potatoes and steam the beans so they absorb the sardine's flavors," Boldrini explains. "You won't get that with roasted potatoes."

For a red, he poured chilled Lambrusco, which suffered from overproduction and alteration in the 1980s but is now experiencing a quality renaissance thanks to producers in Emilia. Often reserved for rich dishes like Bolognese or Parma ham, Boldrini liked the pairing because the fruity bubbles cut fishiness.

For a daring pairing, try the minerally Sibilla Falanghina from the Campi Flegrei in Campania. The grape grows along the ocean and has a pronounced salty taste, which stands up to sardines and similar foods.

With the same type of dish, white wine drinkers can also try Verdicchio, a dry, crisp variety from the Castelli di Jesi DOC in central Italy's Le Marche region, says Luigi Troccoli of Incontro.

He pairs the restaurant's signature southern Italian chicken, marinated in lemon juice, rosemary and chili flakes, with the white because its high acidity complements the dish's heat.

"It's also fruity and marries well with the lemon," Troccoli says.

Meanwhile, Bartoletti likes a Luccarelli Primitivo from Puglia, the same region where the chicken dish is from. Primitivo is genetically identical to Zinfandel. But the Italian style is different.

“California makes it strong with oak and spice,” Bartoletti says. “In Italy they make it a little softer and fruitier, so it’s a perfect summer barbecue wine.”

That’s how pairings go: either to contrast the flavors, structures or weight of a food and therefore attain balance, or, when that proves difficult, as with desserts, to go for similar elements.

“There are no fixed rules,” says Boldrini, who teaches a wine pairing class at Napa’s Signorello Vineyards.

True Sicilian food lovers should try any number of light-bodied blends from the region, like Nero d’Avola, the most widely planted red variety in the region, and Frappato, Italy’s answer to Beaujolais. The combination makes for lush wines with firm tannins, fresh acidity, some pepper and violet floral notes.

At Livermore’s Terra Mia, which recreates dishes from Calabria, co-owner Roberto Pugliese serves a hearty Agnello Scottadito: lamp chops seasoned with oregano, pepper and other spices, and grilled to order.

The dish is actually from Rome, but the red wine he likes to pair it with, a Montepulciano, is from Ambruzzo.

Its dark spicy fruit and soft acidity make it perfect for early consumption, but it also produces an earthiness with chewy big tannins and aging potential, perfect for red meat dishes, and finally, a strawberry-tinged rose, Cerasuolo, ideal for summer.

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