

Beef and wine are a classic match. What makes them taste so good together?

Beef and wine have an undeniable affinity for one another. The profound, meaty, complex, rich flavor of beef is complemented by a beverage that’s equally complex, savory and rich. Nothing fits the bill better than wine. There’s also the all-important issue of texture. Mouthfilling concentrated wines provide just the right counterbalance to beef’s dense texture.

Does the cut of beef matter when choosing a wine?

Yes. Certain cuts of beef like flank steak and chuck are often very flavorful. They need a wine that’s bold and lipsmacking. Simple but fruity merlots and zinfandels work well, as do most inexpensive reds from Australia—which are super-fruity and usually soft as velvet. “Middle meat” cuts from the rib and loin—like tenderloin, strip steak and prime rib—are at their best with more sophisticated, complex (expensive) wine.

How do seasonings impact a wine choice?

Seasonings and spices often act as a bridge to wines. As a simple example, sprinkling beef with some cracked black pepper helps the dish marry well with syrah/shiraz, which has a black pepper–like flavor. Herbs in a beef dish can underscore the hint of herbal flavor in many cabernet sauvignons and bordeaux. The seasonings to be careful with are hot chiles, which can make a wine taste hollow. Chiles need a cushion of sweetness to land on, so fiery-hot beef dishes often do best with a white wine that has a bit of residual sugar. Wines with a lot of oak flavor often need a bridge to connect them to beef. Toasted nuts, brown butter and sesame oil are all excellent bridges to oaky chardonnay.

What about cooking method?

Cooking method, too, should influence wine choice. One of the best American wine and food marriages is grilled steak and a big, oak-aged cabernet sauvignon. The flame-seared flavors and crusty texture imparted by grilling are echoed by the toasty oak of the wine. Similarly, soft, braised beef dishes taste best with wines that feel soft and seamless on the palate. That’s the principle behind beef stew and red burgundy (pinot noir).

Are white wines an option with beef?

Yes—depending on the dish, many white wines work very well, as do rosés. Thai beef salads and beef stir-fries are fantastic with minerally rieslings from Germany. Steak salads with greens and vegetables are terrific with sauvignon blancs, which have a “green” flair of their own. And with garlicky beef dishes, a dry rosé is a must-try experience.

How does marbling affect wine?

Since fat is a carrier of flavor, marbling gives beef richness. The more marbling the beef has, the more dense and concentrated the wine should be. A well-marbled piece of beef should not be served with a lightbodied wine, since the wine will taste frail next to all that beefy flavor. Instead, opt for a powerhouse—a wine that’s muscular enough to balance the richness.

Are there a few best wine bets when the beef dish is humble (e.g., pot roast)?

One of the principles of good pairing is matching wines and foods of the same “status.” A simple pot roast doesn’t require a super expensive bordeaux. In fact, the two can feel wrong together. For example, you can pair humble, flavorful, no-fuss cuts of beef, like ribs, with humble, flavorful, no-fuss wines—juicy, inexpensive reds from Argentina, Spain or the south of France. However, when a fine New York strip or prime rib is being served, a more complex, expensive wine (such as a top-flight bordeaux or a great American cabernet) is definitely in order.

Which wine varietal overall is most “beef flexible”?

Cabernet sauvignon. Among the most powerful and concentrated red varietals, cabernet sauvignon can also be elegant at the same time. For its part, beef has a flavor that’s bold and yet refined at the same time. In this way, cabernet “mirrors” beef, creating a whole that’s greater than the sum of the parts. Cabernet sauvignon also possesses a considerable amount of tannin, which gives it the structure and intensity to pair well with beef.


What’s the biggest “no-no” in beef and wine pairing?

The biggest mistake in pairing beef and wine is adding blue cheese to the dish. Blue cheese is one of the most powerfully pungent, salty and microbial foods. It makes most wines—red and white—taste dull and insipid. So save the blue cheese for dessert and serve it with a sweet fortified wine such as port.


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Beef Cuts




MEDIUM RED




MEDIUM RED




FULL RED



FULL RED




FULL RED




FULL RED


DESSERT WINE




LIGHT WHITE




LIGHT RED




SWEET WHITE




RICH WHITE




MEDIUM RED




SPARKLING



ROSÉ



FULL RED



Beef Dishes



SWEET WHITE



LIGHT WHITE



LIGHT RED



MEDIUM RED




MEDIUM RED




FULL RED


Seasonings & Spices




SWEET WHITE



RICH WHITE



FULL RED



FULL RED



ROSÉ



Beef & Wine

Principles Of Pairing

Advice From World-Renowned Wine Expert
Karen MacNeil, Author Of *The Wine Bible*.

■ **Work with natural flavor affinities.** As any good cook knows, coffee and cream have an affinity for each other that coffee and basil do not. So trust your instincts when it comes to beef and wine. Beef's density and deep flavors have an affinity with rich, powerful wines. Fragile wines or extremely light-bodied ones may taste out of place.

■ **Complex wines go with simple preparations.** Many of the greatest bordeaux or California cabernet sauvignons are best enjoyed with a high-quality but simple dish, such as a fine steak.

■ **Robust Seasonings require robust wines.** Beef dishes with bold/spicy/hot flavors are perfect for spicy, big-flavored wines.

■ **Watch "weight" when pairing.** Besides the intensity of the flavor, the sheer weight of the beef dish and the weight (or "body") of the wine should be in harmony.

■ **Tannin can be beef's best friend.** Tannin is a compound that comes from grape skins and seeds. Some grape varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, petite sirah and nebbiolo, are naturally high in this compound. Tannin acts as the wine's structure, and wines that are high in tannin are usually described as "big." Tannin tastes bitter (like dark chocolate or espresso) and feels dry (like fine-gauge sandpaper). High-tannin wines taste best with dense foods that are rich in both protein and marbling (like beef), which offset this bitterness and dryness.

■ **Don't forget rosés.** Rosé wines, often overlooked, are wonderful with a surprising range of beef dishes. Rosés have the earthly, bold redfruit character of red wine and the freshness and acidity of white wine. This combination is an enormous asset with certain beef dishes— especially those that include highly pungent ingredients, such as garlic. In the Mediterranean, for example, aioli and other garlicky foods are always served with a chilled dry rosé.

■ **Balance salty with sweet.** Salty foods dull the flavor of many wines, making them taste neutral. This is an important consideration for beef dishes seasoned with a significant amount of soy sauce. Acidity can counterbalance a food's saltiness, but another brilliant strategy is to juxtapose that saltiness with a touch of sweetness. An Asian beef stir-fry seasoned with soy sauce, for example, is terrific with an off-dry gewürztraminer.



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