

Eat, drink and celebrate Virginia's wine month

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When pairing wine with food, winemakers advise considering each component of a dish and complementing it, while keeping in mind the wine's acidity and alcohol content.

Virginia wines continue to impress. Honors and accolades cite the quality of the wine -- 67 state wines won medals in the International Eastern Wine Competition, which featured entries from 16 countries and 34 U.S. states this year.

Many of the state's 148 wineries offer their wares, including award winners, at wine festivals or in tasting rooms. When wine month in Virginia starts tomorrow, festivals, tasting rooms and special wine events will take place just about everywhere from the Eastern Shore to the Blue Ridge Mountains and all points in between.

This month long celebration of the harvest provides a platinum opportunity to try Virginia wines. Sipping at a festival or in a tasting room is one thing, but how do you pair these wines with food? What do you serve when you have friends over for dinner?

The wine-food pairing concept can be daunting, but three state winemakers -- James Batterson, winemaker and partner of James River Cellars in Glen Allen; Luca Paschina, winemaker and general manager of Barbourville Vineyards near Charlottesville; and Matthew Meyer, winemaker of the Williamsburg Winery -- recently shared their wine-and-food pairing expertise to lessen the mystique. Q:What is the key to pairing wine with food?

Batterson: There is no one key. Every wine is unique and even every vintage, especially in Virginia.

The most important factor is balancing the acidity levels of the wine with the dish. This can be a difficult task when cooking with high acid ingredients such as tomatoes, lemons, vinegar, etc. It is important that you know how that particular wine tastes and aren't generalizing, because if the acid isn't there, the wine will likely be overpowered and less enjoyable.

Our Gewurztraminer is Alsatian-style and is high in acid and mostly dry. For this reason, it pairs with a large number of dishes. I enjoy it with medium-spiced foods such as crabcakes containing Old Bay and moderately spiced ethnic foods. If you are eating foods with more heat, I would recommend a slightly sweeter, lighter-bodied white such as our unoaked Chardonnay (a hybrid of Chardonnay and Seyval Blanc) with sweet citrus notes, but a fairly dry finish.

Paschina: The key to pairing wines with food is to align their underlying structuring qualities, much more than conventional associations of flavors. Flavors are important and not to be dismissed, but wines of the same varietal might have similar predominant flavors and still differ radically in their acidity, their fruit forwardness, their tannins, their alcohol levels, their mouth feel, and -- not to be overlooked -- their aromatic profile, be it subtle or quite forward. We always focus on these latter characteristics, therefore, in selecting a wine for the character of any dish.

Generally speaking, wines limited to 13 to 13.5 percent alcohol, of lively middle palate vitality ("acidity"), undiffused and focused fruit character (such as a Chardonnay, which avoids malolactic fermentation, or a Merlot, which is not excessively oaked), will be much more "food-friendly" and palate-friendly through the meal, than wines of higher alcohol, diminished acidic verve, incoherent flavor structures and obtrusive, imbalanced barrel age.

Meyer: I like to look at the weight of the food along with its accompanying flavor profile. If you like a heavy dish, then a heavy-style wine is best; and conversely, if the dish is light, then a lighter-style wine is more appropriate. I would serve the Williamsburg Winery 2005 Virginia Trianon with some venison or a lasagna. For a lighter meal of a simple baked scallops and butter, with a hint of seasonings, I would go with the Williamsburg Winery 2007 Barrel Aged Seyval. It is also good to look at the ingredients in each dish. You could take the same scallops and incorporate a heavy sauce with bacon and tomatoes, and a red wine would pair well. I think it is important to be adventurous when pairing food and wine, which is why I do not believe in the adage of red wine with red meat, and white wine with fish and chicken. And above all, the most important aspect of pairing wine with food is to drink what you like and what gives you the most joy. Q:What is your favorite food-and-wine pairing?

Batterson: My favorite pairing is a tender filet of beef, grilled with minimal seasonings of garlic salt, ground pepper and butter, paired with a 2002 or 2005 James River Merlot that has been allowed to breathe. These are two of our best vintages, and they have a lot of fruit and a lot of body that complement the beef so well.

Paschina: All pairings based on the principles I just outlined are equally dazzling and appealing for enjoying fine food. But I have nothing to add to the time-honored delight of an effusive sauvignon blanc or Chablis-style chardonnay with fresh oysters on the half shell. . . . The lively mid-palate responds to both the brininess and lushness of the oyster and achieves a perfect harmony of freshness, which people see as the signature of these two beautiful things.

With steamed clams in a garlic-infused broth, by the same token, we take double advantage of the sauvignon blanc, with a match of aromatic intensity between the food and wine.

Meyer: I do quite enjoy foie gras and or Stilton cheese with the Williamsburg Winery 2007 Late Harvest Vidal, or with a Sauterne, Tokay or ice wine. I am also quite content when a bottle of port and a hunk of Stilton cheese are placed in front of me. The richness of the foie gras and the sharpness of the Stilton are perfectly suited for the strong, rich fruit characters and sweetness of a dessert wine.

October wine events

Wine 101 at James River Cellars: 11008 Washington Highway, Glen Allen; Oct. 1, 6:30-8:30 p.m.; \$25 (reservations suggested). Set up as a casual and fun informational class on winemaking. Special technical tour and barrel tasting included. Information: <http://www.jamesrivercellars.com> or (804) 550-7516

Mount Vernon Fall Wine Festival: Oct. 2-4, 6-9 p.m. each day (Oct. 3 is sold out); 17 wineries; \$30; Information: <http://www.mountvernon.org>

Carytown Wine Festival: Oct. 4, noon-6 p.m.; 11 wineries; \$15 advance, \$20 at gate, \$10 designated driver, children younger than 12 free with a paid adult. Information: <http://www.carytownrva.org/fw.php>

Octoberfest: at Lake Anna Winery, Spotsylvania; Oct. 10, 5-9 p.m.; \$15 for wine tasting and entertainment, \$30 for wine tasting, food and entertainment (reservations required for food). Information: <http://www.lawinery.com> or (540) 895-5085

Autumn Peak Festival: at Massanutten Resort; Oct. 10, 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m.; six wineries; \$5; younger than 10 free. Information: <http://www.massresort.com> or (540) 437-3368

CAIO Italian Wine Festival: at Walsingham Academy, Williamsburg; Oct. 10-11, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. each day; nine wineries; \$12 advance, \$15 at gate; nontasters: \$5 advance, \$8 at gate. Information: <http://www.ciaowilliamsburg.org> or (757) 220-5535

Taste of Culpeper Wine Festival: Oct. 11, noon-5 p.m.; 11 wineries; \$10 advance, \$15 at gate, \$5 designated driver. Information: <http://www.culpeperdowntown.com> or (540) 825-4416

Shenandoah Hot Air Balloon Fest: at Historic Long Branch; Oct. 16-18, Friday 4-8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; 17 wineries; wine tasting \$10 plus general admission (\$5 Friday, \$15 Saturday, \$10 Sunday), younger than 12 free. Information: <http://www.historiclongbranch.com> or (877) 868-1811

Town Point Wine Festival: at Town Point Park, Norfolk; Oct. 17-18, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. each day; 30-plus wineries; \$25 advance (before Oct. 9), \$30 at gate each day; nontasters \$20 on Saturday, \$15 on Sunday; tables for eight \$350 Saturday, \$275 Sunday; other packages available, including boat docking. Information: <http://www.festeventsva.org> or (757) 441-2345

Powhatan Festival of the Grape: Oct. 24, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; 26 wineries; \$15 advance, \$20 at gate; nontasters \$10 advance, \$15 at gate; younger than 12 free. Information: <http://www.powhatanwinefestival.com> or (804) 598-2636

Pick of the Piedmont Wine Festival: at Booster Park, Orange; Oct. 24-25, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. each day; \$12 advance (until Oct. 22), \$20 at gate; packages available, starting at \$175; ages 13-20 \$5, younger than 13 free. Information: <http://www.orangevachamber.com/Festivals.16.0.html> or (540) 672-5216

Monster Mash: at James River Cellars, 11008 Washington Highway, Glen Allen; Oct. 30, 6-10 p.m.; \$14; costume judging (registration starts at 5:30 p.m. judging 5:30-7). Information: <http://www.jamesrivercellars.com> or (804) 550-7516