

One Soup, Four Wines

A delicious experiment illustrates the logic behind matching wine and food

BY JOSH EISEN

How do you pair food and wine? There's endless talk about this question, and as a wine writer I've certainly added my opinion to the debate. But as a wine teacher, I've found that the best way to understand wine-food compatibility is to taste specific wines with specific foods. Tasting them yourself is the only way you can decide what works best for you, and with some guidelines you can learn why a pairing works—or doesn't work.

I've designed a wine and food tasting in which I serve one dish—a simple but flavorful white bean

soup—with four very different wines. As the tasting progresses, I add new ingredients to the soup. This arrangement shows how the wine affects the taste of the dish and how different flavors in the food affect the taste of the wine.

WINE WITH FOOD: A BALANCING ACT

Balance is key when creating a complementary relationship between wine and food. A perfect example of imbalance can usually be found at wedding receptions. When you first toast the bride and groom, a dry Champagne tastes fine; but with the wedding cake, drinking the same Champagne becomes a mouth-puckering experience. Eating cake makes the mouth want something sweet again, and a Champagne that isn't sweet comes as a sour shock. That's why a sweet dessert needs a sweet wine.

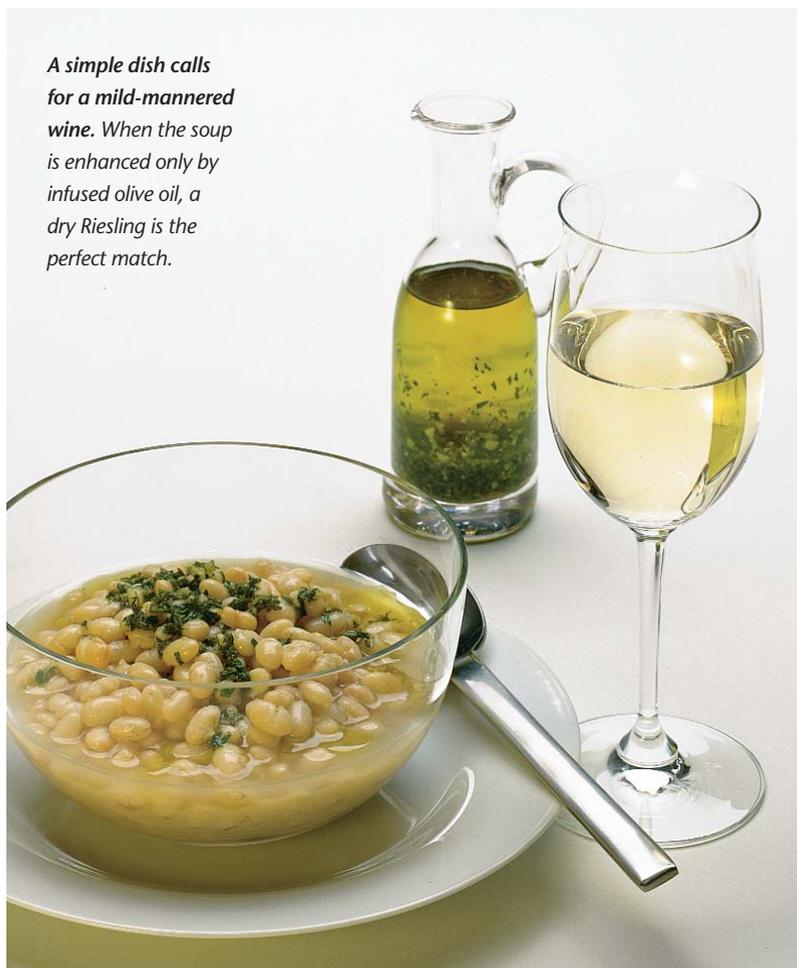
Every wine presented here tastes good on its own, but your perceptions of the wine will change when you sip them with the soup. You'll find that each wine has its "moment" as the best, depending on which elements have been introduced into the soup.

SUBTLE SOUP, DELICATE WINE

Start the tasting with a small bowl of the basic bean soup flavored with a tablespoon of the infused oil. The first wine you'll try is a dry Riesling. (For specific wine descriptions, see the sidebar on p. 64.) This wine is aromatic, fruity, and delicate. The soup is silky, full-bodied, and subtly flavored, and the olive oil gives it a complex and pungent aroma. The Riesling and the soup enhance, but don't overpower, each other.

Try the next wine—a buttery Chardonnay that has spent time in new oak. Compared to the Riesling, the Chardonnay has a heavy, rich, almost fat feeling in the mouth. Taste the Chardonnay with the soup and the soup's flavor seems to shrink in size. The soup's delicate aromas and silky texture are still there, but you have to look for them. The combination isn't unpleasant, but the wine is the dominant flavor. In conjunction with the Riesling, the soup was perfectly balanced. With the Chardonnay, the

A simple dish calls for a mild-mannered wine. When the soup is enhanced only by infused olive oil, a dry Riesling is the perfect match.



Photos except where noted: Susan Kahn



Author Josh Eisen pours the first wine in the tasting, a hands-on demonstration of how wines and food interact. The tasting calls for four different wines—the perfect number for turning the experience into a small dinner party.

soup seems lackluster because the full body of the wine is out of balance with the delicacy of the soup.

Follow the Chardonnay with the Cabernet/Merlot blend at room temperature. The wine and soup make a passable combination, but the wine obscures the beans' silkiness and subtlety—qualities that had been exciting and delicious with the Riesling. The red wine obscures the soup, but not in the same way as the Chardonnay. The Cabernet/Merlot has too much fruit and not enough acid, and the soft fruitiness of the wine overpowers the simple soup.

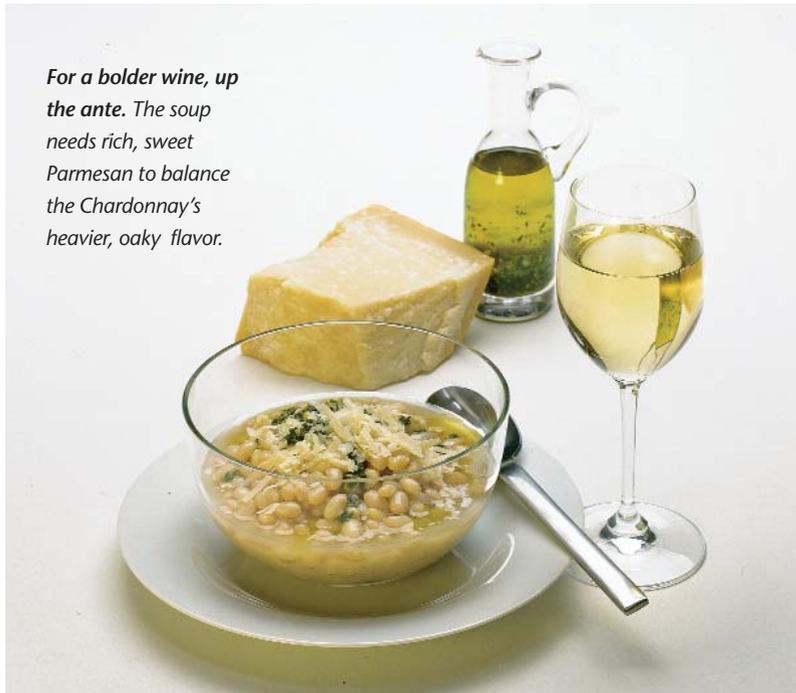
A RICH CHARDONNAY NEEDS BOLD FLAVORS

Now grate about a tablespoon of Parmesan cheese into each bowl of soup—the scenario changes

completely. Suddenly, the Chardonnay comes into balance and is a stunning partner for the soup. This apparent change of heart happens because the cheese makes the soup taste richer and fuller, and the Parmesan's milk fat absorbs the wine's tannins. The sweet richness of the Parmesan is a good balance for the Chardonnay's rich, vanilla fruit. If you taste the Riesling with this version of the soup, you'll find that the wine somehow has become weak and flat.

Now try this incarnation of the soup with the Cabernet/Merlot blend. You'll find the combination has no special dimension; in fact, the soup tastes rather flat. Again, the problem is the wine's fruitiness, which still overpowers the dish. Even

For a bolder wine, up the ante. The soup needs rich, sweet Parmesan to balance the Chardonnay's heavier, oaky flavor.

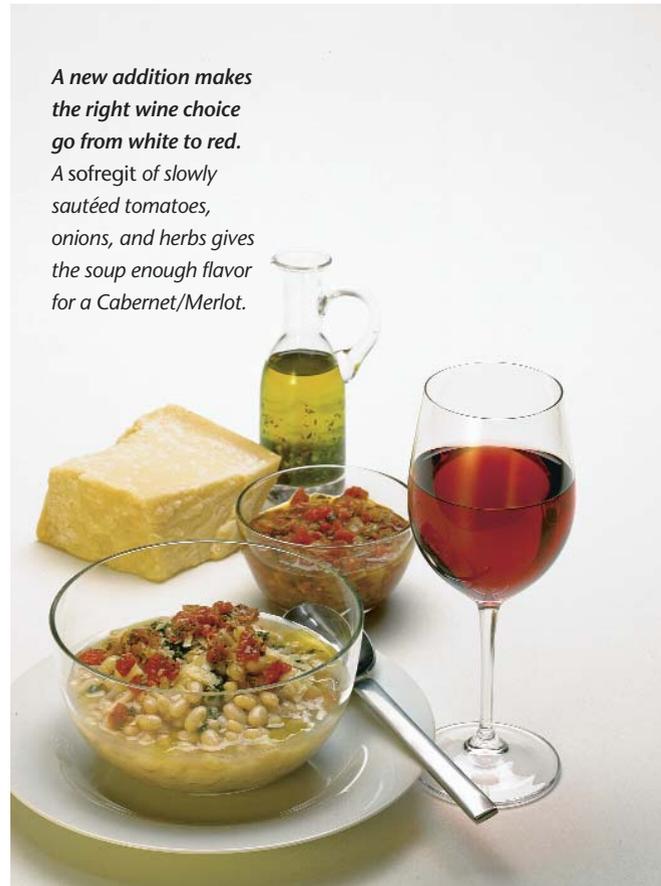


the strong flavor of Parmesan doesn't give the soup enough strength to stand up to the wine.

COMPLEX CONTRASTS CALL FOR A RED

The final version of the soup incorporates a blend of slowly sautéed tomatoes, onions, and herbs (called *sofregit* in Spanish). When you add a couple of spoonfuls of this mixture to the soup, the dish changes altogether. Now there's a lush, succulent feel to the soup, with a full range of flavors. The tomatoes make the soup both sweeter and more acidic, and these qualities give the Cabernet/Merlot a springboard. The same qualities—fruitiness and acidity—that made this wine a poor choice in other versions of the soup now can be enhanced. In fact, at this point it's best to serve this wine just cooler than room temperature to bring out its fruit flavors and make the acidity more prominent. Together, the soup and wine taste balanced and alive, and they're a pleasure to

A new addition makes the right wine choice go from white to red. A sofregit of slowly sautéed tomatoes, onions, and herbs gives the soup enough flavor for a Cabernet/Merlot.



eat together. The wine seems bright and lively without dominating your taste buds or the soup.

If you were to try this version of the soup with a white wine, the combination would be underwhelming. White wines seem to wither and lose almost all their flavor in the face of acidic tomatoes.

The final wine is another red—this time a Cabernet Sauvignon that's rich, concentrated, and aged in new oak. Taste this pairing and you'll find the wine dominates. The Cabernet is just too heavy, earthy, and intense for the soup, even with the tomato, onion, and herbal flavors of the *sofregit*. The Parmesan helps, but the combination is still merely fair, not dazzling. The lighter red wine more closely

CHOOSING THE WINES

I used Trefethen wines in creating this wine and food test, but other wines can be substituted if they approximate the wines that I used in flavor, style, weight, and balance. Of course, the results will be somewhat different, but the fundamental transitions and differences between wines will still be apparent. To make the job of finding other wines easier, try to find a knowledgeable wine merchant.

Here are the wines I used and suggestions of what to look for in choosing replacement wines.

1992 White Riesling Trefethen, or look for a dry young Riesling that's fresh and delicate. If

you can't find a Riesling, don't substitute Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc; instead, use a Pinot Blanc or a Pinot Gris.

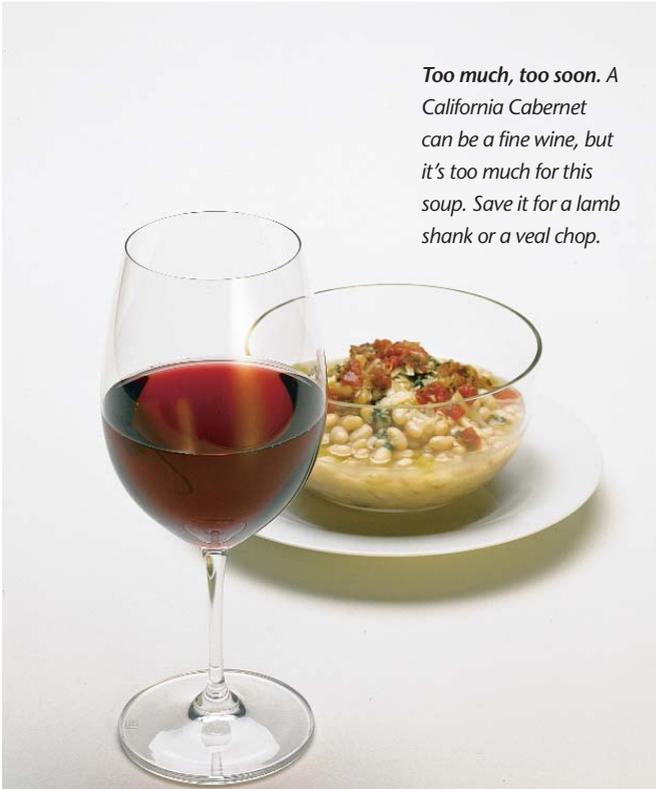
1987 Library Selection Chardonnay Trefethen, or try a fully evolved Chardonnay from the United States or a Burgundy such as Puligny-Montrachet. Look for harmonious balance between oak, fruit, and acidity, where new oak is not the dominant flavor.

NV Eshcol Trefethen (68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot), or substitute a young Cabernet/Merlot blend, or a Cabernet with ample concentrated fruit and soft,

ripe tannins. It should be well balanced, easy to drink, and made without using new oak barrels. Look for an inexpensive, simple, and young red wine with lots of fruit and soft tannins.

1989 Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon Trefethen, or look for an outstanding reserve Cabernet Sauvignon where the oak is not a dominant flavor. Look for good fruit concentration, elegance, and complexity in wines from the United States, Bordeaux, Australia, New Zealand, or Chile.

Too much, too soon. A California Cabernet can be a fine wine, but it's too much for this soup. Save it for a lamb shank or a veal chop.



matches the soup's level of richness and intensity. Save the Cabernet for a lamb shank or veal chop—which could follow the soup.

WHITE BEAN SOUP

This soup is easy to make, and much of it can be prepared a day before serving. You can follow this soup with a simple main course such as grilled sausages, steak, or lamb. (Any of those dishes would be great with the soup's "losing" wine, a reserve Cabernet.) *Yields 6 cups, which will serve four as a first course, or eight to ten in a tasting.*

1½ cups dried white beans
4 medium cloves garlic, peeled
1 large sprig rosemary
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Rinse the beans and soak them in 6 cups of cold water for 8 hours or overnight. Drain and rinse the beans. Put them in a large, heavy pot and cover with 4 cups cold water. Add the garlic and rosemary sprig. Gently simmer, covered, for an hour, or until the beans are tender. When the beans are cooked, add salt to taste.

Alternatively, do not soak the beans but put all the ingredients in a heavy flame- and ovenproof ceramic or enameled-steel pot. Bring to a boil on the stove and then put the pot in a low oven (about 250°F) and bake until the beans are tender. This will take 4 to 8 hours, depending on the freshness of the beans.

The beans may be cooked a day or two in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator.

When ready to serve, remove the rosemary sprig and heat the beans. If you like, purée 1 or 2 cups of the beans and add it back to the soup. Add salt and pepper to taste.

INFUSED OLIVE OIL

This recipe is best with two olive oils: a "regular" light-yellow oil and an extra-virgin, which should be deep green and very fragrant. The extra-virgin oil functions as

much as a seasoning as it does an oil. This can be made up to two days in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator. *Yields ⅔ cup.*

¼ cup regular olive oil
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 Tbs. minced fresh sage
1 Tbs. minced fresh rosemary
2 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

In a small pot, heat the regular olive oil. Add the garlic and herbs. When the oil begins to sizzle, turn off the heat and let it sit; the herbs will have turned bright green. Allow the oil to cool a bit and add the extra-virgin olive oil. Stir and add salt and pepper to taste. The mixture should be heavily seasoned, as a small amount will flavor each bowl of soup.

SOFREGIT

A *sofregit* is one of the most basic elements in Spain's Catalan-style cooking. You'll need a heavy pan, a very low flame, and patience. The long, slow cooking makes the tomatoes and onions taste sweet, rich, and complex. The *sofregit* can be prepared five days in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator. *Yields 1¼ cups.*

⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 cup chopped onion
1 Tbs. minced fresh garlic
1 cup peeled, seeded and chopped plum tomatoes
(fresh or canned)
1 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
1 Tbs. minced fresh sage
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat a heavy sauté pan and pour in the olive oil. When the oil is hot, add the onions and cook over low heat until they turn soft and golden brown, about 20 min. Stir in the garlic and cook until it begins to color slightly, about 5 min. Add the tomatoes and cook slowly until they begin to blend with the onions, about 20 min. Add the parsley and sage and cook for another 10 min. Season with salt and pepper.



Soup accessories. *Parmesan, infused olive oil, and sofregit all have a role in determining which wine best matches the white bean soup.*

Josh Eisen is a freelance food and wine writer. He, his wife, a cat, and more than 700 bottles of wine live happily in a one-bedroom apartment in New York City. ♦