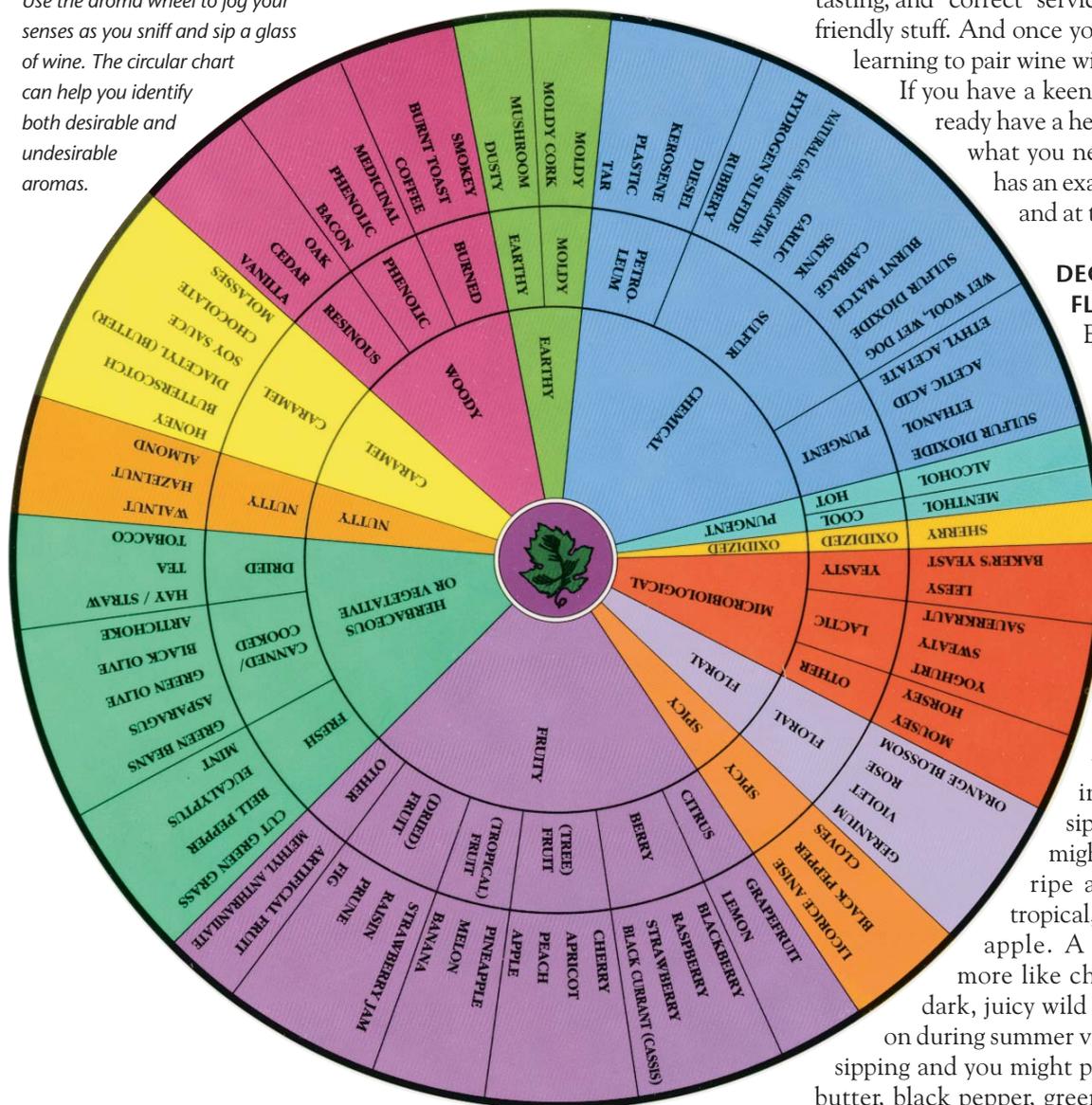


# Which Wine for Dinner?

A user-friendly guide to successful wine and food partnerships

BY ROSINA TINARI WILSON

*Aromatherapy for wine lovers? Use the aroma wheel to jog your senses as you sniff and sip a glass of wine. The circular chart can help you identify both desirable and undesirable aromas.*



## DECONSTRUCTING THE FLAVOR OF WINE

Every wine owes its unique character to a balance of three very simple building blocks: fruit and other aromatics, acidity, and tannin. Alcohol is a component, but it's practically flavorless; sugar can be ignored because most table wines are very dry.

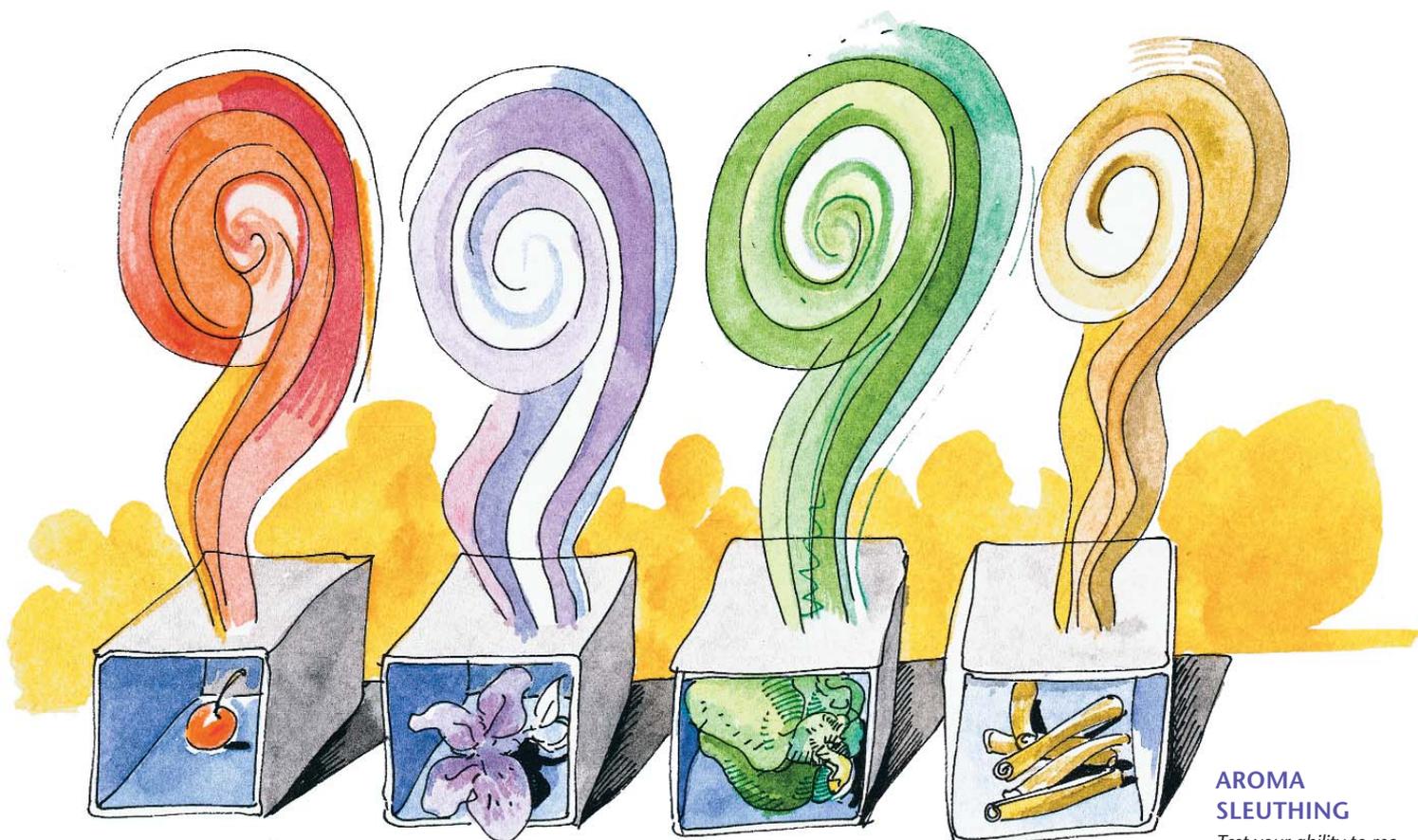
**Fruit and other aromatics.** Fruit in a wine is the first thing you zero in on when you sniff or sip. If the wine is white, it might remind you of apples, ripe apricots, or something tropical, such as mango or pineapple. A red wine might seem more like cherries, plums, or those dark, juicy wild berries that you feasted on during summer vacation. Keep sniffing or sipping and you might pick up a hint of vanilla, butter, black pepper, green olive, or roses. Wine-

**B**rash, brawny, and muscular, with a prodigious nose, thick legs, and a powerhouse finish.”  
 “A vibrant flash of midsummer moonlight on a still, velvety lake.”  
 “Lean, racy, and angular, but disappointingly closed and elusive.”

What are we talking about here? An Olympic weightlifter? A UFO sighting? A snobby supermodel? No, the fanciful (and tongue-in-cheek) quotes that you've just read all refer to wine. With hype like this running rampant, it's small wonder that the average American would rather order a beer. That's a shame because wine is really quite simple. Despite all the winebabble, the tongue-twisting terminology (try saying *Trockenbeerenauslese* ten times fast), the endless details of grape growing, winemaking, labeling, tasting, and “correct” service, wine can be very user-friendly stuff. And once you have the basics down, learning to pair wine with food comes naturally.

If you have a keen interest in food, you already have a head start, because most of what you need to know about wine has an exact parallel in the kitchen and at the table.

Illustrations: Yvonne Buchanan. Aroma wheel courtesy of A. C. Noble.



## AROMA SLEUTHING

*Test your ability to recognize aromas in wine by making a “mystery box.” Put samples of typical fragrant ingredients in small, numbered containers that conceal the items and then try to identify the contents by sniffing. Work with a partner and test each other. Possible ingredients include coffee, lemon peel, cocoa powder, vinegar, mint, cinnamon, black pepper, vanilla, green bell pepper, and fruits such as berries, apples, or pineapple.*

babble again? No, this is real. Wines actually do mimic fruits, vegetables, flowers, spices, and other products of nature. Chemically speaking, the same built-in fragrances that make these fruits and other natural products smell the way they do can also occur in wine, giving the wine those exact same aromas.

To put it another way, a wine can smell like bell peppers because it contains the same stuff that makes bell peppers smell like bell peppers: 2-methoxy 3-isobutyl pyrazine. Vanilla smells the way it does thanks to a substance called vanillin. Found naturally in vanilla beans, vanillin also occurs in oak, so wines aged in oak barrels (Chardonnay is a prime example) can come out smelling like vanilla. Roses smell the way they do because of a compound called geraniol. If a wine (Gewürztraminer, for instance) contains geraniol, it too will smell like roses.

At latest count, more than 800 such aroma compounds have been identified in wine, many of which also occur in foods and other common substances. Knowing this can help you to understand the wine fully, whether you're a novice or an expert wine taster. And a fuller understanding leads to making the best possible partnerships at the table.

**The aroma wheel.** There's a tremendously useful tool that helps tasters sort out these wine characteristics by grouping them into familiar categories. Developed in the 1980s at the University of California at Davis, it's known as the wine aroma wheel (at left). The aroma wheel arranges general categories, such as fruity, spicy, and floral, at the center of the wheel like wedges of a pie, and then subdivides these as you move outward to give specific terms, such as peach, clove, and violet. The wheel lists undesirable as well as desirable aromas; this can help the taster recognize flaws in the wine. Not only can any given wine contain a combination of these aromas, but you might also find aromas not on the wheel, such as papaya, nutmeg, or jasmine.

The advantage of using the aroma wheel is that it describes wine objectively, based on actual scientific fact. It also nudges our “sensory memory” by suggesting a wide range of possibilities for what we're smelling.

**Acidity.** Imagine biting into a slice of lemon—the thought alone makes your mouth water. That's because of the lemon's natural acidity. Likewise, the natural acidity in a wine is very obvious. It can have some of the same effects as lemon juice, bringing out the flavors of the wine itself, and bringing out the food's natural flavor. What's more, the natural acids

in a wine can help cut through rich, fatty foods just as a squeeze of lemon would, refreshing your palate and setting up your taste buds for the next bite.

If the acid level of a wine is too low, not only will the wine seem flat and dull by itself but it won't be able to perk up the flavors of food. And if it's too high, the wine will taste thin and sour. Winemakers the world over realize the vital importance of acidity, and literally work overtime (even going to such lengths as harvesting at night, when acid levels rise) to get good, consistent acidity in their grapes, year in and year out.

**Tannin.** Have you ever tasted a just-made red wine, straight from the barrel? Or chewed on a grape pit, a coffee bean, or a freshly shelled walnut? Remember that dry, puckery feeling, that sense that your tongue is sticking to the roof of your mouth? The culprit is tannin, which is found in the hard, woody parts of plants. In wine, tannins come from the grape seeds, skins, and stems, and they feel rough, gritty, or "furry" in the mouth. Red wines are more tannic than whites because during winemaking, the juice stays in contact with the skins, stems, and seeds longer.

The right amount of tannin can benefit a wine greatly, preserving it against spoilage or too-rapid

aging. This is why red wines age better than whites. And as anyone who has tasted a twenty-year-old Cabernet or Bordeaux knows, tannins soften over time, turning that harsh mouth-feel silky and smooth. Since tannin bonds chemically with both protein and fat, foods such as meat or cheese can make even a young, tannic wine taste less rough and more enjoyable.

#### WHAT MAKES A GOOD MATCH?

Ask the average person how to go about pairing wine with food, and you'll either get a blank stare or some form of the old maxim "white wine with fish, red wine with meat." This rule of thumb works pretty well as far as it goes, but if you care about making the best food and wine matches possible, there's a bit more to it.

Fortunately, the basics of food and wine pairing are very simple, very straightforward, and very intuitive. In fact, you use the concepts already, probably without even realizing it, in many other facets of life including cooking.

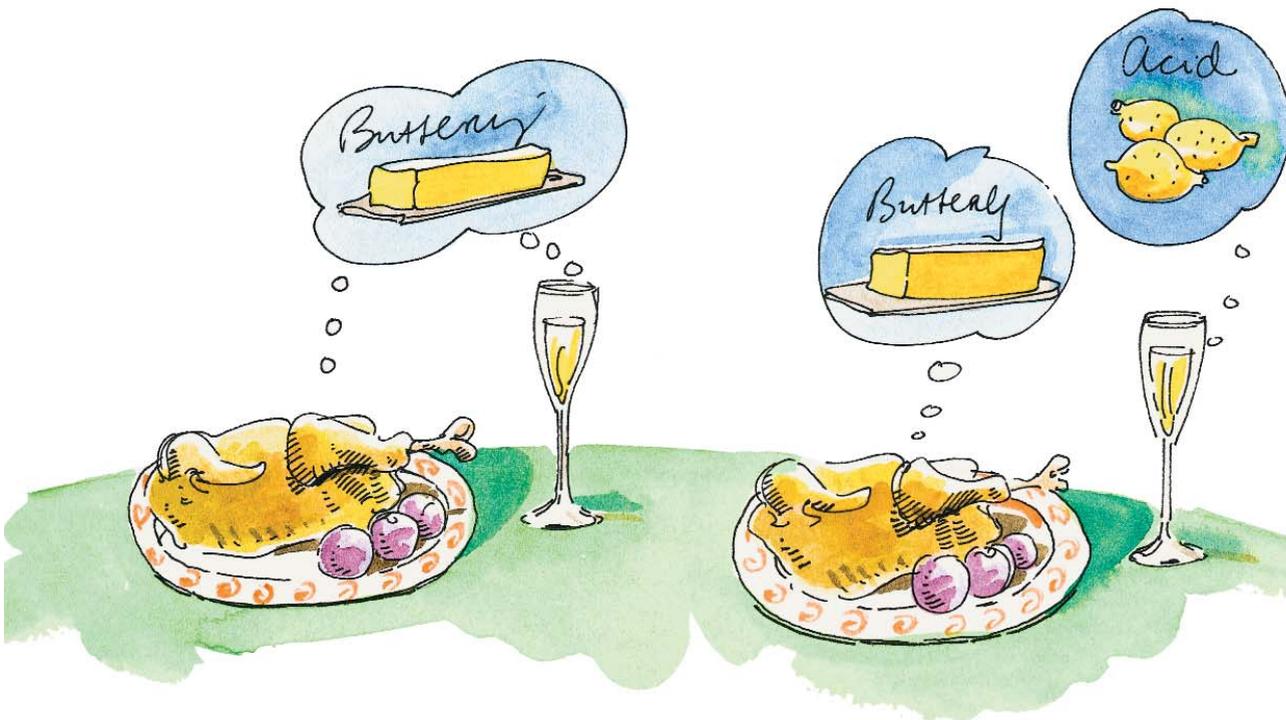
The basics boil down to just a few simple principles. Using them, you can start with virtually any food, or any wine, and not only make any number of great matches but avoid bad ones as well.

#### GEOGRAPHIC PARTNERS

To explore the compatibility of food and wine from the same region, try:

- an olive-oil-brushed grilled steak (*Bistecca Fiorentina*) or fresh pasta with wild mushrooms alongside a good-quality Chianti
- a plate of raw oysters with a crisp Muscadet from the shellfish-rich Brittany region of France
- a good bockwurst with a German Riesling or Gewürztraminer.





## LIKE AND UNLIKE PAIRINGS

To examine the similarity and contrast principles of food and wine pairing, try this three-part tasting. Ask your wine merchant for 1) a buttery, creamy Chardonnay, 2) a tart, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc with no herbal tones, and 3) a Sauvignon Blanc with some herbal flavors. Now make a simple chicken dish: sauté a chicken breast in butter, deglaze the pan with some heavy cream, and boil to reduce slightly to make a sauce. Season just with some salt. Taste this with the buttery Chardonnay. Do you like the way the flavors and textures match? Next pour a glass of the first Sauvignon Blanc. Do you like the way the wine's acidity cuts through the rich sauce, cleansing your palate for the next bite? Now add some tarragon to the sauce and taste it with the third wine, the herbal Sauvignon Blanc. This wine will still show contrast with the creamy dish, but because there's an herbal quality to both the food and the wine, the pairing now shows similarity as well as contrast. Can you taste both effects?

**Partners from the same hometown.** Simply put, wine and food in certain parts of the world have evolved as partners. In places where wines have a long history, they tend to taste good with the local foods. And so we have the Rieslings of Germany with the sweet-spicy sausages, Chianti with Tuscan pasta, and closer to home, local Cabernets and Merlots with Sonoma lamb, Long Island duck, and Texas wild game.

The geographic, or regional, principle works nicely to a point. But for today's creative cooks, it just doesn't go far enough. For one, there are exciting, delicious cuisines from many parts of the world where wine is simply not part of the heritage—Southeast Asia, Latin America, and sections of the United States, for example. Moreover, today's inventive "fusion" cuisine, which combines ingredients and techniques from around the globe, blurs geographic boundaries.

So we need to look at other, more fundamental relationships between the wine and the food to find good partners.

**Like with like.** Think of the people you enjoy being with. It's likely you have a lot in common—similar backgrounds, interests, aspects of your personality which act to help forge a bond between you. With food and wine, the same thing can happen. When you can match a characteristic in the glass and on the plate, the wine and food tend to flow together, to mirror each other, to resonate,

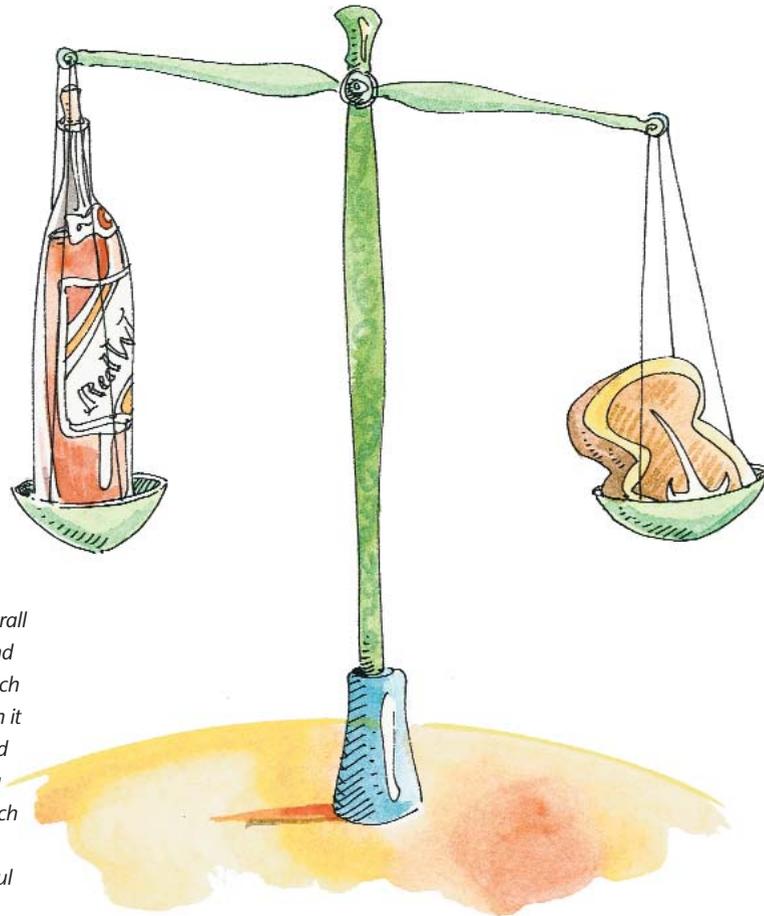
emphasizing that characteristic. This is similar to unison in music: when all the voices or instruments are sounding the same note, the effect is powerful and dramatic.

If you start with a wine that has strong cherry character, such as a Merlot or a Pinot Noir, and make a cherry glaze or dried-cherry stuffing for a meat or poultry dish, the cherry flavors in the glass will echo those on the plate. Start with a fresh pineapple salsa for grilled fish and choose a fresh-tasting, pineappley Chardonnay to magnify the tropical flavors of both.

**Opposites attract.** Sometimes, however, having something in common isn't quite enough. You might find it more interesting to choose a mate or a friend who has different interests and whose personality complements rather than matches your own. This is comparable to harmony in music, when different notes, chosen deliberately, sound pleasing together.

In the kitchen, you create such balances as sweet and sour flavors, hot and cold temperatures, smooth and crunchy textures. Likewise, when you pair a food with a wine because of intentional differences, the whole—ideally—can seem greater than the sum of its parts. This is the contrast principle, and it brings added interest and complexity to food and wine matches.

Although these similarity and contrast principles seem contradictory, both are equally valid—



### EQUAL-INTENSITY PRINCIPLE

To see how the overall intensity of food and wine matches, poach a fillet of sole, finish it with just lemon and parsley, and pour a light white wine such as a Chenin Blanc.

Next, grill a flavorful steak, season with garlic, mustard, and rosemary, and serve a big Syrah or Cabernet Sauvignon. Notice how the body and strength of flavor of the pairings match in both cases. Now try reversing the wines. Does the steak wipe out the delicate white wine? Does the red wine knock the fish out of the water?

You can also try a medium-intensity dish, such as a roast chicken with mushroom sauce, with both a full-bodied white wine, such as a Chardonnay, and a light red, such as a Pinot Noir. You might like both for different reasons.

and they can coexist in the same food and wine pairing.

**Equal intensity.** The most important thing to remember, though, when pairing food and wine, is to keep either one from overpowering the other. Both partners should have about the same weight in the mouth, the same strength of flavor. This is the equal-intensity principle, and it holds true whether the food and wine are both delicate, both full-flavored, or both middle-of-the-road.

You can also fine-tune the equal-intensity principle if you want either the food or the wine to stand out in any given pairing. Start, for example, with a dish that you really want to show off. Instead of choosing an exactly equal partner in the glass, pour something a bit lighter. Likewise, if you want the wine to star, cook your dish more simply.

### HONING YOUR SKILLS—KEEP TASTING

Just as with food, which is endlessly varied and fascinating, the more you learn about wine, the more there is to know. To keep as current as possible, haunt your local bottle shop and check out the wine magazines, especially those that describe and rate recent releases. And wine, like food, is easy to enjoy even without special knowledge. As a cook, you already

possess the instincts for putting the two together.

Hone your skills even further by holding wine tastings, sampling the wines either alone or with food. You can set these up according to themes: open six Sauvignon Blancs, Pinot Noirs, Italian reds, or sparklers from different parts of the world. Taste and see what they have in common and how they differ. Or pour an array of different types of wines, whites and reds, and test them out with a series of dishes. Invite some like-minded friends to join you, have them do the “mystery box” exercise (see the sidebar on p. 37) as a warm-up, and then turn everyone loose and compare notes.

You’ll not only learn a lot about the wines and the way they work with food, but you’ll also learn a great deal about your own palate. Best of all, you’ll be adding an extra dimension to the pleasures of the table—one that you can continue to explore every time you pull the cork on a bottle of wine.

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*Rosina Tinari Wilson is a food, wine, and travel writer and consultant based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She teaches the Food and Wine Affinities course at the California Culinary Academy and has just published a cookbook, Seafood, Pasta & Noodles—The New Classics (Ten Speed Press, 1994). ♦*