

Let's Toast Vegetarian Dishes

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE KNOWN this carnivore for a long time, it really is the same guy writing this article. As I have often told my wife and others over the past four decades, if I could find more vegetarian dishes that would pair as well with wine as ratatouille does with Châteauneuf-du-Pape, I would eat less meat. I've been searching, although not diligently, and without much luck. In all fairness, this search probably can't render many results, anymore than carnivores looking for better meat pairings than rack of lamb or steak au poivre and classified Bordeaux can find better matches.

Few can exist on ratatouille and Châteauneuf-du-Pape alone, so let's explore other great food matches with wines from the southern Rhône. The workhorse grape in this region is Grenache, one of the most widely planted red wine grapes in

the world. Because it is fairly difficult to grow well in the United States, it is not so well known here. It grows best in France, Spain and Australia, and is used chiefly in wine blends, but if the vines are old, it can be wonderful on its own. Unlike Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, which are easy to drink on their own or blended, Grenache is best consumed with food and is best when blended with Syrah or Carignan or some of the other 10 grape varieties permitted in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Other appellations in France that go well with my favorite vegetarian food include Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Rasteau, as well as Côtes-du-Rhône Villages. Another great grape for such dishes is Tempranillo, grown mainly in Spain.

My principal rule for marrying wines with vegetarian dishes is to match the most complex dishes with the most complex wines. My wife's recipe for ratatouille, which is the best I've found, is included here. Matched with that is my favorite Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines, including Château de Beaucastel or Clos des Papes, Le Domaine de Pegau, Vieux Télégraphe, or Le Clos du Caillou.

In doing the research for this article, I discovered a complex dish consisting of bread, shallots, kale, butternut squash, extra sharp cheddar cheese and white wine (see "Butternut Squash and Cheddar Bread Pudding" found at www.epicurious.com). While many wines might go with this dish (I've tried several) – my favorite was a high-quality U.S. Chardonnay (Franciscan Cuvée Sauvage) which had just the right amount of oak without being overpowering. A northern Rhône white wine from Marsanne and Roussanne grapes would marry exceptionally. It would also work well with other complex vegetable dishes.

Wine rule number two seems to be that you have more pairing choices if you normally drink only one color wine, whether white or red. Since so many vegetarian dishes involve multiple ingredients, that increases the chances that your preference will work well. A very simple pairing involves one of my favorites, Red Zinfandel. I find that it marries marvelously with many bean dishes, Indian dishes, especially dal (lentils) and a chance discovery – posole or hominy that is stewed with

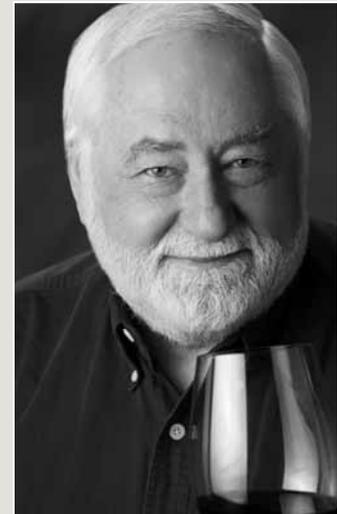


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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tomatoes, green chilies and herbs.

My final pairing marries the most complex, sophisticated grapes, Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo, with their perfect accompaniment, mushrooms, as well as many grains and risotto. Whether simply sautéed in butter or made into a terrine of mushrooms, the earthiness of the fungus pairs perfectly with Pinot Noir, especially those from France.

Wine rule number three relates to the complexity factor in marrying the wines and food. I almost always drink resolved or older wines. This habit lends itself well to pairing up wines with complex vegetarian dishes.

While researching this article, I discovered this addendum, which details choices for matching rich, white and full-bodied red wines to vegetarian dishes. "Which Wines to Pick with Vegetarian Food?" appeared in *Decanter* in June 2007, and may be found at http://www.matchingfoodandwine.com/articles/20070521_1.

A Sante! 

See recipe on the next page

