

JOYCE GOLDSTEIN



“Spring is on the menu of many chefs,” the news brief read.

“But don’t expect to find asparagus and artichokes on the menu at Alain Ducasse’s new restaurant Adour in New York City. They have been banned from the ingredient list. . . . Their crime? They are just not easy to pair with great wines.”

Yes, there are a number of foods that are tricky to match with wine, but they’re certainly not impossible. Many sommeliers know how to make those pairings harmonious and how to work with chefs to make their dishes more wine-friendly.

Asparagus contains phosphorus and mercaptans, both of which are rough on wine. But there’s no need to eliminate asparagus hollandaise or asparagus risotto from the menu; the richness of the butter will soothe some of the vegetal quality. Olive oil and nut oils can also tame the grassiness. Chablis, Pinot Grigio, and Sauvignon Blanc have enough acidity to hold the vegetable in check.

Artichokes are even trickier. They contain an acid called cynarin, which tends to make everything else taste sweeter. Steamed artichokes can distort white wines, making them seem sweet and flat, and can make red wines taste thin. But if the artichokes are sautéed, they take on a nutty quality more amenable to wine pairings. The chef can use lemon, lemon zest, or preserved lemon in the preparation, or offer lemon wedges to counteract the sweetness. And the sommelier can select a wine with high acidity to help bring the pairing into balance. Think Txakolina, Vinho Verde, Vernaccia,

Verdicchio. If you toss sautéed artichokes with mushrooms and pancetta in pasta, they can even behave with an elegant, non-tannic red.

Vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and brussels sprouts are high in sulfur and thus quite pungent. To keep their smell from overpowering the wine, toss them with neutral items such as pasta or rice, dress them with butter or toasted nuts, or combine them with sweeter vegetables such as carrots and caramelized onions. Oven roasting is another option.

Mildly hot jalapeño or poblano chilies are not major troublemakers, but the extreme heat of Scotch bonnets or habaneros can wreak havoc on oaky whites and tannic reds. That hasn’t stopped chef Rick Bayless from serving wine at Frontera Grill and Topolobampo in Chicago. Sommelier Jill Gubesch suggests you pair not with the protein, but with the sauce. Green-chili-based sauces are most often served with white wines, and dried-chili sauces seem to work best with reds, especially if there is tomato in the mix. With sauces that have a hint of heat or spice, try whites such as Riesling, Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc, or Gewürztraminer; a soft, fruity red like Zinfandel; a dry rosé; or even a white Zinfandel.

Tomatoes can also be difficult, because they have both high acidity and sweetness. A savvy sommelier will serve medium-bodied, aromatic reds with high acidity. Barbera, Sangiovese, Old World Merlot, even a dry rosé will harmonize; if your guest requests a white, consider a Vernaccia or Sauvignon Blanc.

Eggs present a challenge because

Don’t toss key ingredients from the menu just because of wine-pairing difficulties.

the creamy yolks coat the palate, making it more difficult to taste the wine. On many contemporary menus, however, savory flans, deep-fried egg yolks, poached eggs, and egg-yolk-filled ravioli are all the rage. Ironically, the same sommelier who banned asparagus and artichokes raved about a successful pairing of sweetbreads meunière topped with a soft poached egg, toasted brioche, and wild mushrooms—it worked with a buttery Chardonnay.

Talk about a double whammy: the other night at Quince in San Francisco, I had asparagus with a breadcrumb-coated, deep-fried, poached egg yolk. The Müller-Thurgau worked like a charm, as would a Friulano, a Pinot Bianco, or a glass of brut Champagne. I’m so glad sommelier Christie DuFault didn’t nix that dish!

While it’s true that certain foods can be difficult with wine, it’s equally true that certain wines can be problematic for the chef. Oaky Chardonnay battles with sharp-flavored ingredients such as leeks, broccoli rabe, olives, capers, asparagus, and tomatoes, as well as with sweet components such as fruity sauces and coconuts. And spicy foods accentuate the oak and the alcohol in the wine. High-alcohol wines can annihilate delicate dishes. They often lack acidity, which is a key for balance, and they are lethal with spicy foods. Salt in a dish can make the wine seem hotter.

By tasting together, chef and sommelier can mitigate these menu problems and turn them into peaceful pairings.

Joyce Goldstein is a restaurant and food consultant and columnist, a cooking teacher, a prolific cookbook author, and the former chef-owner of Square One Restaurant in San Francisco.