

Dealing with the Heat

Pairing advice from a Master of Wine who loves spicy food

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Spicy food poses distinct challenges for wine: the “fire” of chiles – fresh or dried, sauce or paste – may dominate if not deaden all other sensations. How severely we are affected depends on the type of chile, the firepower of the dose – and, of course, on our individual sensitivities. How hot is too hot for wine? It just does not seem sensible to drink wine with incendiary food that turns you white at the first bite, then bright red!

For food that is excruciatingly hot, the normal alcohol content of table wine (11% to 14%, and sometimes more) tends to fan rather than dampen the flames. German Rieslings from the Mosel containing around 9% alcohol are the cooling exceptions – particularly the sweeter, richer Spätlese versions. However, many fine German Rieslings (QbA and Kabinett styles) are usually too light and delicate to withstand highly spiced food. There are also some peppers such as the habanero and Scotch Bonnet which could be called “wine killers.” When you eat Capsicum with a Scoville rating in excess of 100,000 – and certainly above 200,000, as is common with this species – the best antidotes are the sweetened yogurt-based lassi drinks of India, or perhaps just a glass of water. Cold beer without aggressive carbon dioxide works fairly well, particularly richer beers and ales with meat dishes, spicy barbecue and coconut milk curries. There are many imports that fit the bill. You may also opt for one of America’s many artisanal pale ales and ambers which have a full, spicy and faintly sweet taste. These remedies are already well known to chile addicts – unlike the many wines that also have a reasonable affinity for hot dishes.

To identify wines suitable for spicy foods, we need to touch first on the relevant parameters of taste. Scientists tell us that the heat of Capsicum is detected by our nerves and not our taste buds. Thus oral tastes are not only governed by sensors on our tongues

that signal bitterness, acidity, sweetness and saltiness, but also by other sensations transmitted to the brain through our nervous system. As with the matching of non-spicy food and wine, we should never forget the extent to which taste preferences vary by individual. Research shows that, while we share most taste receptor genes, a certain number differ from one person to the next. Taste is in fact a multidimensional phenomenon governed by genetics, learning, context and other factors. Tolerance of hot peppers may be developed automatically during childhood in countries with a regular diet of spicy food. It may be telling that in the cultures which are major producers and consumers of wine – such as France, Italy, and Spain – highly seasoned, fiery preparations are almost unknown. The hottest arrabiata tomato sauce is child’s play compared to an authentic coconut red curry or vindaloo!

Clearly, the heat of peppers is also an acquired taste; witness the popularity of hot sauces and Mexican restaurants in the United States. Many wine lovers prefer to drink wine with a spicy dish, but are often disappointed with the wines they choose – and the advice they receive from wine and food professionals. Most of the recommendations are rather limited in terms of the available options, and far too rigid overall. How many times have you heard: “Gewurztraminer works well with spicy preparations”? Over the years, I have tested many wines with countless spicy dishes of diverse origins – even unlikely combinations, just to see the result – and have developed a strategy that I find generally successful. Here are a few observations that may be helpful:


- ❖ Chile peppers inevitably mute the subtleties of any wine, so select modestly priced wines to serve with spicy dishes.
- ❖ Complex, subtle old vintages will be destroyed by hot food and should be saved for chile-free meals.
- ❖ Sweet beverages do tend to offset the heat, so wines with some degree of residual sugar are good candidates for some spicy foods (e.g., German Riesling Spätlese, Vouvray, off-dry rosé, etc.).


- ❖ Dry, even sharp white wines can work well with intensely seasoned, pungent, salty and sour soups and preparations (e.g., Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc, Muscadet, Assyrtiko, etc.).
- ❖ Alcohol can act like “gasoline on the fire” of chile-laced food, and highly alcoholic wines (above 14 percent) should be avoided as a rule.
- ❖ Rich, fat, ripe wines that are fairly high in alcohol are still good matches for spicy preparations since alcohol has a tempering sweet taste, provided that the wines are soft: neither tannic nor acidic (e.g., Grenache-based reds, New World Merlot).
- ❖ Mild dishes can be transformed into spicy ones by the addition of hot sauces or salsas at the table, so it makes sense to pay attention to these increasingly common condiments because they will certainly affect wine choices.

Translating these observations into a practical strategy, the first step is to think about the food preparation, then select a wine that strikes a balance and deals with the heat. For seafood and white meats such as pork and chicken breast which have salty, pungent, and sharp (acidic) seasonings – and fresh chile peppers – clean, unoaked white wines with relatively high acidity are often good foils, as are truly dry rosés. Fish, light meats and fried noodles in richer or sweetened sauces call for round, relatively soft whites and reds – those that have ample fruit and lower acidities – as well as off-dry rosés. Potent and fiery preparations based on beef, lamb, or duck can only be tolerated by sturdier and fuller red wines.


For spicy dishes, concentrate on a fairly limited number of taste characteristics of the wine that share a commonality with the dish. Focusing on the style of the wine and less on grape variety or color yields a much wider – and far more interesting – range of wines. Consider attributes such as the concentration and body of the wine, the influence (or absence) of oak aging, and, in particular, alcohol, acidity and tannin levels. All of these elements are at least as important as grape variety. If you pursue this approach, you will open the door to possibilities that can include white, red and rosé wines – all candidates for the same dish.


Generalities aside, you may be wondering what wines might be enjoyable with the Szechwan beef you plan to take out tonight on the way home. Here are some well-known Chinese, Thai, Indian and Mexican dishes together with wine recommendations:


 **Thai Tom Yum Goong, Tom Yum Gai and similar spicy, sour soups:** Australian Riesling (dry); Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand, South Africa and the Loire Valley; Assyrtiko from Greece

 **Gumbo with andouille sausage, spicy black bean soup:** Côtes du Rhône (red), Australian Grenache, Spanish Garnacha, basic California Merlot

 **Seafood ceviche with green chile pepper, fish tacos with cilantro and jalapeno, Jamaican jerk chicken:** dry Rieslings from Australia, Alsace and Austria; Grüner Veltliner; Touraine Sauvignon Blanc; Rueda; Verdicchio; South African Chenin Blanc; bone dry rosés from Greece & other Mediterranean countries

 **Szechwan or Thai whole fish, deep fried with sauce, Thai coconut curries:** Italian Pinot Bianco and Falanghina; Alsace Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer; Argentine Torrontes; Tavel or Provence rosé; off-dry California rosés and blush wines (e.g., White Zinfandel)

 **Kung Pao chicken, Vietnamese lemongrass chicken, barbecued pork ribs:** Mâcon-Villages, Vouvray; California Merlot; Rioja joven or crianza; Montepulciano d'Abruzzo; Côtes du Rhône (red or rosé)

 **Chicken tikka masala or Jhalfrezi, Lamb saag, Szechwan beef, Hunan lamb or duck, enchiladas with ranchera sauce, beef chili:** Côtes du Rhône-Villages & crus such as Vacqueyras, Lirac; Primitivo and Nero d'Avola from Italy; Rioja reserva; "GSM" blends and Shiraz/Syrah from Australia; Argentine Malbec; and California Cabernet or Zinfandel (14% alcohol maximum for these last five wines if at all possible)

Wines selected utilizing the guidelines suggested here can cope with spicy food, and the options go well beyond a few familiar choices. Remember that taste preferences are

individual, so pairing advice should not be seen as a set of inflexible rules. Feel free to experiment with a diversity of wines sharing stylistic similarities to find ones that suit your own palate and favorite hot foods. There is no reason to be confined to a “one wine fits all palates” approach when dealing with the heat!

For more advice about pairing wine with spicy foods, cheese and other dishes, you may find it helpful to consult my **Wine and Food Guide** which is freely accessible on my website, www.vintrinsic.com.

