

The Best Wines to Pair With Chinese Food

For most people, beer, not wine, is the drink of choice when it comes to Chinese. Wall Street Journal wine columnist Lettie Teague took on the vinous challenge of finding a worthy match, with surprising discoveries



PHOTO: KOREN SHADMI



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“WE NEVER DRINK WINE with Chinese food,” my friend Michelle Shih, a first-generation Chinese American, confessed during a recent dinner at Peking Duck House in New York with our husbands and a food-critic friend, Alan.

Michelle isn’t alone. Most people I know pair beer, not wine, with Chinese food. Its unfamiliar, frequently intense flavors make pairing wines with it a difficult undertaking. A single dish can flood the palate with sweet, spicy, salty and sour flavors, sometimes all at once. And then there are the condiments: Sauces like soy and the ubiquitous black vinegar not only up the pairing challenge, they almost discourage wine-drinking.

Of course, all wine lovers—especially professional ones—relish a challenge, and finding a worthy match for Chinese seemed to me like a public service of sorts. But where to begin? There’s no such thing as “Chinese” food, after all, but rather eight distinct regional cuisines. Three in particular—the sweet Cantonese and the spicier Hunan and Sichuan (Szechuan)—show up most often on American menus.

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The Peking Duck House on Mott Street in Manhattan’s Chinatown (there’s also a location uptown) doesn’t feature the food of one particular region—“unless you want to consider Mott Street a region,” as Alan said. Like most Chinese restaurants in the U.S., it serves dishes from several regions, as well as some purely American inventions, such as General Tso’s chicken, the classic, sweet-spicy fried chicken.

While the restaurant’s fare is representative of the kind of Chinese food most American diners encounter, the real reason I’d chosen the place was its BYO policy. Patrons can bring multiple bottles of wine, with no corkage fee.

I bought three bottles each of white and red wine and one rosé, almost all under \$20 a bottle. I avoided white wines that were too oaky (think big, rich Chardonnays) or too high in acidity with too little weight (New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc). When it came to reds, I eschewed those with lots of tannin or oak, since they can make a spicy dish taste like wood. Instead, I chose wines that were young and lively, with an abundance of fruit and bright acidity—two qualities I deemed necessary to complement intensely flavored food. I also made sure they could work with competing flavors, since Chinese restaurants rarely serve in courses.

Our Peking Duck Dinner for Five featured an array of dishes, including hot and sour and duck soups, steamed dumplings, barbecue beef, General Tso's chicken and, of course, Peking duck. Save for the dried-out strips of barbecue beef, it was all very flavorful—and a pretty good deal at \$33 per person.

The first wine we opened was the 2015 JCB No. 5 Côtes de Provence Rosé (\$17), a Grenache blend that Michelle's husband, Jon, regarded with approval. "The French believe that you should drink rosé with Chinese food," Jon said. He wasn't quite sure why, but this particular rosé supported the French view, at least in part. With a lively nature, bright acidity and juicy red fruit, the No. 5 paired well with the sweeter dishes. Spicier fare, however, knocked it flat.

Next we tried two Rieslings, the grape most sommeliers favor with Chinese food, since it delivers both sweetness and acidity. Of course, there are many versions of Riesling, from sweet to bone-dry. I chose one from each extreme. The slightly sweet 2014 François Baur Herrenweg, from Alsace (\$16), worked well with the soups, accentuating the sweetness of the hot and sour soup in particular. But with everything else, the 2014 Weingut Bründlmayer Kamptaler Terrassen, a dry example from Austria (\$20), proved more versatile.

The third white wine was a Gewürztraminer, another sommelier favorite for Asian fare thanks to its richness, weight and exotic aromas of lychee and roses. Although some Gewürztraminers can be sweet, the 2014 vintage from Lazy Creek Vineyards in California's Anderson Valley (\$24) was dry and full-bodied. Remarkably versatile, its unctuousness smoothed out the heat of the spicy dishes and gave substance to the less interesting food.

We opened the reds—all light- to medium-bodied—last. The 2014 Calera Central Coast Pinot Noir, from Hollister, Calif. (\$24), marked by lots of ripe red fruit, was a flexible wine, working with many different dishes. Lush and lively, the 2015 Clos de la Roilette Fleurie Cuvée Christal, a Beaujolais, France, cru (\$18), was almost as good, though the saltiness of the soy sauce made a dent in the fruit. But the 2014 Azelia Dolcetto d’Alba Bricco dell’Oriolo, from Italy’s Piedmont (\$12), was too tannic and rustic to go with much; it blunted rather than blended. A lighter, less tannic Dolcetto might have worked better.

As we went back and forth, tasting all seven wines with the different dishes, Alan noted that while the sauce determined the wine in most cuisines, it was the opposite with Chinese. “The sauce will almost always diminish the wine,” he said. (He also suggested restaurants install Lazy Susans just for the wine bottles.)

Everyone agreed that the rosé and whites were the most food-flexible, followed by the Pinot Noir. My husband, Roger, wondered why I hadn’t brought more options since there was no corkage fee. If only we had more wines to try, he sighed.

There were certainly a number of others I might have added, such as Chenin Blanc and Grüner Veltliner, both white grapes with good weight and acidity. And, of course, Champagne and other sparkling wines, especially rosé, pair well with Chinese food—for many of the same reasons that beer is a good match. (Bubbles help clear the palate, counteracting the salt and the heat of the spice.) In fact, a sparkling rosé might be the best choice for wine drinkers who don’t want to think too much about pairings.

The Lucien Albrecht Crémant d’Alsace Brut Rosé (\$16) that my husband and I recently had with some Chinese takeout certainly proved this point. While the spicy orange beef was dull, the steamed dumplings lumpish and the General Tso’s chicken sickly sweet, the Lucien Albrecht was lush and fruity, balancing out the sweetness of the chicken and almost able to enliven the beef. “Maybe what Chinese food really needs is a wine that has a little dazzle, that’s fun,” said Roger. He might just have a point.