

Wine Spectator

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PAIRING
WINE &
CHOCOLATE

CHOCOLATE

Matchmaking

BY OWEN DUGAN

Rules tend to breed exceptions, and matching wine and food is no different. Red goes with meat and white goes with fish, yet Pinot Noir and salmon make a fine pairing. So in setting up a dinner or a tasting, the tendency is to stick with the familiar or rely on educated guesses to refine your target. A recent tasting of wine and chocolate began that way, then quickly turned into a sort of free-for-all, with new bottles being procured and bars being tasted broadly. Ultimately, it delivered a few surprises while reinforcing a few old rules.

The original, on-paper matches were selected by Roxanne Browning, who followed a career on Madison Avenue and a turn as mayor of Northport on Long Island with starting a company ExoticChocolateTasting.com that runs business socials tasting events for corporations.

Browning brought about 10 pairings, then we both added more wines and chocolates when they seemed appropriate. I wholeheartedly recommend this method; it is as if your senses become more acute as you go along, and the palate-brain connection more efficient.

"I want to take them on a journey," Browning says of the guests at her tastings. "Each element makes its own statement, but they should progress in natural order, too." When setting up, be sure to start with dry bars and wine and move to sweet --- sugar is persistent and will make less-sweet bars taste unpleasant.

Also alternate between complex and straightforward wines and chocolates. Palate fatigue sets in if tasters have to wrap their senses around wave after wave of multifaceted flavors. Simpler or more familiar flavors can help orient you.

Browning recommends starting with white wine. "Riesling works particularly well; it's a nice entry and very versatile," she says.

The Fritz Windisch Riesling Kabinett Rheinhessen Niersteiner Spiegelberg 2012 she poured was a nice hello; subtle, with a light lemon drop freshness and faint honey notes. The best chocolate with it was from a new-to-me store: Xocolatti in New York. The citrus notes in the lemon- and ginger-infused dark chocolate (www.xocolatti.com \$10 for 2.47 ounces) and in the Riesling build a bridge, and the prickly effect of the ginger



and tangy finish on the wine were refreshing.

A note on sweetness: Browning and I (and most people who have an opinion on the subject) have one firm rule about wine and chocolate, which is that the wine must be sweeter than the chocolate. Dry wine will often turn sour or bitter with sweeter chocolate. In the aforementioned case, though, I would not say the wine was sweeter, but its freshness and brightness made it a good foil to the chocolate.

The rule did hold true with a match of Romariz Vintage Port 2011 and a dark chocolate Papua New Guinea bar from Dandelion. Browning warns of the bar, from San Francisco bean-to-bar producer (www.dandelionchocolate.com \$10 for 2 ounces): “You have to be a little patient with this.” She’s right. It is brooding and smoky, then turns on a dime and brightens. Likewise, the Port is superrich, with stewed red fruit flavors, then a clean finish. Taken together any time of day they plunge you into a very happy post-feast satiety.

At this point we opened a bar of To’ak, a new producer run by Americans and locals in Ecuador. To’ak has garnered attention first of all for price and scarcity only 574 50-gram (1.76-ounce) bars were made, priced at \$260 each (www.toakchocolate.com). Whether this is tenable as a business model remains to be seen, but the slightly cakey chocolate offers earthy, leathery aromas and dark fruit. Here the Port acted almost as a welcome sauce, dressing the chocolate with a little brightness.

Finally we turned to the dried grape category, with Chateau Dereszla Tokaji Aszu Eszencia 2008. This gorgeous wine has deep, sweet honeysuckle character and the long reach that shows why the sweetest wine should be saved for last. The Amedei Toscano Blond with peach and apricot (www.amedei.com \$8.50 for 1.8 ounces) brings bits of stone fruit to sweeten and lighten the dark chocolate. Browning saw the textures as complementary: “The rich, smooth texture of the wine contradicts the nibs in the chocolate.” The peach also pulled similar aromas out of the glass that were not noticeable before eating the chocolate.

The tasting’s takeaway: Open up and try more. Rather than starting with rigid pairings, start wide open to anything that might happen. Set an order, give yourself time for each thing you taste --- Browning says at least 30 seconds; I would triple that --- and try every combination. Anyone who matches food and wine knows that for all the knowledge and planning there are those moments when something really surprising happens. Some of the best matches are counterintuitive, and won’t happen if you don’t commit to experimenting. And even if it is not a perfect match, you’re still drinking wine and eating chocolate.

TASTING GUIDELINES

There are few hard rules in matching wine and chocolate, but the following general principles will help focus your aim.

- **Taste broadly.** Don’t limit yourself to the planned matches; happy matches can come from unexpected combinations, and the more you taste the sharper your palate will become.
- **End sweet.** Sugar is more persistent than dark chocolate, so taste sweeter chocolates and wines last.
- **Drink sweet.** Though there are exceptions, they are few. The most universally agreed upon rule is that the wine should be sweeter than the chocolate.
- **Match like to like.** If there are nuts or nutty notes in the chocolate, find a wine that has them too. Ditto fruity, sweet, floral and so on.
- **Complements attract.** Sometimes a fruity wine can provide flavors missing from a dry, earthy bar.