

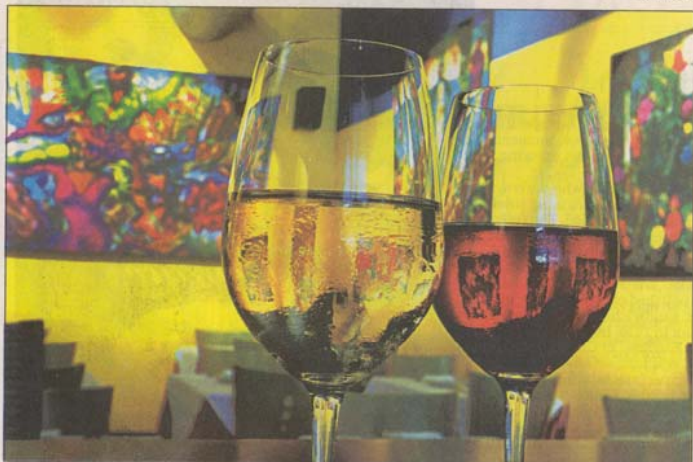
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GOOD EATING
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Tribune photo by Bob Fila

At Salpicon, Vincent Satkoff steers diners toward wines that match a dish's sauce.

Matching complex flavors of Mexico

Vincent Satkoff doesn't mind if you start off dinner at his Salpicon restaurant with a margarita, but he would be very happy if you switch to wine during the meal. For him, drinking margaritas all night long is like having a martini with every course—too, too much.



Bill Daley
Tribune food and wine reporter

But when it comes to Mexican food, many Americans think their only choices are tequila, beer or margaritas. We forget that Mexico is the oldest wine-producing country in the Americas, dating back almost 500 years to the Spanish conquest, and that Baja California is garnering increasing attention for its new boutique wineries.

Perhaps the reason is that most Mexican wine stays in Mexico. Or we love the opportunity to party-hearty with margaritas too much to switch. Or, perhaps, the prospect of making a good wine-food pairing seems daunting with Mexican fare.

"You have to think about it in a different way," said Satkoff, who offers more than 900 wines at his restaurant. The first thing, of course, is to drink what you like to drink.

"Don't be forced to drink red wine if you hate red wine," he said.

In general, Satkoff thinks the best white wines for Mexican food are those that are unoaked, crisp and with good acidity. Consider sauvignon blanc, gruner veltliner or Australian riesling, he suggests. For red, go with fruit-forward wines that are lightly oaked and with good acidity. Satkoff recommends pinot noir from California, Oregon or New Zealand (but not from Burgundy), California zinfandel, Argentine malbec and barbera, Valpolicella and Chianti classico from Italy.

Take your wine cues from the sauce, not the main ingredient, he said.

At Salpicon, quail may be served with an ancho-honey sauce. Because the sauce has some sweetness, a dry white wine would taste "tinny." He would recommend instead a fruity pinot noir, a zinfandel or a Valpolicella from northern Italy.

Rick Bayless of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo restaurants offers similar advice. Look for fruit-forward wines, he said, and look for a good amount of acidity to balance the complex flavors of the food.

"You're looking for brightness," he said, using a term defined by the Wine Lover's Companion as a descriptive for wines with a "fresh, fruity character."

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Wine and enchiladas, ole!

Choosing one dish to represent an entire cuisine is a daunting task. You want something accessible, inexpensive and relatively universal. That's why we chose chicken enchiladas in red sauce to represent Mexican fare in a food-wine pairing. As an "everyman" dish practically everybody knows, nothing beats it. We bought ours at Su Casa Restaurant in Chicago. The enchiladas were straightforward: boneless chicken wrapped in soft corn tortillas and topped with a mild tomato salsa and melted cheese. The Good Eating staff conducted an informal blind tasting, first tasting the wines on their own and then with the enchiladas. The food pairing score is shown below.

Reds

2000 L.A.Cetto Petite Sirah

How fitting that the top red wine is from Baja California in Mexico. The wine, which ranked first on its own and when paired with the enchilada, had a lively pepperiness, an incense-like aroma and plenty of berry flavor that held up to the sauce and the cheese. **A++** | \$7

2002 Hartford Pinot Noir

From California's Sonoma Coast comes this deep, concentrated red with plenty of peppery berry flavors and a smoky, almost baconlike aroma. The chicken and tortilla flavors get a boost from this pinot, although one taster thought the wine took on a slight metallic tinge. **A+** | \$18

2003 Antano Tempranillo

Very soft with plenty of peppery flavor, this Spanish red offered fruit and aromatic pinelike notes. Tasters who liked this wine thought it gave a "strong backbone" to the enchiladas. **A+** | \$5

2002 La Carraia Sangiovese

Astringent, with hints of eucalyptus, this Umbrian red matched the enchilada in terms of intensity. Those who liked the pairing thought the food tamed the tannins but naysayers felt the match brought little improvement. **A+** | \$10

2002 Catherine & Pierre Breton Bourgueil Trinch

Those who liked this Loire Valley wine, made with cabernet franc grapes, talked of its spicy finish and flavor accents of mushroom and eucalyptus. The wine's punch enhanced the enchiladas, they thought. Others thought the wine tasted sour, thin, unpleasant and improved little paired with food. **A+** | \$11

Whites

2002 Mitchell Riesling

Riesling is considered the ultimate food wine and this pairing of a Clare Valley white from Australia with Mexican food proves the point. Tasters thought the wine balanced the enchilada's cheesy richness with skill. The wine also enhanced the flavor of the chicken filling and underscored the subtle corn flavor of the tortilla. **A++** | \$12

2003 Jurtschitsch Sonnhof Gruner Veltliner Grube

This Austrian white has a fruity floral presence that one taster likened to "gardenias crossed with apricots." Panelists thought it a very good match, working particularly well as a foil to the melted cheese. The wine's score rose two points with food added. **A++** | \$13

2003 Pazo San Mauro Albarino

This Spanish wine from the Rias Baixas region had a brightness some panelists found appealing, but others judged it too thin and acidic. Adding the enchilada boosted the wine's flavor profile, lifting its score a full point. **A++** | \$10

2003 Altas Cumbres Viognier

From Argentina's Mendoza region, this wine had a citrus crispness that matched the enchilada well. "Very nice teamwork here, ole!" exclaimed one panelist. Naysayers thought the wine added little to the food. **A+** | \$8

2001 Gustave Lorentz Gewurztraminer

Some wines work with certain foods, others don't. This Alsatian white was hands-down the top scorer on its own, winning praises for its tropical fruit flavors. But most panelists thought it way too honeylike for the enchilada, dropping its score two full points. **A++** | \$15

—B.D.

Sources: We found these wines at Binny's Ivanhoe Castle, Sam's Wines and Spirits and Famous Liquors in Forest Park. Not every wine may be in stock at your local stores; prices may vary from store to store. Prices are rounded off.

A++ Excellent **A++** Very good **A+** Good **A** Fair (No corkscrews) Poor

At Topolobampo, guests receive a pocket card featuring tips on food-wine pairings from Bays and sommelier Jill Gubesch. They focus on chilies, herbs and other flavorings found in Mexican fare.

Like Satkoff, they recommend pairing the wine with the sauce and not the meat, poultry or fish on the plate. They also suggest that green chilies tend to work best with white wine while red chilies work best with reds. And sauces that are tomato-based do well with Italian barbaresco and sangiovese.

"Wine offers more thrilling complexity than any other beverage—more intricate layers of

aroma, more diversity of flavor; more spirit," according to the pamphlet. "Which means wine is absolutely the most perfect match for the complex, varied dishes Mexico's classic cooks have turned out for centuries."

So, be inspired. Put down that punch bowl-sized margarita goblet with the cactus stem and pick up a classic wine glass, turn to the staff for a recommendation or two, and enjoy Mexican food with wine that works.

Hear Bill Daley on WBBM Newsradio 780 at 6:21 p.m. and 10:22 p.m. each Tuesday and 7:52 p.m. each Saturday and Sunday.