

Wine Without Food is Like Wearing a Tie Without a Shirt

By John Mariani

John Mariani is an American food and wine journalist, critic, and author known for decades of writing on dining, culture, and culinary history. He spent 35 years as Esquire's food and travel correspondent, was a wine columnist for Bloomberg News, and has written numerous acclaimed books on food and drink, including The Encyclopedia of American Food & Drink. Read more of his work at www.johnmariani.com.

Centuries—millennia really—of praise lavished on wine as a divine drink have unfortunately obscured the reality that wine drunk on its own diminishes the pleasure that would otherwise be had by drinking it with food.

It's like listening to a baseball game on the radio or shadow boxing. It's like *Reader's Digest* or visiting only Hong Kong on a trip to China.

Wines' first usage was to go with food, and one may assume the earliest efforts, in the Caucasus region about 8,000 years ago, were modest. The idea that wine, containing alcohol, was a better alternative to drinking contaminated water came along when people moved into cities. Yet the effect of wine, which the Bible calls a gift of God, has certainly been disassociated from its role as an accompaniment to food—even if the enjoyment leads to tipsiness or drunkenness.

To be sure, there are plenty of wines that can serve as an aperitif, though it's always questionable when a person just orders "a glass of dry Chardonnay," which shows about as much discrimination as buying a pair of black socks. Even then, that Chardonnay's middling virtues will be enhanced when sipped with snacks, canapes or appetizer, whether it's pretzels, shrimp cocktail or sushi.

Drinking red wines all on their own is even a little ridiculous, because their flavors and tannin lack the stimulus that food, especially fat or some kind, provides. Whether it's with a hamburger or ribeye, a red wine will always taste better than on its own.

For the same reason eating food without a beverage makes no sense—and water doesn't do anything at all for the beef, onions, cheese and ketchup involved. Wine writers are constantly pairing up what they insist is the ideal wine to go with a specific dish, but the options are so numerous for any dish as to be little better than the advice of having white wine with seafood and red wine with meat.

There are wholly natural pairings that make perfect sense when it comes to the food and wine within a region. Why would anyone eating, say, Sicilian food order a French Burgundy or serving a dish of Spanish paella with a German Riesling? After all, the grapes of a region—sometimes indigenous—grow in the same soil as the food, and that soil contains the same nutrients and minerals absorbed by the grapes.

Take, for example, a modest Italian white like Vermentino, once a workhorse grape, very light, very pale and in the past indistinguishable from others. But modern examples are not only

better but show off their regional character, so that the Tenuta Ammiraglio Massovivo Vermentino 2024 (\$22) from Tuscany that comes from seaside vineyards is quite different from the Val delle Rose “Litorale” 2024 (\$20) from Maremma’s inland vineyards and Olianias Vermentino di Sardegna 2024 (\$23) from the terroir of the island in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

So, too, an oaky, vanilla-rich Chardonnay from Napa Valley is going to taste a lot different from a more subtle example from Oregon’s Willamette Valley. New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs like Cloudy Bay are mostly made into a sweet style almost like punch, whereas those from the Loire Valley have more tempered fruit, vegetal and mineral flavors that go with the local goods like goat’s cheese, rillettes of pork, perch in a *beurre blanc*.

If any rules should apply with regard to wines, it should be that they match up with the food traditionally produced by growers and cooks who know from long experience that the Pinot Noirs from California or Australia taste very little like those from France, as they should, given the widely varying terroirs of those nations. Japanese drink beer or sake (itself a beer) with the food grown from farms and fished from the sea, and wines are almost always a lesser match-up with sushi and sashimi. The post-war affection for beef in Japan has, oddly enough, caused the creation of ultra-fatty wagyu beef, with which beer is a decent accompaniment but big red American or Australian wines are a much better idea.

Sometimes there’s nothing better than to slug down an ice cold bottle of beer or Coke, and tea and coffee make for good pick-me-ups all on their own. So can a glass of wine, but it will be made better if there’s some food on the table.