

On a recent trip to Napa with the Dailys and the Vandewaters, the five of us talked non-stop for three days about wine and food, food and wine, and then more wine and food. We ate our way through the Valley and drank to our hearts' delights. We dined prominent wine makers and even took notes we could actually read on some of the wine and food. However, we did extensive research on champagne and sparkling wine, each becoming an expert in our own way as we did the research.

So, let's talk about champagne this month. I love champagne and certain California sparkling wines, too. It is typical for a meal to start or finish with champagne. I always prefer it at the start. It loosens the tongue, cuts the dust from your throat, and makes everyone just a tad more bearable. My favorite pairing with the bubbly is seafood. Grilled or poached scallops in wine butter and cream, drunken lobster (courtesy of Cathy Lewis at the Nick of Thyme), smoked trout or salmon with all the trimmings, lobster or crab cakes, and the list goes on – you get the idea.

Although I've seen it done (it's beyond my skill set), champagne with red meat is best to avoid. There are also a few cheeses that work with champagne (but not in Nashville and definitely not Cheese-Wiz). So you can avoid these two pairings for safety's sake. Also, though it seems popular, pass on chocolate desserts and champagne. Napoleon would roll over in his grave.

So, what are you matching as far as flavors are concerned in champagne? The most common taste and smell aspects of champagne are yeast, citrus, honey, wheat, biscuits, toast, mushrooms and nuts.

So those would be the elements you'd look for in the food you're matching up. For example, whole-wheat crackers take on new flavors when paired with champagne. Simple, but delicious. The second element you're matching with champagne and food is the acid. You've got lots of acid and so you can clear your palate of strong flavors – like fish. Then, enjoy a long effervescent finish in your mouth. The feel of the wine in your mouth is also important to your enjoyment. Most young champagnes give off big sensations. Mature champagnes let the wine show through and so have more complex flavors. Sort of like an interesting woman.

Here is one idea I got from Ed McCarthy (author of Champagne for Dummies). I've tried it and loved it – champagne with eggs. Put in some Ricotta or soft white cheese, some truffles and enjoy it for a Father's Day brunch. Mushrooms in the eggs work, too. By the way, if you're making Mimosas (who doesn't?), then use one champagne to drink with eggs (the good one) and one to mix with the orange juice (the bad one, under \$10 if possible). If you like eggs and fish, the champagne works very well with this combination. One note: The stronger the fish, the more you need a stronger, crisper champagne (Veuve Cliquot, Pol Roger, etc.).

Don't forget oysters! The Acme doesn't serve champagne and neither does Felix's, but every great chef pairs oysters and champagne with oysters. I love blanc de blanc (all chardonnay), which is usually more fruity and delicate. An iron fist in a velvet glove. You can even drink champagne with asparagus (preferably white). It's the only wine that works.

Another word of warning: Champagne and caviar is a cliché, but onions must not come near this dish. This spoils the match. Sour cream blinis or plain toast and caviar is the rule.

Regarding champagne sweetness, the label tells it all!  
Extra brut (literally extra raw) is usually very dry.  
Brut (bone dry in French) less than Brut, still very dry.  
Extra sec. (means extra dry) is medium in dryness and sweetness.  
Sec. (dry) means sweeter yet, but still in the medium range  
Demi-sec. (medium dry) sweet. This is sweet wine.  
Doux (sweet). This is almost impossible to find.

In fact, if you do call me, I'll provide the dessert (555-5151). This is intensely sweet. So the pairings can correspond to the label. You're already an expert.

But, if all this seems like too much work, too much thought or as Dilbert McClinton says, "just too much stuff", then take the advice of another wine nerd and French philosopher Andre Simon, founder of the Wine and Food Society. He said, "The best rule is to find out what your guests like and give it to them."