

Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

White with fish . . . unless you like red

On the North Carolina coast we are blessed with an array of local seafood we can grab at a market or, better yet, catch ourselves. Grabbing a cold beer to quench our thirst is easy, yet we should never forget how well wine pairs with fish. A couple of easy rules help start the selection process. Start with the density or richness of the fish: is it flaky, oily, shellfish or steakfish? What wine do you like to drink?

The old saw is white with fish, red with meat—and with good reason. White wines have higher acid levels and seem lighter in flavor and texture to our palates. Serving these wines cold heightens their brightness. We put lemon on our seafood for exactly that reason. Start by matching weight of wine to weight of food. Light dishes call for bright, crisp whites made from grapes like sauvignon blanc or albariño. Think choices like flounder or garlicky, butter-based shrimp dishes. Denser seafood or preparations with lots of cream or excessive butter call for a wine made from a heartier grape or with more oak influence. Lobster pairs perfectly with big oaky chardonnay or rich viognier.

You like only red? Go for it. Here are the quick rules. Go lower tannin. Higher tannin grapes like cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and nebbiolo create a drying sensation in your mouth. Tannins in wines do not play well with fish oils and give fish a metallic/copper flavor. Choose high acid, low tannin wines from pinot noir, barbera or gamay. The denser the fish, the better the pairing will be. Barbera will pair better with swordfish than with flounder. In Oregon, drinking pinot noir with salmon is almost required.

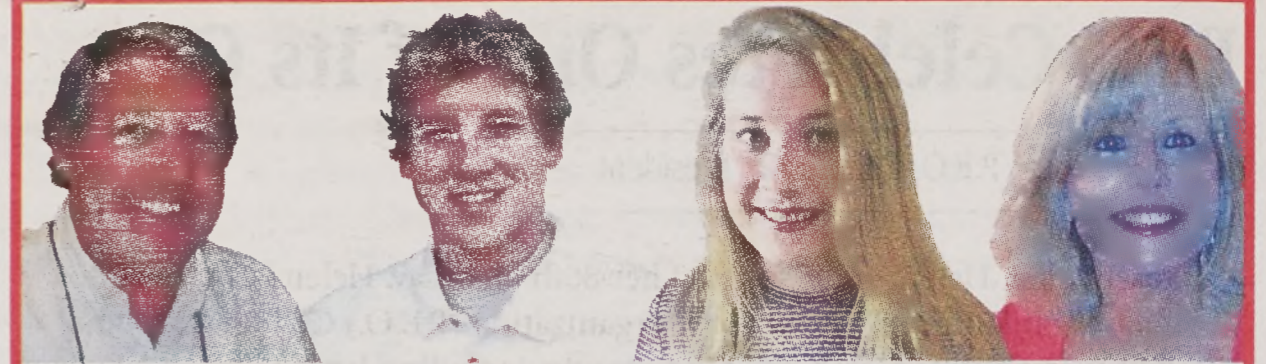
Here are other easy rules. Select wines from an island or a coastal region. Generations-old traditions and cuisine of the region both inform winemaking. If a people eat mainly fish, then their wines will complement seafood. Sicilian and Greek reds prove this point. The acids are high, the tannins are low, and you can even chill them to highlight their crispness.

Want to be in the know on wine? Pick wines from regions with chalky soils. Old seabeds grow wines of high acidity and fresh fruit. If the land is made of oyster shells, the wine will match seafood—in three words: Chablis, Burgundy and the Loire.

Still stuck? When you are at dinner with someone who only drinks white and you only drink red, choose rosé. By nature of production, most rosé is high acid and dry, meaning not sweet. Darker rosés tend to please the “only red” drinker’s palate better. Sparkling wine goes with everything. Champagne is the perfect foil for fried seafood—fat, salt, bubbles, oh yeah.

The most important rule, though, is enjoy what you drink. Who is to judge? People from Bordeaux drink Left Bank Margaux with Dover sole. If I were sitting at that table, I would first eat the fish and drink water. Then I would drink the wine. Both are great. Nothing should go to waste.

Brett Chappell is a certified Sommelier and Wine Educator with 30-plus years of experience in all aspects of the wine and restaurant industries. He and his wife, Jen, who is a Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level Two, escaped from Northern Virginia to Pine Knoll Shores to “retire” by opening MF Chappell Wine Merchant in Atlantic Beach during COVID-19. MF Chappell Wine Merchant is located at 407 Atlantic Beach Causeway in Atlantic Beach, and the phone number is 252-773-4016.



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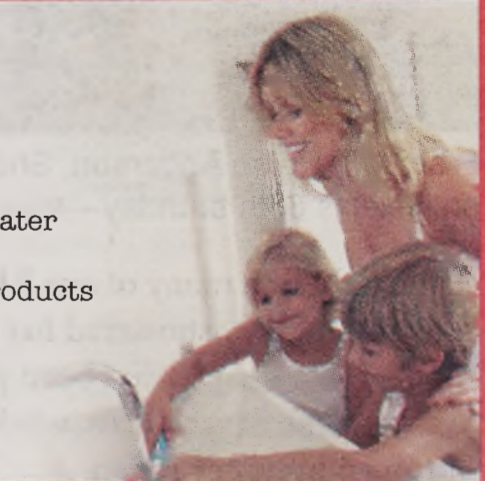
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