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Pairing Wine With Indian Food

The trick is finding what will flatter its complex flavors.

A RECENT DINNER AT Indian Accent on West 56th Street began in a typical fashion. Papadum and other crisp wafers arrived with an assortment of sweet and spicy chutneys, though, in an elegant expression worthy of high-end aspirations, the wafers were presented vertically, their edges anchored in a bed of dry lentils.

Next came a little something unexpected: a small circle of warm naan stuffed with blue cheese as an amuse-bouche, a delicious union of soft, lightly smoky South Asian bread and pungent European funk. Then, a surprise: the wine list, a world-class collection of bottles spanning the world, including inexpensive obscurities and fine,



AMY LOMBARD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rachel Ziff, of Paowalla in SoHo, says higher-alcohol reds go well with its dishes.

pricey Burgundies and Champagnes.

Many people, conditioned by the vast majority of Indian restaurants, would never imagine ordering fine wine with Indian food. Beer, they insist, is the go-to, especially with spicier dishes.

Over centuries in European and Middle Eastern wine-drinking cultures, wine and food developed in tandem, dovetailing naturally at the table. Some cuisines outside historic wine regions, like Cantonese and Vietnamese, have proved themselves amiable companions to wine. But Indian food, with its intricate spicing; rich, integrated sauces, and occasional chile heat, has often posed a difficult riddle to wine lovers.

Yet a growing number of Indian restaurants are offering lists of wines intended both to flatter the food and to create un-

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expectedly delicious synergies.

Along with Indian Accent, other recent arrivals include Pondicheri, which offers an appropriately casual selection of well-chosen bottles with its informal menu of dishes from all over the subcontinent; Paowalla, Floyd Cardoz's long-awaited return to Indian cooking after the closing of Tabla in 2010, which has a list that is quickly developing a point of view; and Babu Ji, another easygoing restaurant that opened in the East Village last year with a good selection of care-free bottles.

Each of these places builds on the success of pioneering restaurants like Junoon near Madison Square Park, Gymkhana in London and Rasika in Washington, which have demonstrated how well fine wine can enhance an Indian meal.

But the process of integrating wine and Indian food is not easy, nor is it intuitive. For one thing, it is a ludicrous generalization to speak of Indian cuisine, which comprises many different regional styles and traditions, as if it were one thing.

"When somebody asks, 'What goes great with Indian food,' I say: 'I don't know. What goes great with European food?'" said Michael Dolinski, the wine director at Junoon, who has probably been asked that question more than any other New York sommelier.

Mr. Dolinski suggests that classic European dishes were constructed with wine in



AMY LOMBARD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES (ABOVE AND BELOW)



mind. They leave openings for wines to fill

More good Indian restaurants are offering excellent wine lists.

with their range of fruity, sweet, bitter flavors and their acidity and tannic structures.

In the various Indian cuisines, that vacuum has often been filled with chutneys and other sauces, which add acid and sweetness; spices, which provide tannins; and raita, which cools and refreshes.

The challenge is to figure out how wine can bring balance to a dish.

Often, this can lead to counterintuitive pairings. For example, the reflex desire to pair lamb with a red wine, Mr. Dolinski suggests, would be a mistake.

"I think that with virtually any lamb curry, white wine is the best choice," he said, singling out dry rieslings and grüner veltliners as wines that would go well. A lamb kebab, cooked in the tandoor and served with a spicy sauce, he said, would benefit from a moderately sweet riesling, like a German feinkerbe or kabinet.

"Set aside your American or European approach to putting wine together with food," he said. "Red wine with red meats, white with fish and vegetables, it just doesn't work like that."

Lively, moderately sweet wines can be excellent. German feinkerbe and spätlese rieslings and demi-sec Vouvrays from the Loire Valley, which all have plenty of acidity and a moderate amount of residual sugar, are often brilliant with many Indian dishes.

Conversely, wines that are high in alcohol or tannins, or which are discernibly oaky, are often bad. This is why many California cabernet sauvignons and zinfandels, Bordeaux and Barolo are difficult to pair with Indian foods.

EMAIL: asimov@nytimes.com. And follow Eric Asimov on Twitter: [@EricAsimov](https://twitter.com/EricAsimov).



Rajat Parr, the former wine director for the Michael Mina restaurant group, who grew up in Calcutta and is a partner in Sandhi and Domaine de la Côte, two Santa Barbara wine producers, has informally advised Pondicheri on its list. He says the number of wines that go well with Indian foods is small.

Among reds, he looks to earthier, spicier wines, like syrah and cabernet franc, especially those that are not generously fruity or oaky. Unexpectedly, he suggests that red Burgundies and other wines made with pinot noir, often cited as among the most versatile of wines, do not work that well.

"They're too subtle, with too much fruit," he said.

When Daniel Beedle, the beverage director at Indian Accent, took the job, he had eaten a lot of Indian food but had little experience in pairing wines with the dishes. He examined the many spices used in Indian

Clockwise from top, Daniel Beedle, the beverage director at Indian Accent on West 56th Street; Rachel Ziff of Paowalla on Spring Street; and Michael Dolinski, the wine director at Junoon on West 24th Street.



preparations and realized they can often be surprisingly tannic. As others concluded, the best wines were often moderately sweet whites high in acid and fresher, savory reds with few tannins, although he tolerates more fruit in the reds than Mr. Parr does.

Reds from Languedoc-Roussillon, particularly those with grenache and carignan, can be very successful, he said, as can Rioja gran reservas with enough age to have mellowed the tannins. His list is well-stocked with aromatic whites, syrahs from the northern Rhône, cabernet francs from the Loire and Beaujolais.

Even so, he also offers a significant selection of red Burgundies and some top Bordeaux and California cabernets, with an understanding that wine selections can be emotional rather than rational reflections on what pairs best.

"I'm a human being, I love my Burgundy," he said, adding that he looks for bottles with

more purity and freshness and less oak.

The Bordeaux and cabernets, he said, were nods to the many Indian visitors from the subcontinent who, if they drink alcoholic beverages at all, expect big names and classic reds. It's a legacy, he and others suggested, of British colonial rule and its notion that Bordeaux was the supreme red. These wines may turn bitter with many Indian dishes, but customers have become accustomed to that sensation and expect it.

While general notions of what sorts of wine will work with Indian foods can be helpful, the cuisine is too diverse and subtle to avoid numerous exceptions and surprises.

"There can be good places to put highly tannic wines," Mr. Dolinski said. "A Punjabi vegetable dish with a yogurt sauce, that's where your big red can go."

He also cautioned against pairing cabernet francs and sauvignon blancs with dishes rich in turmeric. Although these wines can be exceptionally good with some preparations, turmeric, he said, causes them to taste metallic and bitter.

Sometimes, it's impossible to generalize beyond the cuisine of particular restaurants. Mr. Dolinski and many other sommeliers involved with Indian food believe that alcohol increases the perception of spicy heat. But Rachel Ziff, the assistant general manager of Paowalla, who is also in charge of beverages, says that with Mr. Cardoz's cuisine, alcohol is not so much of an issue.

"We're fortunate that Floyd's cuisine is a little more moderate in heat," she said. "Bigger reds with fruit content really bring out the flavors of the food. You have to be slightly higher in alcohol, especially in reds, because otherwise they get lost."

Zinfandel, she said, holds up well, as do monastrells from eastern Spain, which tend to be less tannic than those from southern France, where the word for monastrell is mourvèdre. She is also planning to expand the selection of sherries, which, though high in alcohol are low in tannins.

Like pinot noirs, sparkling wines are often thought to be versatile, but it's not always the case with Indian dishes. Champagne can go well with fried dishes, Mr. Parr suggested, but often it is too austere, particularly those labeled extra brut or brut nature. Other types of sparkling wines that show some sweetness, like Bugeys from the Savoie in France and pétillant naturels, can be great.

As for that other sparkling beverage, beer, few sommeliers believe that it enhances Indian dishes. Mr. Parr says it refreshes the palate without accentuating the flavors, while Mr. Dolinski is disdainful.

"When the British arrived in India, it didn't have an alcohol tradition, so they brought Scotch and beer," he said. "Beer wipes out the spices and destroys the flavors. To the British, that was great."

Given all the complexities in pairing wine and Indian dishes, I have two suggestions: First, in a fine Indian restaurant with a good wine list and a sommelier, ask for help. The sommelier has an intimate sense of the restaurant's cuisine and how it will go with wine. Second, if you are choosing wines at home, be experimental. Don't fear failures; chalk them up as lessons learned.

"We don't yet know enough about all the Indian cuisines in order to say what goes and what doesn't," said Mr. Beedle of Indian Accent, "but I think we're going to learn a ton."

