

PDF Generated: 2021-06-17 16:06

Original URL: <https://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/does-chinese-wine-go-chinese-food>

Richard Hemming MW

16 Jun 2021

Does Chinese wine go with Chinese food?

Sancerre and chèvre, Barolo and boar, Ningxia and ... noodles? Richard asks a silly question and gets a silly answer.

Matching wine and food takes two variables that are infinitely complex and totally subjective, then multiplies them together. As a premise for certainty, that's a pretty shaky one [though see [Tam's most recent report](#) on the topic - JR].

Maybe the point of the exercise isn't to produce a failsafe formula for success, but to explore ever-expanding frontiers of flavour - especially so with Chinese wine and Chinese food. Whereas most European regions have food and wine cultures that co-evolved, Chinese wine is a much more recent phenomenon. On the other hand, 'Chinese food' is an ancient multiverse of diverse flavours, often served and eaten at the the same time.

It's hardly surprising that very few seem to have even tried matching Chinese wine with Chinese food - while writing in English, at least. [One article](#) suggests a glass each of 'refreshing white and a big, bold red' to go with the cuisine from Ningxia. [Another](#) gives three more-specific matches, while [a third](#) finds a rosé (the same one I taste below, in fact) that could accompany all the courses of a Chinese New Year feast.

Most other tasters default to European aromatic whites, with non-dry German Riesling particularly popular, for sensible reasons. For even more sensible reasons, most consumers default to local lager.

Perhaps it is indeed a silly question, but with so much Chinese food and wine available on my doorstep in Singapore, I wanted to ask: do they go together?

The six Chinese wines

I selected these six Chinese wines, from the left:

1. Kanaan Riesling 2019 Ningxia, SG\$37 (£20, €23, \$28)
2. Silver Heights, Family Reserve Chardonnay 2019 Ningxia, SG\$57 (£30, €35, \$43)
3. Château Changyu-Moser XV, M7 Blanc de Noir Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 Ningxia, £18 (€21, \$25)
4. Xige Estate, N 609 2018 Ningxia, RRP 980 Chinese yuan (£109, €126, \$154)
5. Tian Sai, Skyline of Gobi Syrah/Viognier 2017 Xinjiang, SG\$68 (£36, €42, \$51)
6. Chateau Changyu Moser XV, Purple Air Comes From The East 2016 Ningxia, £195 (€227, \$276)

(Wines 1, 2 and 5 were purchased in Singapore at the SG\$ price shown. Wines 3, 4 and 6 were sent as samples, with approximate prices shown. Currency conversions are based on the current exchange rate, but they don't necessarily represent the actual price of that wine in those markets. In the UK, wine 3 is known as 'Helan Mountain Range' rather than M7.)

Five of the six come from Ningxia, China's most wine-focused province, representing a cross-section of styles. The three whites are varietal: the Riesling and Chardonnay follow a well-established international blueprint, while the white Cabernet Sauvignon is very much a curveball, and something of a speciality for Changyu Moser.

Wines four and six are also made from Cabernet Sauvignon, representing China's ambitions for premium red wine, in both price and style, while wine five is a Syrah/Viognier blend, presumably inspired by Côte Rôtie.

Dutifully, I tasted them all first, and two of them were unfortunately among the worst wines I've ever tasted. The Chardonnay was painfully thin and acidic at 11.5% alcohol, with sour fruit and a torrent of new-oak flavour. The Syrah/Viognier was chronically reduced, with an aroma like waste water and cremated fruit on the palate, and notched up 15.5% alcohol. Both were totally unbalanced, at opposite ends of the scale.

The other four were, thankfully, much better-made. The Riesling was bone dry, with full body but introverted citrus flavours. The white Cabernet was similarly viscous, but with maximalist flavours, featuring a strong green-bean aroma similar to some Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. The two red Cabernets were similarly intense, as if trying outdo each other for depth of colour, magnitude of fruit and degree of polish.

This was shaping up to be less of a match and more of a slug-fest.

The six Chinese dishes

Clockwise from top-left, here are the six Chinese dishes I ordered, on advice from a local food expert (all Singaporeans are local food experts) to cover as many flavours as possible.

1. Beef fried noodles , SG\$7
2. Sweet-and-sour pork , SG\$17.80
3. Dry fried French beans , SG\$6.80
4. Stewed chicken with three cups sauce , SG\$14.80
5. Sautéed shredded potato , SG\$7
6. Yang Zhou fried rice , SG\$7

Total price including delivery was SG\$68 (£36, €42, \$51) from Chinatown favourite Dong Fang Mei Shi via GrabFood, Singapore's indispensable super-app.

The potato is flavoured with vinegar, as is the pork's sweet-and-sour sauce, the three cups chicken is soy-based, the French beans are fried with shrimp and chilli, the beef noodles are cooked with oyster sauce, while the special fried rice has a little bit of everything.

Chopsticks at the ready. Round one ... fight!

The verdict

Six rounds later, after 36 possible combinations of flavour, any outright victory was never going to be likely. There were certain aspects of some wines that complemented certain dishes, but overall it was not the most harmonious experience.

It was a victory of sorts, I suppose, that the strong flavours of the food helped mask

the worst shortcomings of the Chardonnay and the Syrah/Viognier. Meanwhile, the viscous texture of the Blanc de Noir Cabernet made more sense alongside the glutinous sweet-and-sour sauce, but the wine's strong green aromas were not a happy marriage. Perhaps the most surprising mismatch was the Riesling, which was too dry and sharp for all the dishes – a little residual sugar would have helped here. Similarly, the savoury severity of the two Cabernets clashed with the food.

To be fair, none of these producers claim to make wine that goes with native Chinese cuisine. The two Cabernet Sauvignons, for example, have a similar beefiness to premium South American reds, so barbecued meats might be more natural bedfellows. Perhaps the dry Riesling would be better with sashimi-type dishes. The white Cabernet may be better as a solo drink, while the Chardonnay and Syrah/Viognier were, I'm afraid, irredeemable.

Chinese wine is still in the primordial-soup stage of evolution. I don't mean to say it is unsophisticated, rather that it takes generations to interpret new terroirs. In the meantime there is a huge diversity of styles being produced, the majority of which are modelled on the classic wines of the West, with particular interest in full-blooded reds.

For as long as that remains true, it seems unlikely that winemakers in China will specifically make wines that pair with their local cuisine – and why should they? Applying European principles of wine and food matching to other countries isn't merely arbitrary, it might even seem colonialist.

As I said at the beginning, it is an infinitely complex and totally subjective topic, and it's nigh-on impossible to answer whether Chinese wine goes with Chinese food.

Still, let me try: no, it doesn't. And more to the point, neither should it have to.