

Client: Terra Andina
Media Outlet: Chicago Tribune
Circulation: 501,202 Daily
Date: October 7, 2009



A toast to spaghetti wines



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October 7, 2009

Maybe I'm a culinary Rip Van Winkle, but who killed off spaghetti and meatballs? As a kid whiling away winter in 1960s Miami, spaghetti and meatballs was exotic "ethnic" fare. Though served in caveman portions and wantonly dusted with cheese out of a can, it was the stuff of a dining-out adventure. Somehow, between the rise of extra-virgin olive oil, cappelletti, cipollini and lardo, spaghetti and meatballs seems to have been elbowed aside, not just on many restaurant menus but in the minds of wine professionals.

Of the wine-food pairing books on my desk, only Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg directly address spaghetti and meatballs in their "What to Drink With What You Eat."

Maybe most of the pros are satisfied with the old stereotype of straw-wrapped Chianti bottles when it comes to such a humble dish as spaghetti. But it's a shame wine drinkers never read or hear much about what other wines might really work better.

"We do tend to forget about simple foods like spaghetti and meatballs, don't we," said London-based Brian St. Pierre, author of "The Wine Lover Cooks Italian."

"I think most wine pros ignore spaghetti and meatballs, as well as a lot of other things people really eat, because, one, they just don't think of them; two, if they do, they think it's beneath them; three, they've forgotten how to have fun with simple things, like we did when we were kids."

St. Pierre clearly prefers Italian wines for spaghetti. He likes the rusticity of Chianti with any pasta in tomato sauce. Brunello di Montalcino works, too, although he thinks it "a ridiculous rich man/poor man pairing." His faves would be rosso Conero and montepulciano d'Abruzzo.

Master Sommelier Andrea Immer Robinson said wine drinkers need to zero in on the tomato sauce in picking a wine. Consider its tanginess and herbaceousness (think oregano).

"This, of course, gets countered at some level by the meatballs and Parmesan cheese, if any, but still it usually screams through," she added. "Best bet to stand up to both the acid and herbs and the richness in the meat is reds with spice and a good acidic backbone."

Robinson, author of "Great Tastes Made Simple: Extraordinary Food and Wine Pairing for Every Palate," would go with Chianti, rosso di Montalcino, barbera and other regional Italian reds.

Of course, you don't have to stick with strictly [Italian](#) wines with spaghetti. An Argentine bonarda (admittedly a grape originally from Italy) works great with the classic dish.

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Chianti isn't the only choice

The tasting panel tried six reds from around the world, including the expected Chianti, with a big dish of spaghetti and meatballs from Buca di Beppo, an Italian restaurant chain with outposts nationwide. All but two of the wines tasted better when matched with this classic spaghetti dish. The hands-down winner was from [Argentina](#).

2006 Trapiche Bonarda Broquel: An inky red from Argentina's Mendoza region with a nose heady with violets, stems and dark fruit. Green peppers and tomato notes are overlaid with plummy, berry flavors. The spaghetti gives the wine a great lift, softening the tannins and adding pizzazz to the berry notes. **Three corkscrews, \$16**

2008 Terra Andina Carmenere: From [Chile's](#) Central Valley, a wine with a lively berry fragrance touched with a hint of cherry and mint. It's a puckery, fruit-forward wine with notes of cherries, mushrooms and black pepper. Natural pairing. **Three corkscrews, \$8**

2007 Potel-Aviron Fleurie: This French Cru Beaujolais has the signature cherry and grape flavors found in the gamay grape. The wine tastes like Pez candy for adults. This wine suffered slightly when paired with the spaghetti. No spark. **Two corkscrews, \$22**

2006 Charles Krug Merlot: From [California's Napa Valley](#), a merlot with touches of cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot and syrah. Look for a spicy raspberry nose and a touch of chocolate on the palette. The wine gave the spaghetti more depth. **Two corkscrews, \$24**

2008 Melini Chianti Borghi D'Elsa: This Chianti from Italy's Tuscany region smelled like good strawberry jam. The flavor was ripe with strawberry and raspberry notes; plenty of tannic [muscle](#) kept the fruit in line. The wine's berry flavor made the spaghetti sauce seem brighter. **Two corkscrews, \$7**

2008 Villa Maria Pinot Noir Private Bin: Even the most zealous fans of New Zealand pinot noir would have trouble with this pairing. The wine's subtle elegance, its earthy quality accented by mushroom and tomato, seemed overwhelmed by the sauce's bright flavors. **Two corkscrews, \$19**

(Ratings key: Four corkscrews, excellent; three corkscrews, very good; two corkscrews, good; one corkscrew, fair; zero corkscrews, poor.)

You want that wine. But your store may not choose to carry it. What to do? Ask your wine retailer for a wine similar in flavor, style and price.

-- Bill Daley

More wines for pasta

Andrea Immer Robinson lists a number of weeknight pasta and wine dinners in her book, "Everyday Dining With Wine." Here are her wine suggestions for various pastas:

Butter and cheese: Chianti, barbera

Garlic, olive oil, parsley, hot pepper flakes: Pinot grigio

Basil pesto: Cabernet sauvignon

Fresh goat cheese, peas, mint: Sauvignon blanc

Fresh tomatoes and basil: Sangiovese

Pancetta, onions, garlic, canned tomatoes: Syrah

Mushrooms, prosciutto, canned tomatoes: Zinfandel

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/features/food/chi-tc-food-wine-1002-1007oct07,0,3672273.column>



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