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Wine & Sushi

This is Your Wine on Acid: Considering acid, fruit and oak, especially with sushi.

By Francis Fecteau

I rolled the wine around my mouth and sure enough, snap! The telltale lemonlime ping of a poorly executed acid correction pinched my tongue. Acid correction is a winemaking "fix," where a winemaker adds citric or tartaric acid, post-fermentation, to correct the balance of the wine. In this case, they'd used citric acid, giving it the mouthfeel of lemon juice in water. Wine shouldn't taste like that, ever. Why, it's the sort of thing that would make a wine drinker biased against acid-corrected wines!



It was a sour snarl at the start of an otherwise brilliant sushi meal. A bottle of **Luigi Bosca "Gala 3"** (\$25)—a mostly tank-fermented blend of Chardonnay, Viognier and Riesling—saved the moment. I would tell you the name of the bottle of vile bile that got my meal off to such a bitter start, but wine salesmen are a touchy bunch; sleazy and duplicitous we may be, it's still a hard enough job without me making such pronouncements. The **Bosca "Gala 3"** on the other hand, showed impeccable depth, richness and refreshing acidity. It also proved a marvelous foil for higher acid seafood selections and fatter fish like tuna, especially so when touched with wasabi.

This particular sushi meal was a good "instructional" in food and wine pairing dos and don'ts. Great sushi is an exercise in clean, bold flavors that demand clean, bold, competently made, well-balanced wines.

With each passing dish, the sushi selections sang with fresher, brighter wines and fell on tin ears when exposed to obvious viticultural manipulation. Red or white, a wine must emphasize fruit when playing with raw fish. Well ... how do you determine which is which and what is what?

When a wine geek uses the phrase "emphasize fruit," it refers to a wine that hasn't met excessive manipulation—the use of new oak, acid corrections or malolactic fermentation. Don't get me wrong, these are all legitimate things to do in crafting a wine's style; it's just that more often than not, these manipulations create a less foodfriendly wine. But if a wine doesn't see the use of new oak, acid correction or isn't put through that malicto-lactic fermentation (which softens the wine—especially so with whites), it shows more acidity and liveliness, concentrating the wine's flavor more to the center of the palate.

So, think in terms of heft and acidity: Sauvignon Blanc, for instance, most always shows more tartness and acidity than Chardonnay. It ripens sooner, almost always has less sugar and, therefore, less alcohol and less glycerol.

Glycerol is the sugar alcohol that helps create an unctuous palate texture. Consider region, too—cooler climate wines show more acidity. Reading the label helps; higher alcohol usually indicates a bigger wine, and, most times, winemakers tell you if they are using oak. Yes, it really is that simple. Since all reds go through a certain amount of manipulation (i.e. malolactic fermentation, which is optional for many whites), pairing reds with certain sushi selections can be challenging, especially with the excess of oak common in so many reds.



As the final dishes arrived—the finest incarnation of pork belly ever known (thank you, Takashi!) and a portion of eel—all of the reds, larded with roof-of-the-mouth-drying oak tannins, fell flat and tinny except for a Pinot Noir. It showed minimal oak, magnificent richness and met the food without dissonance or heaviness. Again, an Argentine saved the day: **Luigi Bosca's Reserve Pinot Noir** (\$20) was a brilliant foil and complement.

But then again, I am biased. I like harmonious wines.

Francis Fecteau is owner of Libation Inc., a wine brokerage in Salt Lake City.

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