

I am a very proud man today. News has just reached me that all three of my young sommelier team have made it to the final stage of the Scottish and North of England Sommelier of the Year competition with Franck, my assistant, finishing first. Franck will go on to compete for the UK title at the end of month. I think I retired from competing at the right time as the famous stories of 'the pupil beating the master' you could say brought my retirement forward a couple of years! Seriously though, my role has changed over the past few years at Sharrow Bay. I now see my goal at Sharrow Bay not just learning and developing my own knowledge but also helping me team surpass the standards of knowledge required of a top sommelier.

This month I would like to solve a common dilemma. A typical example is when four people have chosen different dishes. The host calculates. A bottle of white and then one of red is conventional, regardless of food. This formula works up to a point. But it can be refined-or replaced with something more original, something to really bring out the flavours in food and wine. Remarkably for such a common problem only a few wine commentators have discussed this topic. Hopefully a few of my tips for a meal at Easter will help with both menu planning at home and wine selection in restaurants.

Before the meal the conventional aperitif wines are either sparkling (often Champagne) or fortified (often sherry in Britain). Increasingly in vogue before eating are white wine and rose wine. I wouldn't recommend avoid eating peanuts, plain crisps and olives as they destroy the flavours. For an asparagus starter is a difficult flavour for wine with it being slightly bitter. Although it is challenging the perfect match this starter are white wines, either the Dry Muscat or Chenin Blanc. The easiest starter dish to match is scallops as they are inherently sweet and salty and as a result can be matched with almost any fine white wine. Three popular main dishes at Easter are duck or goose or the famous Cumbrian spring lamb. A red burgundy will work perfectly with the duck and goose as the pinot noir grape variety offers a complex fruity and well balanced response to the duck and geese flavour. One of the traditional and best partners of lamb is red Bordeaux blend or the finest old Rioja. My wine choices for the main courses or not chosen just because of their structural matches but also because of the link between region the wine is produced and each particular dish. For example Bordeaux is famous for its Pauillac lamb. As a dessert most of us love chocolate at Easter which interestingly isn't an easy dish to match. Generally only powerful flavours can compete with the chocolate such as orange Muscat from California or Tokaji Aszu from Hungary. But for a weightier partnership the fortified tawny port or Banyuls will provide a fantastic match. Otherwise a tot of good rum or reverting back to my Valentines column, a cognac which has been frozen for a couple of days before serving provides an interesting alternative.

Hopefully my tips will have solved some of the dilemmas of hosting a dinner party this Easter. I would however like to mention that with very special bottles the wine sometimes should guide the choice of food rather than the usual way around.

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Nico

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