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Confessions of a Wine Lover Who Loves Beer

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by Kim Sypher, General Manager

Conversation came to an abrupt halt as I popped the top off a Belgian Abbey Blonde Ale and poured it into a mug. My chit-chatting girlfriends, glasses of chardonnay in hand, were stunned by my choice to enjoy a beer with dinner. “You’re having BEER?” one of them asked. It was hard for me to believe, too, but apparently I had crossed over to the dark side!

For years I had enjoyed wine — its nuances, intricacies and depth. I enjoyed wine so much that for the first seven years I worked at the Willimantic Brewing Co. I barely touched a sip of beer to my lips — that is until I discovered that pairing beer with food was as exciting as pairing wine with food.

I won’t soon forget the circumstances of this epiphany. My husband and I were sharing an order of Teriyaki Beef Skewers and I couldn’t decide what to drink with them. Just for the heck of it, I took a sip of his Saison Ale. It was as if the skies had parted and a light shone down upon me. The two flavors together made each one taste better!

Since that defining moment, I have learned that the same standards used to measure a wine’s qualities can also almost always be used when tasting beer. Characteristics like sweetness, acidity and fruitiness apply to beer and wine, and your senses really come alive when you taste both beverages with food.

While the old rules that white wine goes best with fish and ale goes best with bratwurst are a little outdated, there is some truth to them. When choosing any beverage to drink with food, it’s best to try to “match” the flavor intensity of each. For instance, a buttery, citrusy Chardonnay pairs with a baked codfish better than a garnet-red Cabernet Sauvignon. Similarly, a bold Ale matches a strong-flavored meat, like a bratwurst, better than a light pilsner.

The same holds when we swap beer and wine pairings. Like Chardonnay, lighter summer ales, Hefeweizen for instance, match baked codfish better than, say, a darker beer like a porter. And Merlot is a better match for strong-flavored meat than a crisp Pinot Grigio.

It also helps to think regionally when pairing a beer or wine with a meal. In fact, the term terroir refers to the way a beverage reflects the land from which it arose. For example, Argentina’s and Chile’s wine growing regions, known for producing great red wines like the Malbec, also produce some of the world’s best beef — a natural taste pairing. England, with its love of fried pub foods, like its nationally popular dish of fish and chips, also produces many hoppy ales, such as India Pale Ales, which are natural accompaniments to rich fried foods.

It still surprises me when I try a new beer and pick up a subtle note of pineapple in the background, and then get excited about matching that beer with pineapple glazed chicken – Wow! The bottom line is, isn’t it good to think outside the box sometimes? The next time you’re out enjoying dinner, try something new. You might just surprise yourself, too!

Kim Sypher is the General Manager of the Willimantic Brewing Company. She is an avid cook, enjoys wine and is now a beer lover as well. Her inspiration for this article and the restaurant’s upcoming Beer vs. Wine Dinner is based on the book He Said Beer, She Said Wine by Marnie Old, Master Sommelier, and Sam Calagione, Brewer and Founder of Dogfish Head Craft Brewery. For more information about the Beer Vs. Wine Dinner, on Monday, September 14, visit www.willibrew.com.



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