

Wine and chocolate: *the perfect pairing?*

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GRAPEVINE
CHRISTINE CARROLL
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What says “Valentine’s Day” better than a bottle of champagne and a box of chocolates? They go together like, well, love and romance. Right?

The answer is yes. And no.

According to the experts, not all wine and chocolate pairings are a match made in heaven. The taste experience can be fabulous or forgettable, depending on your choices. Included below are some pairing guidelines that can help make your life a little sweeter.

Beaujolais: A fruity, floral Burgundy wine made from the Gamay grape.

Bordeaux: A French wine, most often made from a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot.

Cabernet Sauvignon: A dry, spicy, tannic wine with dark berry flavors

Cognac/Armagnac: Brandies from France

Grenache: Generous, fruity dessert wines made from pink or red grapes

Malbec: A Bordeaux wine similar to Merlot

Marsala: A sweet, Italian fortified wine

Merlot: A wine similar to Cabernet Sauvignon but with softer tannins

Mas Amiel Classique: A dessert wine made from the Grenache grape

Tawny Port: A port wine aged in oak barrels which becomes the color of tea; hence, the “tawny” name

Ruby Port: A fruity, bright red port not aged in oak.

Shiraz: A generous, complex wine often high in alcohol. (Also known as Syrah)

Zinfandel: An “all-American” wine, complex, dry and high in tannin.

Semisweet Chocolate

Dark chocolate with 50%-69% cacao has strong, complex flavors, with nutty, spicy, floral, earthy, fruity and/or caramel nuances. The taste is balanced and not too sweet.

Semi-sweet chocolate can be paired with the same wines as Bittersweet Chocolate. For example, Banyuls and Ruby Port have cocoa or chocolate in the nose, as well as cherry, raspberry or other berry fruit, and are classic companions to chocolate. Banyuls is made from the Grenache grape; Port can be a blend of several grapes. Banyuls and Non Vintage Ports have softer, rounder tannins than Vintage Port and pair better with chocolate.

Beaujolais and Orange Muscat bring out the fruity notes in chocolate. While Orange Muscat, a dessert wine, is a predictable choice, Beaujolais is unusual. If you like this wine, try pairing it with chocolate.

Muscat complements fruit-flavored truffles or dark chocolates with fruit fillings, bringing out the fruity notes.

Cabernet Sauvignon highlights the fruity-peppery-grapey notes in dark chocolate.

Tawny Ports, which have nutty and tobacco/leather notes, also make good pairings. Vintage Ports should be matched with caution.

Bittersweet Chocolate

The most intense, richly-flavored dark chocolate contains 70% to 100% cacao and has fruity, earthy, woody, ashy, roasted and/or nutty notes.

Because of its flavor intensity, bitter-sweet chocolate should be paired with fortified wines and stronger red wines with concentrated fruit notes.

With its higher percentage of cocoa butter, dark chocolate keeps red wine from tasting too dry or tannic.

Wine Pairing Possibilities:

Banyuls: A fortified, sweet wine from the Roussillon region of France.

Their high sugar and alcohol content can overwhelm the chocolate.

Zinfandel enhances semi-sweet chocolate’s spicy nuances.

Milk Chocolate

Milk chocolate has a higher percentage of sugar, a lower percentage of chocolate liquor and a higher milk content than bittersweet or semi-sweet chocolate. These ingredients create a milder, sweeter product with the flavors of brown sugar, cocoa, vanilla, honey, caramel, milk, cream, nuts and malt.

Milk chocolate should be paired with sweeter wines, or the wine will taste too tart. Possibilities include:

Hungarian Tokaji: A naturally sweet wine made from grapes affected by botrytis (“noble rot”).

Mas Amiel Rouge & Vintage Blanc: Dessert wines from France made from the Grenache grape.

Muscat/Moscato: A dessert wine with peach and apricot flavors, a popular partner for milk chocolate.

Tawny Port: This fortified wine makes the best pairing with milk chocolate. Its nutty nuances highlight milk chocolate’s honey and caramel notes and enhance the overall flavor of the chocolate.

White Chocolate

Made without chocolate liquor and thus not a true chocolate, white chocolate is a rich product containing cocoa butter, sugar and milk solids. It has sweet flavor notes including cream, milk, honey, vanilla, caramel, and/or fruit.

The acidity in sparkling wine often produces tart flavors when paired with the cacao in milk or dark chocolate.

Since white chocolate contains no cacao, it can be paired with champagne.

Fresh strawberries dipped in white chocolate make an excellent pairing with champagne.

Wine Pairing Possibilities:

Champagne/Sparkling Wine: Sweeter champagnes (sec, demi-sec, cremant) or Asti Spumante make the best pairings with white chocolate.

Gewurtztraminer: Late harvest styles made from this spicy, fruity white grape make an exotic match with

white chocolate’s typical dairy and caramel flavors.

Mas Amiel/ Vintage Blanc: French white dessert wines from Southwest France; born to pair with white chocolate.

Muscat: This lower acid wine may make a great pairing with white chocolate.

Riesling: This wine’s “flowery” sweetness complements the vanilla, caramel and honey flavors of white chocolate. Late harvest styles pair best.

Pairing Pointers

Keep it Sweet: Choose a wine that’s as sweet as or slightly sweeter than the chocolate you’re eating. Drier wines are more likely to clash, especially with milk or white chocolate.

Think Red: Because red wines are more complex and have a more “generous” taste, they will match better with the robust flavors of bittersweet and semi-sweet chocolate.

Be Daring: If dry red table wine is your comfort zone, try something new. Choose a sweet dessert wine, such as Late Harvest Riesling or Muscat, or a fortified wine like Tawny Port.

Match Textures: Fine chocolates are rich in texture and mouth-feel. Match them with creamy, full-bodied wines for the best pairing.

Match Flavors: Flavors like raspberry, cherry and nuts pair well with chocolate. Red wines often offer berry flavors, and nutty notes can be found in whites. A tip: Taste wine by itself to evaluate the flavors; then choose chocolate with a similar taste.

The most important pointer for pairing wine and chocolate is this: experiment with different combinations and find the ones you like. And keep trying. What’s the worst that can happen? Even your mistakes can be pretty sweet.

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To learn more call Crossing Vineyards and Winery in Washington Crossing for information about Wine and Chocolate for Lovers, a special Valentine’s Day class on pairing wine and chocolate, scheduled for Sunday, February 10 at 2PM.

To reserve your place for this “delicious” afternoon, call 215-493-6500, ext. 19. The cost is \$30 per person and includes instruction, award winning wines from Crossing Vineyards and fine chocolate samples provided by Newtown Chocolatier.