

Perfect Pairings



MEXICAN MATCHES

BY JIM FESSLER



What to serve with Mexican food? For many people, the obvious response is cerveza, or maybe margaritas. But just as Mexican food is much more intriguing and complex than tacos and cheese-draped enchiladas, there are more interesting and satisfying beverage choices than beer and margaritas.

Although many elements contribute to the deep and intricate flavors of true Mexican cooking, chiles are a mainstay. Mexican cuisine utilizes a wide assortment of fresh and dried chiles, cooked in a variety of methods, or not cooked, to achieve subtle or intense differences in flavor and "heat." The chiles present a major challenge in beverage matches, but Tequila and surprisingly, wine, can stand up to that challenge. The latter is a particularly gratifying choice, since for many of us a good glass of wine is the perfect accompaniment to and enhancement of a good meal. During my years at Topolobampo and Frontera Grill in Chicago, I enjoyed selecting and offering wines that contributed to the diners' enjoyment of the fine regional Mexican food.

Presented here are some types of Tequila and wine that can heighten the pleasure of a Mexican meal. You'll see that acidity is a consistently desirable characteristic and that tannins are not. Although I've mentioned some specific dishes, I've tried to match beverage choices to certain components or flavor ranges of a dish. You'll also find two versatile sauce recipes from Kevin Karales, Managing Chef at Topolobampo and Frontera Grill, and my suggestions for beverage matches.

TEQUILA CHOICES

Though the margarita seems to be the traditional accompaniment to Mexican food, it's best served as an aperitif. On the other hand, Tequila, straight up, can nicely com-

plement certain dishes, because its flavor and natural acidity are lovely counterpoints to the lively flavors of the food.

Picking the right Tequila depends on two significant factors: purity and aging. I prefer Tequilas made solely from the blue agave plant, without other additives. In this type of Tequila, the natural flavors of citrus, herbs and sweet fruit are clear and distinctive. *Porfidio*, *El Tesoro* and *Patron* all make a 100 percent blue agave Tequila. For pairing, I recommend the blue agave Tequilas that haven't been aged (the Silver classification) or that have been aged in wood up to two years (*Reposado*), because the natural flavors are clearly expressed and complementary to the food. A Silver, blue agave Tequila would make a nice pairing with Veracruz-style dishes, made with tomatoes, pickled jalapeños and capers.

Tequila can also be infused with flavors in order to complement specific dishes. For example, Tequila that's been flavored with cilantro, olives and serrano peppers is perfect with ceviche. The flavors in the Tequila are the same as those in the ceviche, and the combination is a perfect marriage. This same type of principle can be used to match Tequila infusions with other dishes.

In general, I don't recommend serving Tequila that is aged more than two years in wood, classified as *Añejo*, with food. The wood flavor imparted during the aging process can overpower the crisp and clear flavor of the blue agave. Also, wood tannins can amplify the heat of the chiles, putting a pleasantly piquant dish into the "four-alarm fire" range.

WHITE WINE MATCHES

When considering white wines, a general guideline is to look for wines that have strong fruit flavors and a good acid backbone that will keep the palate salivating.

GLASSWARE: RICCOLETTO WINE BY LUIGI BOBHELO; PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LAVIN FLOWER

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