

Putting Chocolate First

In paired tastings, chocolate no longer takes a back seat to wine. Try these four flights.

By **Susie Norris** | Thursday, 17 December 2009 | 11:10



Chocolate and wine offer flavors of faraway worlds -- either cacao's fragrant rainforests or the grape's pastoral vineyards. But when it comes to paired tastings, chocolate has always played second fiddle to wine.

That's starting to change. "As recently as five years ago, most people only paired chocolate with port," says award-winning chocolatier Norman Love, who conducts chocolate and wine tasting classes in his Florida factory. "Now, there are no rules."

Finally, fine chocolate is standing up to the classic character of fine red wine, and tasters are realizing how sophisticated the perfect pairings can be.

It makes sense that these two would be complementary, even though they're rarely served together. Both flavors inspire rhapsodic followings. Both fruits contain high levels of flavanols, the nutrients that assist cardiovascular flow and healthy hearts. While they differ in texture and mythology, chocolate and wine share many flavor notes, particularly ripe red fruit and dark earthiness. The chemistry of fermentation for both grapes and cacao beans is strangely decadent. Literally, the fruits must first decay and decompose -- but only just a little. If they don't decompose enough, they don't develop full flavor. If they decompose too much, they become a rotten pile of sludge.

Cacao beans, of course, are not really beans. They're the seeds of the fruit pod of cacao trees. Chocolate terminology is full of such misnomers. The word "cacao," for instance, now refers to the products of the tree ... but becomes "cocoa" when those same products move through the chocolate production process. Blame bad translation when the Spanish explorers/conquerors were learning the complex process of planting, harvesting, drying, fermenting and roasting and describing cacao from scratch from the Aztecs.

Wine flights often travel from light to dark, but not chocolate. Chocolate flights should travel from dark to light; otherwise the taster's palate gets coated with milkfat, cocoa butter and sugar contained in lighter options such as milk or white chocolate. The palate loses some of its receptivity with a coating of milk and sugar, pleasant though it may be.

Chocolate and wine pairings usually seek to embellish the flavors of the wine -- but in the suggested tasting below, we've turned that upside down. Here, the emphasis is on chocolate's flavors, and wines highlight them. The terroir, fermentation process and regional craftsmanship give us context for the flavor comparisons.

Beginning with raw, organic cocoa nibs is a good choice. From there, dark, bittersweet chocolate selections with a cocoa content of 72 percent or more make sense. Then lighten up with the delight of high-quality milk chocolate or the sinfully sweet confection known as white chocolate (though I've not included that here since it does not have any cocoa solids, only cocoa butter).

Here are some very fine chocolates and modest wines that echo the chocolates' fruitiness, earthiness and/or sophistication.

Flight No. 1: Valrhona's 70% Guanaja Les Feves from the Rhone region of France

Beans from around the world are blended on the banks of the Rhone river in France. Perhaps the world's most sophisticated chocolate maker, with powerful but balanced flavors and a long finish, this company prides itself on bean selection and craftsmanship.

With: **Chateau D'Oupia's Les Heretiques** from the Rhone region of France

Note the sophistication, strong red fruit notes, long finish and smoothness -- signs of craftsmanship.

Flight No. 2: Scharffen Berger's 70% Petit Baking Squares from Berkeley, Calif.

Note the signature strong red fruit notes, especially raspberry. Assertive, acidic, memorable ... a long finish from this respected California chocolate-maker. The company, sadly, is now owned by Hershey's. The flavors, so far, still rock.

With: **Gnarly Head's Old Vine Zin** from Lodi, Calif. Similarly fruity and dry; the makers of this wine praise its "chocolate and vanilla notes."

Flight No. 3: Barry-Callebaut's Cocoa Barry Tanzanie from Tanzania via Switzerland

Unusual yellow fruit notes (peach, mango, apricot) and a long finish distinguish this single-origin brand from the world's largest chocolate maker.

With: **The Wolftrap Syrah** from South Africa. Big, earthy flavors with little assertiveness. Quiet and strong.

Flight No. 4: Valrhona's Milk Chocolate from the Rhone region of France

Note the exceptional caramel notes and richness. High cocoa content for a milk chocolate. Needs no other sweet components to use in confections as its flavor is so complete.

With: **Moet Et Chandon Brut Champagne** from Champagne, France. A legendary brand whose classic craftsmanship and dry effervescence balance even the richest sweets from Valrhona.

Susie Norris is a chocolatier, TV producer and author of the new book "Chocolate Bliss."

Photo by Silvia Jansen