



## **Madeira Wine and Food – a personal perspective**

The idea of serving, or indeed matching, Madeira Wine with food might not quite have gone out with the ark, but seemed to at least fall from grace around the same time we stopped using terrapins to make soup.

But in the last couple of years, more and more sommeliers and gastronomes are again realizing that Madeira possesses some critical properties, which don't lend it to every dish, but are highly conducive to a number of food partnerships, often where other wines can struggle.

We should of course stop talking in a generic singular about Madeira at this point, because it is highly diverse, from dry to sweet, and young to old. But all are characterized by notable acidity, providing plenty of opportunity for excellent matching, and increasing levels of caramelisation of unfermented sugars through the maturation process.

Broadly dissecting the Madeira family into drier and sweeter styles, there seem to be two groups (with some crossover) of symbiotic ingredients. These include:

### **Drier wines / savoury ingredients**

Salted almonds  
Caramelized onions  
Game  
Cheeses (especially parmesan types, or very mature cheddar)  
Mushrooms  
Smoked Meats or some Smoked Fish  
Air-dried Meats  
Soy Sauce

Foie Gras

### **Sweeter wines / sweeter ingredients**

Caramel  
Toffee  
Treacle  
Praline

Dried Fruits  
Caramelised Apples  
Orange  
Cheeses  
Sweet spices  
Ginger

As can be seen, with the drier wines, there is a lot of correlation in food matches with umami-type ingredients, whilst the sweeter matches gravitate towards caramel/toffee, some fruits and sweet spices.

From here, it becomes quite logical to assemble some memorable matches.

A French onion soup, with caramelized onions, and with a savouriness from the stock, is a classic, of course, with a drier Madeira, but a Game Terrine with Onion Marmalade is just as perfect.

But equally satisfying would be some mushrooms fried in butter (maybe with a splash of Madeira in the pan), topped with croutons and shaved parmesan.

Welsh Rarebit, Peking Duck, dishes with Air Dried Ham and Smoked Eel can also be successful at the drier end of the scale.

Of course, when served as an aperitif, you might consider matching it with parmesan crisps, or canapés using other of these components, or just salted almonds.

Moving to sweeter styles, the caramelisation in the wine finds a perfect match with classics like Tarte Tatin, Crème Brulee or Crème Caramel (where botrytised dessert wines tend to do less well, because of the bitter clash between the by-products of caramelisation and botrytis cinerea).

But equally successful are those dishes which include dried fruit, like classic Sticky Toffee Pudding, and the family including fruit cake, mince pies, plum pudding and the like, especially when they are liberally spiced, and/or served with a slice of cheese.

A special mention deserves to be made of dishes which incorporate marmalade: it's a fantastic combination in a sponge, or similar.

Both dry and sweet styles are also interesting to experiment with a cheese course.

Finally, don't overlook the heavenly marriage of a really racy Malvasia (Malmsey) with Pate de Foie Gras, or pan-fried Foie Gras: the combination of caramelisation and acidity reaches greatness with a match like this.

And a quick note on Madeira age here. Sometimes the very old wines seem happier without the distraction of too much food (they used to save these wines for "once the cloth is removed" from the table in olden times, too, and it can be good advice). If you are serving an ancient wine, perhaps keep accompaniments very simple; perhaps just a bowl of nuts.

Danny Cameron  
Director, the b.f.t.  
May 2012