



I must admit to having a sweet tooth and especially at dessert time when the choice is limited to only one – that being a pairing of wine and chocolate. Since chocolate can present a complexity of flavors, the same way that wine does, there are a few simple rules to follow to make this dessert course easy.

1. The chocolate does not have to be sweeter than the wine. In fact, the opposite is true. If you are going to pair the chocolate with a Merlot or a Syrah, just make sure that the wine is essentially as sweet as the chocolate. This may require some trial and error; but I cannot imagine anyone would see that as a hardship. How do you know when everything is okay? The wine will not taste bitter when matched with the chocolate.

2. Aim to purchase quality chocolate. It is not necessary to break the bank, but the basic ingredient of cocoa powder on today's market is very expensive. Go easy!

3. Pair chocolate and wine according to the darkness of the chocolate. As with food, the general rule is that the darker the chocolate, the darker the wine. So, here we start to think of red wines. They are ideal for this purpose.

4. Look for full-bodied sweet wines to match with strong, intense, and heavy chocolates and chocolate desserts. Examples would be Port or maybe a Banyuls, or a Sherry.

5. If tasting wine and chocolate together, obey the rule of tasting them from light to dark. Start with the light milk and white chocolates, then move to the medium intensity chocolate, ending with the very dark and bitter chocolates. Match the wines in ascending order of weight and darkness.

6. Select wines according to the flavors of the chocolate. Here is a guide to help you.

- **WHITE CHOCOLATE.** Match with a Sherry, Muscat, a fruity Chardonnay, or a Moscato d'Asti. These wines will pick up on the buttery, fatty tones of what is usually considered not to be a "real" chocolate.

- **MILK CHOCOLATE.** Try Merlot, Pinot Noir, Riesling, or a Muscat. If you are feeling adventurous, try Champagne. The crisp, dry flavor of the bubbly contrasts perfectly with a simple milk chocolate. The champagne should be a demi-sec.

- **DARK CHOCOLATE (50-70%).** Pair this with more robust wines such as Cabernet

Sauvignon, Zinfandel, or a Port.

- BITTERSWEET CHOCOLATE (70-100%). This chocolate enters the bittersweet range with deep intensity. This is the range for the “experts.” Some good choices are Bordeaux, Beaujolais, Shiraz, Orange Muscat, Port, Malbec, and Zinfandel.

Remember that this is a guide and only a guide. One of the best recommendations is to experiment a lot to find your own satisfaction level. There are so many combinations available that it may take some time and effort. Could you ask for a more delightful assignment?

And say you order a rather intense chocolate for dessert. The waiter suggests a Banyuls wine to accompany the chocolate selection. Your waiter explains that Banyuls is sometimes referred to as cousin of Port. On its own it is a sweet, Grenache-based fortified wine that has been made since the thirteenth century; primarily in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. It was developed by a physician/chemist by the name of Arnaud de Villeneuve, who figured out that the fermentation of wine could be halted by adding pure grape spirit. This process raises the alcohol level of the wine to about 15%, thus making the wine “fortified” and very sweet. It is important to make note of this process because what happened in the thirteenth century is still happening today. The process is called “vins doux naturels.”

The wine is a classic companion to semi-sweet or dark chocolate. The Banyuls offers flavors of black plums and cherries. You will also taste orange bark toward the back of your tongue and espresso and raisin in the middle. The wine and the chocolate seem to be saying that they like each other.

WINESPEAK

As I was doing the readings for this article, I was overwhelmed by the amount of information available. It seems endless. The Champagne examples numbered no less than 13. There are numerous Port wines from Portugal and sweet wines and Late Harvest Rieslings from California and Germany. By no means can we be allowed to forget the Cabernet Sauvignon infused with chocolate from North Carolina. The waiter wanted to pour it over ice cream. It was decadent!!!

However, allow me to pass on to you one experience that I enjoyed at the Verterra Winery Tasting Room in Leland, Michigan. I tried the Port made by the winery and a Hard Chocolate.

The wine was served in a very distinctive glass meant for Port and the chocolate was served on a small wooden cutting board with a knife. The wine and the chocolate were a terrific match. I noticed that most of the folks who ordered the same selection savored the experience by eating and drinking very slowly.

In any case, you now have a lifetime of experimentation ahead of you matching chocolate and wine. I know that you will be successful.