



Basic Juice Article Spice World

by: *Beau Jarvis*

Do you crave spicy food? Is one of the joys in life getting all misty-eyed over a spicy plate of curry? When most of us hear the words ‘spicy food,’ we think of throat-burning, perspiration-inducing spice. Yet there’s more to spicy cuisine than watering eyes and flaming mouths. Consider the following spice categories: Savory spice, Mexican/Southwestern spice, Asian spice, and sweet spice. How on earth does one select wine for such spices? It can be tricky. Read on, and I’ll do my best to help.

Savory Spice

Savory spice is familiar to most of us. For example, take a slice of pepperoni pizza. It’s got black pepper, onions, garlic, and for those who crave spice, perhaps a shake or two of Cayenne pepper. This spice combo presents the wine adventurer with two red wine options: 1) Subtle & crisp or 2) Bold & fruity. Subtle & crisp wines include mostly old world reds like Italian Barbera d’Asti, French Côtes du Rhône, and Spanish Rioja. These wines will accent your pepperoni slice by highlighting its spice components on your tongue. In this instance, wine acts as the backup band to the singing savory spice combo. Perhaps you would rather go bold. Bold & fruity reds include Australian Shiraz, Californian Red Zinfandel, and Californian Petite Sirah. These big boys will act as a reset button for your tongue – take a sip and pizza is mostly erased from the tongue’s taste memory. Which is better? Try both wine styles and let your palette decide. **Wine recommendations:** *Taurino Salice Salentino, ’00 (\$12) from Puglia, Italy* (subtle & crisp); *Bogle Petite Sirah, ’02 (\$10) from California* (bold & fruity)

Mexican/Southwestern Spice

This is one diverse category. It includes near-flammable chili peppers, earthy mole, salsa, cilantro, and zesty citrus. Dish yourself up a green chili quesadilla with spicy salsa. Now, before you pop open a bottle of *cerveza*, think about the kind of wine that could possibly taste good in this instance. Again, let me provide you with two options: 1) Light, crisp, slightly sweet white wine or 2) Bold & fruity red wine. The light whites include German Riesling, French Vouvray, and California Chenin Blanc. These wines work because they are a little bit sweet and a little bit zesty (kind of like a salt-rimmed Margarita). White wines of this ilk will accent the food and tame any spice-fire in your salsa. If you’re feeling a little more aggressive, fight fire with fire. Pit a big ‘ol heavy red fruit-bomb against this dish and prepare for a tasty wrestling match on your tongue. Big red wine will do its best to extinguish burning taste buds with concentrated, fruity flavors. Have a flavor *Fiesta*, give both wine styles a try. **Wine recommendations:** *Beringer Chenin Blanc, ’02 (\$7) from California* (light, crisp, slightly sweet); *Cline Ancient Vines Mouvérdé, ’03 (\$13) from California* (big red)

Asian Spice

I’m sure a studious foodie out there could author an entire treatise on the near-infinite spice combinations in Asian cuisine. Today, let’s pull our Asian spice example from

Thailand. Picture a mouth-watering platter of chicken satays with spicy peanut sauce. How on earth could any wine handle soy sauce, peanut sauce, spicy red peppers, garlic, and onions? It's tricky, yet it can be done. In this instance, our wine needs to be full-bodied, slightly spicy, and aromatic enough to register in this sea of spices. Let's go with two fragrant heavy hitters: Alsatian Gewurztraminer (from France) or California Viognier. These white wines offer spicy aroma, tangy flavors, and tongue-protecting viscosity (i.e. this wine is thick and sticky). Take a sip. You'll notice nutty flavors of the peanut sauce slipping through the spice wall. You may also enjoy the sensation of lasting tangy wine flavors hanging out with the spicy red peppers. **Wine recommendation:** *Smoking Loon Viognier, '02 (\$9) from California*

Sweet Spice

Perhaps you are thinking, "Isn't sweet spice an Oxymoron?" Not exactly. Consider Northern African cuisine (Morocco, Algeria). You'll find cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, and even mint used as major spice ingredients. One of my favorite sweet spice dishes is couscous with toasted almonds, dates and green onions spiced with lemon, cinnamon and cloves. Fortunately, we won't need to introduce a new wine category to handle this dish. We can grab two of the white wine styles mentioned above: 1) Light, crisp, slightly sweet and 2) Full-bodied, spicy, aromatic. A lighter white wine, such as Chenin Blanc, will accent sweet spices. Full-bodied white wines, like Viognier, will not only accent sweet spices, but also turn up the flavor volume on the almonds and green onions. My preference in this case is Viognier with the couscous dish. In fact, each time I sip Viognier with my sweet, spicy, nutty couscous, I get little giddy. I dust off my eighties albums, put on *Combat Rock* by the Clash and dance around the house singing *Rock the Casbah*. Who knew that the old adage, "Spice up your life," could be taken literally? Cheers.

© *Basic Juice, 2005*

For reprint permission contact: beau@basicjuice.com