

Deal of the Week! Executive Corkscrews. \$10 Off

Basics > How to Pair

How to Pair Wine with Indian Food and Succeed Every Time

BY RUDRI PATEL



Getty

When you buy something through our link, we may earn a small commission from our affiliate partners. Wine Enthusiast maintains complete editorial independence and all wines are blind tasted. [Read more about our policy.](#)

“Traditional wine pairings don’t apply when it comes to Indian food,” says Alpana Singh.

At 26, Singh became the first woman of South Asian descent to receive the Master Sommelier certification. She believes there’s potential to [pair wine with Indian dishes](#), despite incorrect assumptions some people make about the country’s cuisines.

“I feel this is a general stereotype that’s attached to food that comes from regions that aren’t associated with wine production,” she says. She believes Indian cuisine “doesn’t get the same attention as Eurocentric dishes or dishes that come from traditional wine-producing areas.”

Scott Carney, dean of wine studies at New York's International Culinary Center, notes that wine isn't always part of the experience in the U.S. "There are certain cultures that will routinely drink beer with their dishes," he says.

Formerly the sommelier at Junoon, an Indian restaurant in New York City, Carney believes that some people are hesitant to pair wines with Indian food out of respect for the cuisine's flavors, figuring that "beverage has to take a secondary role to the complexity of the spices," he says. However, he found that "guests were willing to try pairings" at Junoon.

There are several ways for wine to complement the cumin, cardamom, coriander and yes, even red chili spices present in dishes like chicken tikka, dal makhani and lamb vindaloo. Here are four key tips from Indian food and wine experts.

IN THE SHOP

Elevate your culinary skills with our premium selection of cooking tools and tableware.

[Shop Now](#)

Pay Attention to Sauces and Spices

When it comes to finding the right wine for an Indian dish, the spices will generally take precedent over the protein.

"The elements to consider when pairing Indian food are the spices, sauce and the seasoning," says Singh. "We are talking about very aggressive spices like cinnamon, cumin, turmeric, ginger and garlic." Finding a wine that stands up to these flavors is key.



Palek Paneer (left) Riesling (right) / Getty

Because of the residual sugar, Singh says a [German Riesling Kabinett](#) pairs well with dishes like palak paneer, a dish with cubes of mild cheese and creamy spinach sauce.

Sandra Guibord, a wine educator, agrees. “The freshness and acidity of a Riesling won’t overpower the spinach and will complement the creaminess,” says Guibord.

Tannins can increase the perception of spice and may overpower spicy dishes as well as accentuate bitterness. “You want to find a way to balance the essentials like the sweetness, sourness, tanginess, heat and the spice, and the texture,” adds Singh.

Pair dishes like chicken tikka masala with a [Merlot](#), says Guibord, since “the smoky flavor from the tandoor cooking and subtle spices shine when matched with a softer tannin, fruit-forward wine.”

Fruit-forward wines with lower [tannins](#) may also complement spiciness of Indian dishes, says Brent Karlicek, certified advanced sommelier and beverage director for Upward Projects. Look for fruit-forward reds like Cru Beaujolais or try a Gewürztraminer or Pinot Gris. “Maybe Gamay wines might be better when the heat is higher because of the ripeness of the fruit,” he says.

Be Mindful of Alcohol Content

According to Singh, spicy dishes like lamb vindaloo, which features coconut, vinegar and abundant hot chili peppers, shouldn’t be paired with a wine that has a high alcohol content. The alcohol will amplify your perception of the spice. This combo will mute the taste of the other key ingredients.

Instead, Guibord advises a Grüner Veltliner. The “acidity of this wine will tone down the heat without overpowering the spices and flavors,” she says.



Lamb vindaloo / Getty

Red Wine Pairings for Indian Foods

A common misconception is that all Indian dishes feature red chili as the dominant seasoning. But many Indian dishes do not have an overabundance of heat.

"Coriander, cumin and garam masala aren't necessarily hot," says Singh. "If you're going to do a lamb dish with garam masala flavors to it, a Malbec is absolutely delicious with it."



Chicken tikka masala (left) and Merlot (right) / Getty



Keep in mind, though, to stay away from a high-alcohol [Malbec](#) if you're going to add chili peppers.

"Palak paneer can be paired with either a deep earthy Tempranillo or a peppery Zinfandel," says Sidney Roberts, owner and chef of Austin-based Indian restaurants G'Raj Mahal and Mumtaz Table & Bar. "Nothing stands up and balances the pepper in a curry like Jalfrezi better than a Zinfandel. It is just so warm and zesty."

While you won't find many pork dishes on Indian menus, Roberts believes that Tempranillo is the right choice for the mellow flavors of Mumtaz's pork rechaad, a warmly spiced stew served with braised cabbage and candied pineapple.

American barbecue can provide some guidance for kebabs or boti meats. Try them with a [Syrah](#) or [Côtes du Rhône](#). "Anytime the protein is chewy you need a wine that is chewy," says Singh.

When in Doubt, Try Prosecco or Rosé

"I love [Prosecco](#) with Indian food, for several reasons," says Singh. It tends to be lower in alcohol than still reds or whites, for example, and the green apple and stone fruit notes can be refreshing. "It helps neutralize the heat and I love the cleansing effect of the bubbles," she says.

Singh finds Prosecco pairs especially well with samosas and anything with rich, creamy sauces, like makhana or butter chicken.



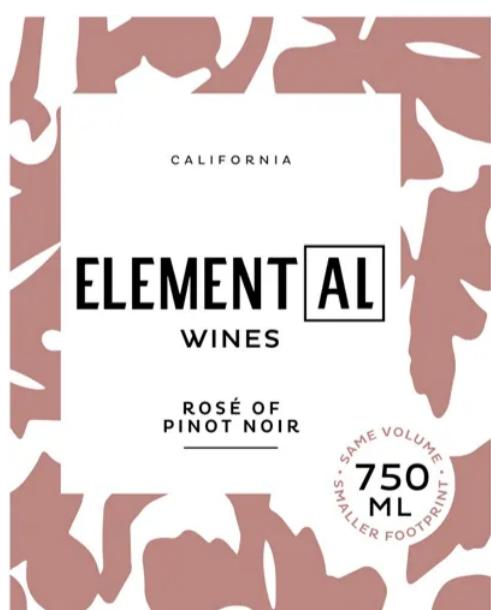
Butter chicken / Getty

Roberts likes [rosé](#) with chaats and tomato-cream sauces like tikka masala or makhana.

"We have had incredible luck with crisp, dry rosés to provide a nice balance to so many dishes on the menu," she says.

Published: January 28, 2022

What We're Tasting



Element[AL] 2023 Rosé of Rosé
(California)

PRICE \$17 POINTS 90

[Read More](#)

Maris 2023 Rosé de Nymphe Emue Rosé Lecavalier 2021 Zinfandel (Paso Robles) Oak Farm 2023 E (Lodi)

PRICE \$22

POINTS

91

PRICE \$52

POINTS

91

PRICE \$26

PC

[Read More](#)

Re

Subscribe to Our Newsletters

Sign Up For Wine Enthusiast Emails For Discounts And More!

Wine Enthusiast Wine Express

Enter your email address

Sign Up

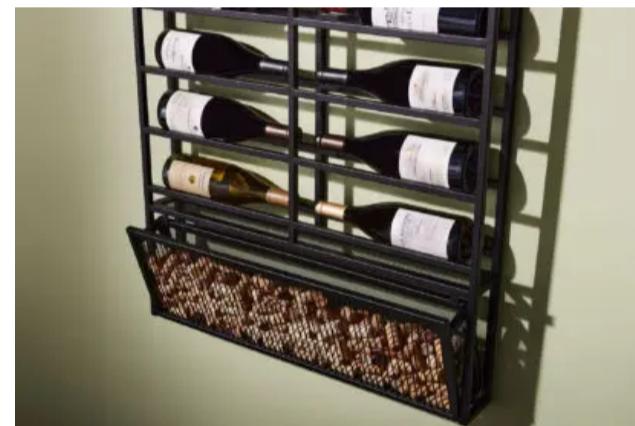
Welcome to Wineenthusiast.com! By using our website and/or subscribing to our newsletter, you agree to our use of cookies and the terms of our [Privacy Policy](#).

Take a Deeper Dive



[HOW TO SERVE](#)

[Meet the Aria Short Stem, the Official Glass of the Wine Enthusiast Tasting Panel](#)



[BUYING AND COLLECTING](#)

[When to Use a Wall-Mounted Wine Rack—and When Not To](#)



[GRAPES 101](#)

[Meet Madeleine Angevine, a Loire Valley Grape at Home in the Pacific Northwest](#)

Basics > Grapes 101

The Greatest Grape Debate: Chardonnay vs. Sauvignon Blanc

BY MATT KETTMANN





Getty Images

On one hand, [Chardonnay](#) and [Sauvignon Blanc](#) grapes couldn't be more different, at least in how they're commonly expressed and popularly understood. Chardonnay is a suave charmer, layered in smooth textures and warm flavors kissed with [oak](#), with comfort as its calling card. Sauvignon Blanc is a brisk refresher, zesty in acidity, crisp on the tongue and bright in grassy, tropical flavors that enliven the palate.

On the other hand, these two contenders are remarkably similar.

Both emerged from somewhat mysterious origins in [France](#), where they rose to recognition as [noble grape](#) varieties. They then traveled the world to almost every wine region, where they're able to reflect microclimates like few other varieties. And they're simultaneously shapeshifters, both Sauv Blanc and Chard willfully bending toward whatever style a winemaker desires, from the sharp edges enabled by stainless tanks to the round curves cultivated by oak aging.

Same, Same But Different

Thanks to such similarities, the arguments levied when vintners are challenged to elevate one over the other tend to echo a bit.

"No other grape variety makes as diverse a set of styles of wines as Chardonnay, and no other variety can be planted in such a diverse set of regions and climates as Chardonnay and still make good wine," asserts Richie Allen, who's been crafting Chardonnay (plus a good amount of Sauvignon Blanc) for [Rombauer Vineyards](#) for more than 25 years. "You can plant it anywhere in almost any soil type and it always makes a wine that is relatively palatable. No other variety can do that."

Or, you can instead trust Kathy Joseph, who founded [Fiddlehead Cellars](#) in Santa Barbara County as a Sauv Blanc and Pinot brand back in 1988. "Sauvignon Blanc to me is more terroir-driven than Chardonnay," says Joseph, who has long been disappointed by the many generic Chards on the market. "Sauvignon Blanc has more variety of character, depending on where it's planted, how it's farmed and what you do with it in the cellar. You can pick different Sauvignon Blancs for different moments in your life—what you're eating, what the weather is like, what part of the world you're in."

Joseph's career inspired the path of John Dragonette and Brandon Sparks-Gillis of [Dragonette Cellars](#), who similarly appreciate Sauvignon Blanc for its variability. "If you want, and you have the right terroir, you can make a Sauv Blanc like Will Ferrell—light, fun, airy—or make one like Robert DeNiro: deep, deadly, serious," says Dragonette.

Like many wineries in California, the Dragonette lineup includes both Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, so the men are hard-pressed to choose one over the other. "It would be a split decision," says Dragonette.

Popularity, Backlash and Evolving Palates

But Chardonnay tends to earn more critical praise and commercial status than Sauvignon Blanc, explains Sparks-Gillis, and that may indicate that there's something more to the variety.

"If you're splitting hairs, Chardonnay just has this kaleidoscopic ability to be complex and really complete," he says.

"Chardonnay can be enjoyed early and then gains complexity as it ages. It's rare to find Sauvignon Blancs that can transcend the more everyday style."

Whereas Chardonnay has enjoyed an endless quest of refinement over the decades, most modern Sauvignon Blanc tends to be made quickly in stainless steel tanks. "You can lose that ultimate completeness of the wine and the concentration," says Sparks-Gillis.

Both grapes faced uphill battles at different stages of their New World rise. Chardonnay was a victim of its own success, as the buttery styles of the 1990s and early 2000s triggered the "[Anything But Chardonnay](#)" movement. That resistance still simmers today, despite the fact that buttery Chardonnays are far less common than they once were.

For Sauvignon Blanc, the challenge was right at the start. "It was virtually given no recognition," says Joseph of how the now popular varietal was seen when she started out in 1981, when the wines tended to be flat and sweet. That's when the brilliant vintner Robert Mondavi recast the grapes as serious and dry, naming his versions "Fumé Blanc."

"The consumer took a huge liking to this new wine," recalls Joseph. "Sauvignon Blanc suddenly had the opportunity to gain much better definition by considering where the fruit was planted and how it was farmed. I felt like I could be a part of that."

Her Fiddlehead brand evolved to produce three distinct styles, from fresh and tropical to barrel-aged and rich.

Minimal Intervention, Major Change

The New World's exploration of Sauv Blanc styles is decades behind Chardonnay's learning curve. But there are exciting developments on the horizon, according to Erica Crawford, who co-founded the revolutionary New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc brand [Kim Crawford](#). Since selling that brand two decades ago, "I couldn't put Sauvignon to my lips for four years," she says with a laugh.

Then, in 2013, she and her husband, Kim, created the organic-minded label [Loveblock Wine](#), where they're expanding the possibilities of the country's infamous Sauv Blanc.

"Some people are finding that the classic [Marlborough](#) style is a little big and in their face," says Crawford, who helped make such flavors famous. "We're exploring and evolving the style."

Their latest project is using green tea tannin instead of sulfur as a preservative, which is revealing new Sauvignon Blanc characteristics like mandarin, saffron and cumin alongside the grape's typical jalapeno note.

"We see more and more flavors opening up as we are intervening less and less," she says. "Sulfur is like a little blanket that gets put over the flavors and the acid at the same time. It's really quite interesting in this controlled situation to see the difference between the two."

So, What's the Verdict?

Perhaps that final bell is yet to ring in this battle.

Chardonnay definitely has the edge when it comes to popularity. “Unfortunately, more customers are familiar with Chardonnay, so I’m on a constant teaching program to open the door for people to consider the different styles of Sauvignon Blanc,” says Joseph. “But I love encouraging people to give it another try, to explore the possibilities out there, because there are so many.”

But there’s at least one benefit that all wine lovers can appreciate when it comes to Sauv Blanc. “Sauvignon Blanc is one of my favorite wines to teach young winemakers how to make,” says Allen from Rombauer. “It’s about precision in how you protect the aromatics. If you can’t get that right, you’ll never be a good winemaker in my book.”

More Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc Coverage

- In [California, "almost magical" Chardonnay](#) offers a balance of freshness and flavor.
- The [best Sauvignon Blancs](#) to drink right now.
- Think you know [Sauvignon Blanc? Try aging it.](#)
- Napa and Sonoma winemakers market [luxury Sauvignon Blanc](#). Is anyone buying?
- [Hate buttery Chardonnay?](#) Try these and get back to us.



FROM THE SHOP

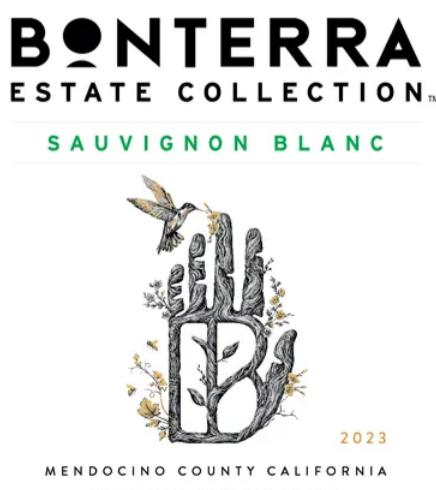
Find Your Wine a Home

Our selection of white wine glasses is the best way to enjoy the wine’s subtle aromas and bright flavors.

[Shop All Wine Glasses](#)

Published: October 2, 2024

What We're Tasting



Bogle 2023 Rosé (California)

PRICE \$13

POINTS

91

[Read More](#)

Element[AL] 2022 Pinot Noir (California) Element[AL] 2022 (California)

PRICE \$17

POINTS

91

PRICE \$17

POINTS

PC

[Read More](#)

Re

Subscribe to Our Newsletters

Sign Up For Wine Enthusiast Emails For Discounts And More!

Wine Enthusiast Wine Express

Enter your email address

Sign Up

Welcome to Wineenthusiast.com! By using our website and/or subscribing to our newsletter, you agree to our use of cookies and the terms of our [Privacy Policy](#).

We Bring Wine to Life



A Love for Wine and Family

[Learn More](#)



Purveyors of the Wine Lifestyle

[Learn More](#)



Renowned Trust and Expertise

[Learn More](#)



Uncorking Wine Culture for All

[Learn More](#)

Subscribe To Our Newsletters

Sign Up For Wine Enthusiast Emails For Discounts And More!

Wine Enthusiast Wine Express

Enter your email address

Sign Up

Welcome to Wineenthusiast.com! By using our website and/or subscribing to our newsletter, you agree to our use of cookies and the terms of our [Privacy Policy](#).

GET TO KNOW US

HELP

FOR BUSINESS

SUBSCRIBE

OUR SITES

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Cookie Policy](#)

[California Rights Do Not Sell My Information](#)

