

What's the Best Wine for Indian Food?

Pairing wine with Indian food is simple, right? A lightly sweet Riesling, a spicy curry, end of story. Or maybe that's just part of the story...

By **Ray Isle** | Updated on May 24, 2017

Nine times out of ten if you ask a sommelier what wine goes with Indian food, the answer will be an off-dry white. It's not a bad answer—if you're talking about a spicy curry, for example. But Indian cuisine, like Chinese cuisine, is about as far from homogenous as you can get. Kashmiri cooking is different from Keralan cooking, both are different from what you might find in Kolkata in Bengal, and so it goes. So saying that a lightly sweet Gewurztraminer is ideal with Indian food is about as nonsensical as saying, "Chardonnay goes great with American food."

At the acclaimed restaurant Babu Ji in New York's East Village (where I had the best Indian meal I've had in ages), chef Jessi Singh and wine consultant Jorge de Yarza (who has his own superb Basque place, Donostia, a few blocks away) have thought a lot about this. As Singh says, "I try to feature the whole of India on my menu. One dish from the west, a couple from the south, a couple from the north, a few from the east." Singh's Gol Gappa, a hollow, crackling-crisp ball of poori bread, filled with tamarind chutney, yogurt and spices is indicative of his cooking. Eating it—you pop it in your mouth in one bite—is like having a flavor-piñata explode on your tongue. "If you want to give someone a crash course in Indian cuisine, you give them this," Singh says. "It's a street snack, and comes from Upper Pradesh. Whenever anyone in my family dies we take their ashes to this one town in Upper Pradesh. The priests keep a ledger of the family—our ledger goes back 800 years. This town's tradition is to make their gol gappa with yogurt. It's so nice—creamy, crunchy, sweet, spicy, sour."

This is a dish that a lightly sweet wine actually works with. De Yarza says, "With the gol gappa you get that citrusy, minty, yogurt, sweet-spice mix. The Theo Minges Kabinett Riesling that we have on the list almost tastes like a deconstructed margarita. It's a fun combo with those snack food flavors."

Singh's Punjabi Kadhi, a dish of cauliflower fritters in a tangy, turmeric-inflected yogurt curry, has an entirely different flavor profile. "Kadhi is a staple dish of my home. We had ten buffalos, so we'd make our own yogurt, and my mom would take the yogurt and keep it three or four days to let it get more sour. You add some lemon juice, add turmeric and chickpea flour, and cook it for seven or eight hours."

For the Kadhi, Yarza pours a Chardonnay from France's Jura region. "The kadhi has a beautiful sourness, so it needs more weight," he says. "A structured, savory white is ideal."

Singh enjoys the way his menu darts all over the Indian subcontinent: "I love Chinese-Indian cuisine—Chinese refugees in Calcutta created it over 100 years ago. I always have two or three things that represent that tradition, like Chinese noodles with Indian spice, or Mumbai spring rolls, with green mango, carrots and shredded meat. The prawn coconut curry on our menu is mostly Keralan; it's very simple, with no other spice than fresh curry leaves, which don't overwhelm the flavor of the prawns. The yogurt kebab we do, that's from Lucknow: Awadhi cuisine, the cuisine of the Moghul rulers of that region. They were into poetry and food and architecture and music; they used to feed their goats gold leaf thinking that it would make the goats taste like gold. It's a very flavorful, rich, creamy cuisine. Our beef curry is southern Indian, bay leaves, pepper, cardamom—that's a spicy curry." (De Yarza pairs it with a California Grenache from Beckmen Cellars.)

"The Moghuls ruled India for nearly a thousand years," Singh continues. "They brought hung yogurt, and beets; dried seeds and nuts. But you've also got the influence of the French in Pondicherry, the Portuguese in Goa—vindaloo, which classically is pork cooked in vinegar and spices—comes from the Portuguese influence. Farsi refugees in Mumbai and Delhi; the Sri Lankan influence; and the spice route influence, Thailand. Every 200 or 300 years our food has been influenced by *some* culture. And they leave their marks on it."

So, saying that one wine can go with all that does seem a bit like lunacy. But if you absolutely had to pick one?

"Well, I am of the school where Champagne goes with everything," De Yarza admits. "And even on Jessi's menu that turns out to be right."