

Pairing Wine with Chocolate

Monday, 05 January 2009

It warms my heart to see all the positive emails we've received about our Chocolate by Moonlight Valentine's Day feature story — and I hope you all enjoy the recipes as much as I have over the years. But it's interesting. Regardless of where I hear it — online, from friends, customers or co-workers — the one question most often asked of me around this time of year is, "How do I pair wine with chocolate?"

The general rule of thumb is to go light-to-light, dark-to-dark. I love white chocolate and pink champagne. Or milk chocolate and merlot. Then as we get closer to the bittersweets, I look for wines that have the illusion of sweetness — without being sweet. Ripe often tastes sweet, so a ripe zinfandel is a great pairing for bittersweet chocolate because it fills in one of the layers of flavor. It doesn't compete. I look for contrasts in the flavors, not perfect matches.

For example, many people like cabernet with chocolate. I'm not nearly as fond of it because the tannin in cabernet is similar to a tannin-like flavor in chocolate, so you're matching that kind of astringency — its bitterness with bitterness. Now, bitterness as a flavor is very important, but when you're matching the two you tend to accentuate one. So a young cabernet matched with a bittersweet chocolate brings out that bitterness in the tannins, which, to me, makes the wine taste like it needs to age another 10 years — not the effect you're looking for.

I'm always looking for flavors to crescendo. Building layers. So, let's take and taste a zinfandel with a bittersweet chocolate: It starts with the cocoa butter flavor, then you get a softer tannin layer right up above that, then the richness of the chocolate kicks in, followed by the fruitiness of the wine, followed by a little acidity at the end to clean it all up — which gets you ready for the next bite. Perfect.

-Michael