



Perfect union of wine and cheese

Sometimes, a match is made in heaven. I'm talking of wine and cheese, a potential minefield. But this time there were no explosive traps, just pure pleasure which made both partners, already delightful, even more attractive.

The match-making wasn't planned. It happened during an evening when the focus was on high street burgundies (of which more in a nearer-to-Christmas column), not on the earlier date when, with the same group of friends, specific cheese and wine partnerships were under scrutiny. Support for the union was unanimous, even though it's not a classic one.

I won't delay the announcement of the names any longer: The wine was Simonnet-Febre chablis premier cru Montmains 2010, the cheese camembert – specifically that from the unpasteurised milk of Normande cows in the red-and-black-labelled box from Waitrose's specialist cheese cabinet. It's on offer at £3.59 (normally £4.49) until December 4.

Conveniently, the wine is also sold by

“You need to like chablis at the steely, mineral end of the spectrum and camembert with ripe, rich, earthy, savoury flavour



■ Looking down on the town of Chablis from the Montmains premier cru vineyards

Picture: BVB/Aurelien Ibanez

Waitrose – though not by all branches (locally, John Barnes, Holloway Road and Oxford Street should have it, £18, or buy on line). Wine Rack sells it at £1 more – check you get 2010 vintage.

Both have loads of personality, though you need to like chablis at the steely, mineral end of the spectrum and camembert with ripe, rich, earthy, savoury flavour. If you do, there's your weekend treat.

To return to specific cheese and wine sessions. That evening with friends also featured Waitrose rather a lot, but that must have been coincidence – the public relations people who prompted it are paid by the wine and cheese companies, not the supermarket. The cheeses all came from Appleby, whose stockists, Waitrose apart, include Neal's Yard and Paxton & Whitfield.

Complexity and funkiness

Specific matches were suggested, but the star cheese, Appleby's Cheshire, was promiscuous, a happy companion to a variety of reds and whites, new world and old (NB, some vintages may have moved on). But you can't always guarantee harmony over a single grape or with your friends. I very much liked the complexity and funkiness of Errazuriz Wild Ferment chardonnay 2010 (a bargain at Majestic, £10 in purchases of two-plus Chilean wines), and on my palate both wine and mature Cheshire retained their character. Not so with two friends – the two were incompatible, they said.

The reverse was true with Louis

Jadot Macon Villages 2011 (Budgens, independents, £10.50) – I enjoyed its creamy crispness, but found that double Gloucester turned up the sweetness factor uncomfortably. No, said the same friends, “much better with cheese than without”.

Would red relationships be more harmonious? Yes, fortunately. The somewhat peppery red-fruit concentration of Villa Maria Cellar Selection Pinot Noir 2009 (£11.60 in Majestic's two-plus New Zealand offer) was even better with the mature Cheshire. The cheese blossomed too, we agreed. And another Kiwi wine, fragrant, big-flavoured yet still elegant Vidal White Label Series syrah 2008 (£13, www.waitrosedirect.com – may be in stores at £14) was the unanimous top partner for the multi-award-winning Cheshire.

A few days after that experience came another, matching wine to more English cheeses, spanning styles from soft, fresh and white – ewe's milk Sussex Slipcote – to tangy Lord of the Hundreds, also ewe's but hard and mature, and creamy Barkham cow's milk blue, where my note said “yum”. The wines, chosen by a small Sussex independent merchant, Bush Vines (info@bushvines.co.uk), were 2011 sauvignon blanc from the talented Forrest family in Marlborough, New Zealand (£9.65) and a soft rioja, Medievo Selecccion Especial 2010 (£8).

Sauvignon is famed as a cheese-friendly wine – it was great with the Barkham; and I liked the rioja with the Slipcote.

But the lesson is that there are few cheese and wine rules: personal palate prevails, so try match-making.

Raising a glass to a piece of theatre

Setting creates atmosphere of high drama to enjoy a 'pretty damn good' meal

As I awaited my guest in a quiet little side street just behind Marylebone High Street, I felt rather as if I might have been a character in a play, such as the vaguely stage-like setting – though a character in search of not so much an author, as a lunch. From the outside, Hardy's is handsome – bottle green and glossy with highlights of gold, a full scale Union Jack proudly flying from a jutting pole: it looks like the theatrical recreation of a tasteful English restaurant as envisioned by an optimistic expatriate in Hollywood. Inside it is a study in calculated casualness: the furniture is artfully mismatched, though totally toning: claret buttoned banquettes, captains' chairs, half lace curtains. A marble-topped bar brings in a slice of Austrian café, the pastiche canvases hauling us back to Blighty: Beardsley black-and-white approximations of his more risqué illustrations for the Yellow Book, but with each wicked lady here clutching a brimming glass of red wine. The room was spattered with well-dressed couples and clusters, all from central casting ... and then there is the proprietor: oh my. Very tall, and with the sort of short back and sides that was de rigeur for a squaddie during the Crimean War – in that there was no back, no sides, merely a thicket, a tuft on top. He is an amiable host whom I have encountered before,

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