



Thinking About Cooking (With Wine)

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I like cooking lots of different kinds of foods. I cook Mexican and Italian, Chinese and Vietnamese, Argentine, French, Spanish and Texan. Some of my favorite food is Texas fusion which can incorporate bits and pieces of all of them. I like things like foie gras potstickers, cowboy snails, and sweetbreads tacos. Except for baking (which is as much chemistry as cooking) and Julia Child's Beef Bourguignon (out of respect), I generally don't use recipes. I'm more of a technique guy. As much as I love to cook, I particularly like cooking with wine. Sometimes I even add wine to the

dish.

Actually, I use a lot of wine when I cook and it doesn't matter what sort of food I'm cooking. It's something I'm regularly asked about. Why use wine? Which wine? How much do you use? When should I add it? Does the alcohol all evaporate? And so on.

I use wine in cooking for a variety of reasons. Wine can replace some of the water when I make rice (or polenta or masa for tamales). Wine can add acidity and/or sweetness. Wine can add richness and complexity and enhance savoriness. Wine adds alcohol, which along with fat and water, is one of the most basic vectors for flavor (some flavors are soluble in fat, some in water, and some only in alcohol). And, of course, red wine can add color.

Along with dry red and white wines, fortified wines – Port, Sherry, Madeira, and Marsala – are often called for in recipes but there is more to it than just that. Red or white wine can be tart or smooth. Port can be tawny or ruby. Sherry, Madeira, and Marsala can be bone dry, lushly sweet, or anywhere in between. Consider the dish to choose the wine. Even if no type is specified or you are winging it, as I almost always do, think about the dish. The dish will tell you which wine to use and when to use it.

The Basics

So which wine to use depends on the dish and “dish” (note I didn't write “recipe”) encompasses both ingredients and techniques. Whether the wine is used for steaming, poaching, or braising, in a sauce (gravy or reduction) or a marinade, as an ingredient or in an emulsion, technique has as much importance as the ingredients in selecting the right wine for cooking. Wine is rarely the only liquid used in a dish. Wine may be mixed with water, stock, melted butter, olive oil, fruit juices, oyster liqueur, and many other things. These initial ingredients begin to dictate the type of wine used. The main ingredient – beef, lamb, pork, salmon, grouper, mussels – guides you further. The wine has to work with the ingredients but it also has to work with the technique.



When you add the wine is also important. White wines added early don't yield the scum on the sauce that red wine added early can give. Wine added late in the cooking process adds more flavor but is less integrated into the dish than wine added early. Red wine added at the end to finish a dish or a sauce generally won't leave a scum if you keep it below a boil. Fortified wines can be added at any point in the cooking process but the sooner they are added, the better they integrate into the dish. Red port takes a bit more care than the other fortified varieties because it can leave some scum.

When braising, wine is an essential ingredient. The acid adds life to the dish. The alcohol in the wine helps extract and develop the flavors in both the meat and the sauce. And the wine itself adds flavor and richness to the dish. When I braise, my “go to” wine of choice is White Port because of its moderate acidity, higher alcohol (a good bit of which – but certainly not all – evaporates off during cooking), subtle, clean flavor, and low price. As braising is a long, slow cooking process that simmers the food in a bath of flavorful liquid, dry White Port works better than dry red or unfortified white wines. In addition to forming a scum over long cooking times, red wines can introduce and concentrate some undesirable flavors in a longer cooked dish. The white wines I select for cooking are cleaner tasting and more able to allow the main ingredient to shine through. I prefer the higher alcohol White Port for braising, as drier, lower alcohol whites don't stand up to the extended heat as well.

I generally keep and freeze any leftover braising liquid for later use in gravies and sauces. While this liquid invariably already has wine in it, I will often add more while making the gravy, sometimes finishing it with red wine. The layering of different additions of wine can add richness in the same way that adding spices to a dish at different points in the cooking does. These braising liquids are also excellent for reducing down to a demi-glace that can be frozen for later use.

For poaching seafood, I use higher acid, lower alcohol, dry whites mixed with seafood stock and often some citrus in the form of lemon or lime juice. Due to the shorter cooking times and higher acidity, these accentuate the flavor of the seafood, whether clams, mussels, shrimp, lobster, or fin fish. The wine rich liquids used to poach seafood can be saved and kept frozen for use in seafood soups or stews or – my favorite – as part of the liquid for cooking the rice in Paella.

The Wines

For me, cooking wine – red or white – is best if aged in tanks rather than barrels. If it goes into barrels, they need to be older barrels and for not too long. Otherwise, the wine will have an oak flavor that rarely incorporates well into the dish. White cooking wines should not have gone through malo-lactic fermentation as that may give them a milky-buttery character that will interfere with the flavors in the dish. I prefer cooking wines sealed with artificial closures (screw-caps, plastic stoppers, glass stoppers) rather than natural corks so I don't have to worry about the possibility of cork taint in my dish. I am looking for acid or alcohol or both along with some winery richness and some fruit flavor. Some minerality is a plus. Clean flavors are essential.

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The dry white wines I use come from one of four categories: leftovers, close-outs, Vinho Verde, and White Port. Leftovers are just that; if I have leftover dry, un-wooded, no ML white wine, I save it to cook with. If I don't have leftovers, I might buy close-out (\$2.99, \$3.99) wines to cook with but they have to be dry and clean (no oak and no ML). It is often easier to just keep some Vinho Verde on hand. Vinho Verde is a high acid, lemony, minerally, lower-alcohol white from the northern Portuguese coast. It is perfect for lighter seafood dishes. I always keep Gallo White Port on hand. I add it to braising liquids, soups, and stews. It goes into the pot when I make stocks and replaces up to half of the water when I make rice. I use White Port instead of water for the steaming stage of making fried potstickers.

I also use red wine when cooking but I use rather less of it, especially early in the process. I will use white wine and stock to make a braising liquid but I will add a flavorful red at the end to finish the reduced sauce. In finishing sauces, I do try to use better red wines and will often use the same type of wine if not the exact same wine I plan to serve with the completed dish. If I am serving a great Bordeaux (say a top Pauillac like Lynch Bages) with Lamb, I'll use some lesser but still high quality Bordeaux (maybe a \$15.00 Haut Medoc) to finish the gravy. While I use white wine almost exclusively for braising and steaming (tamales, vegetables, mussels, clams, lobster, the aforementioned potstickers), I generally poach everything but fish in red wine. Poached pears, poached peaches, and poached cherries are favorites but there is a lot more out there. Ever had an egg poached in red wine and then flash fried in olive oil? Yum. The reds I use tend to follow the same pattern as the whites: leftovers, close-outs and two others. In this case, the others – my go-tos – are Gallo Hearty Burgundy and Gallo Red Port. I use the leftovers, closeouts, and Hearty Burgundy interchangeably. By the way, leftover dry red wine in my house – and I suspect in many of yours – usually means we opened a second bottle. Sauces, pan deglazers, and poaching liquid are the main roles for the dry reds. My favorite steak sauce is made by adding butter and shallots to a hot cast iron skillet in which I have just finished cooking a steak. After the butter sizzles and the shallots caramelize, deglaze the pan with some wine and let it reduce to half. Notice I didn't specify what kind of wine to use. Dry red works but so does Madeira of all types and the richer Sherries. Serve it ladled over the sliced steak. If I had made pork chops this way, the wine of choice for the deglaze and reduction could be Red Port. Otherwise, I use the red port almost exclusively for poaching fruit.

Dessert or “fortified” wines are often called for in recipes. Fortified wines are those that have extra alcohol in the form of white brandy added to them during or after fermentation. Usually the recipe specifies Port, Sherry, Madeira, or Marsala but that only gets you part of the way home. Port can be Tawny or Ruby. Sherry, Madeira, and Marsala can be bone dry, lushly sweet, or anywhere in between. All can range from fresh to very oxidized. The key is to match both the sweetness and level of oxidation to the dish. Savory dishes generally want drier, less oxidized versions. Sweeter dishes generally want sweeter, often more oxidized – from long aging in old barrels – wines as ingredients or cooking mediums. Here the barrels are used for that slow controlled oxidation rather than adding any wood flavors. A seafood soup wants a dry Sherry or Marsala. A glaze for an apple tart might want sweet Madeira and Zabaglione requires sweet Marsala. A lot of it just depends. Sweated out mushrooms will absorb any liquid added to them and fortified wines are ideal for that. A richer dish wants mushrooms enhanced with a fortified wine with some sweetness, like a Tawny Port or an Oloroso or even a Cream Sherry. A simpler dish might like those same mushrooms more subtly enhanced with a Fino or Dry Amontillado Sherry, a Rainwater Madeira, or even a White Port.

Some dishes will take more than one wine. My Bolognese sauce starts with some White Port and vegetable stock added to the mix of browned beef, veal, and pork with sweated carrots, celery, onions, garlic, mushrooms, and finely diced bell peppers (they disappear into the mix) along with tomato paste, lemon juice, and pine nuts. Later I add some Sweet Marsala as it simmers and then I finish it with some dry red wine.

When I poach pears, I use a mix of Ruby Port and dry red wine with lemon juice, brandy, cinnamon, and nutmeg. After the pears are done, I reduce some of the poaching liquid to make a syrup as a sauce for them. The rest of it gets cooled off a bit and drunk as a delicious sort of mulled wine.

As much as I like wine in food, I am very careful about using wine in marinades. Any water-based marinade – and wine is mostly water – has the potential to steam the food from the inside out as it is cooking and I can't think of a better way to ruin the texture and flavor of most meats than unintentional steaming. I will use wine when I make a brine for turkey or pork but most of my marinades tend to be more olive oil-based than wine-based. Nevertheless, due to its flavor vector qualities and inherent acidity, I generally use at least a little wine, often fortified, in most of my marinades. For subtler dishes, I generally use White Port. For the richer dishes, I'll use darker Sherries and Madeiras.

The second best piece of advice I can give about cooking is “use wine”. (The best piece of advice is to learn techniques and only use recipes for ideas.) Outside of most breakfast dishes (remember those wine poached eggs) and baking, wine has a place in virtually all of your cooking. It will increase the flavor of your

dishes and increase your enjoyment of your food. Just let the dish tell you which wine or wines it needs ... and remember to put some wine in the cook as well as in the dish. ✨

