

Pairing a Traditional Cantonese Banquet with Western Wines: Lessons Learned

Tony Aspler, Roger Dagorn M.S., and Patrick Lin, with Henry M. Wu

Introduction

A side effect of globalization in the last few decades is the rapid fusion of the world's culinary cultures. A prime example is the marriage of Chinese cooking and French-style wines¹ – it is now commonplace to see haute Chinese cuisine enjoyed with the best vintages in Asia and beyond.

While much knowledge and many rules can be relied on when matching western cuisines to wines, the pairing of wines to Chinese food is still a relative mystery if only for the infancy of the premise. There are also real political and technical obstacles to the task.

Here we attempt to construct a knowledge base that sheds light on the subject while debunking some of the myths that have accumulated. We put together a group that included two experienced sommeliers and a master chef who, while a practitioner in French cooking, has spent years managing Chinese kitchens. We were given unfettered access to one of the most celebrated Cantonese kitchens² in North America, along with all of the products, condiments and, most importantly, cooking techniques and secrets contained therein.

In terms of protocol, we started with the structural template of the traditional Cantonese banquet, which in all its variations offered a sequenced collection of courses featuring almost all of the major cooking methods, styles and flavours. We deconstructed the complex ingredients and cooking techniques to find a style of wine that would complement and express each dish best in terms of flavour, balance, colour aesthetics, and mouth-feel. With findings based on individual dishes, we picked wines versatile enough to be used throughout dinner. Our exercise and results also generated knowledge and understanding to allow near-optimal wine choices for less formal dinners with common Chinese dishes.

The Challenge of Matching Wines to Chinese Cuisine

Many factors make the pairing of wines to Chinese food a complicated and difficult task, including these listed below.

¹ Throughout this document, “wine” will refer to wines based on classical French wine-making styles, whether the wines are from Europe or the New World, but will not include classical Chinese alcoholic beverages.

² Lai Wah Heen at the Metropolitan Hotel, Toronto

The Cuisine

While western fine dining has developed hand-in-hand with oenology, the consumption of wine with Chinese food has garnered momentum only in the last thirty years. Many inherent aspects of the cuisine contribute to the wine-pairing challenge, for example:

- 1) The sequence of dishes in a Chinese dinner or banquet switches from meat to fish, fish to meat, and sometimes back to fish; the pairing of wines was never contemplated when the order was traditionally determined.
- 2) The spicing of each dish, which may simultaneously involve soy, oyster sauce, Chinese cooking wine, black and white pepper, star anise, and even MSG, can be complex and even contrasting.
- 3) Condiments such as Hoisin sauce, vinegar, and chili sauce of intense flavour often accompany dishes, and their application can dramatically change the flavour profile of the core recipe.
- 4) The main ingredient may be plated with jellyfish, fish maw, or other items with contrasting flavours and textures. Found on the same plate may be items that are hot and cold, spicy and mild, fresh and smoked or pickled, or soft and crunchy.

The Cultural Divide

While Chinese cooking has a long and storied history, a lot of knowledge on techniques and ingredients has been passed down through word of mouth and the apprenticeship system in the kitchen. Only the more general aspects are documented, and formal instruction is just a recent possibility. A lot of the best chefs with true understanding of the intricacies of the cuisine do not speak western languages and are foreign to the world of wines and western concepts of flavours and texture.

On the other hand, wine is a product of western culture and people knowledgeable in the field often lack exposure or access to the proper information, products and philosophy surrounding Chinese food.

Socio-economic Development/Politics

The growing consumption of wine in China is fueled in no small part by the recent economic boom in the region. Wine is seen not just as a desirable culinary accessory, but often a symbol of wealth. Accordingly, well-heeled diners have gravitated towards the prestige appellations, namely the Bordeaux and Burgundy reds, with the understanding and consumption of most other wines marginal at best. It is not uncommon to see premier cru such as Chateau Lafite and Petrus on the dinner table at the best restaurants in China regardless of the menu. This has contributed to the myth that Bordeaux reds, as fabulous as they obviously are, represent the best match for the most exotic and expensive dishes on the Chinese menu such as Shark's Fin Soup and Braised Dried Abalone.

The importation of wine is still subject to regulations and tariffs in China and many countries where Chinese food is popular and developed. Under this practical limitation, wines of different regions and styles are available with varying degrees of difficulty from time to time, influencing their acceptance and popularity.

Finally, any exercise to match wines to such a complex and diverse cuisine must necessarily involve exceptional access to potentially expensive products. Many such attempts and publications in the past have involved the sponsorship of wine makers and merchants, with the results potentially tainted by commercial motivations.

The Tasting Protocol

For our effort, we started by looking at successive courses in the traditional Cantonese banquet as a collection of cooking styles, ingredients and flavours. By studying a number of alternatives with each course, we generated a sizable library of matches tabulating the best correlation between the flavour and texture of the dishes, the style of wines, viable varietals and representative products.

By using the formal Cantonese banquet menu as a template, we experienced what is essentially a superset of almost all of the relevant styles, ingredients and tastes one is likely to encounter in a typical dinner setting. It is also a rare opportunity for some of us to study in depth a few of the exotic Chinese dishes, including shark's fin soup, dried abalone, and assorted other dried sea delicacies.

The courses in a Chinese banquet are served sequentially rather than a few at a time as is sometimes the case in restaurants, thus providing some natural isolation of each wine and course pairing. Still we allowed for the possibility of using palate cleansers in the form of water and green tea in between courses. We also recognized that it may be impractical – and expensive – to serve a different wine with each course. So based on the results of the per-course tastings, we made a selection of wines versatile enough to match multiple courses. We used the same approach to suggest wine pairings for a less formal, typical corporate dinner menu to test the practicality of our findings.

We conducted extensive discussions on the flavour profile, textures, colours, ingredients and history for each dish with the chef on our team. Every ingredient in each recipe was meticulously tabulated based on taste and its impact on the dish.³ Besides bringing his personal knowledge, Chef acted as our guide to the Chinese kitchen and enhanced our understanding of the subtle taste differences and intentions of each creation.

We grouped together a variety of courses based on each major cooking style and held three separate sessions to investigate the best individual matches and also versatile matches for each group. Then we took one particular example of a banquet menu and experimented with wines suggested in theory by our earlier findings in order to illustrate the subtle pairing considerations necessary for specific preparations. We repeated the exercise with a less formal dinner menu with fewer courses suitable for corporate entertaining or even a family celebration.

³ A copy of this spreadsheet is available at <http://www.laiwahheen.com/wine/>

The Cantonese Banquet Menu

The Cantonese banquet menu typically begins with a course from the BBQ/Marinated Meat section of the kitchen. For formal banquets, roasted suckling pig accompanied by marinated jellyfish is common. Sometimes, a plattered selection of items is served. The Peking Duck is a popular choice in less formal settings especially in the West.

The meal is followed by two wok-fried or deep-fried “hot appetizers”. Scallops, prawns or fileted chicken pieces are common main ingredients. Then comes the shark’s fin soup, a few preparations of which are possible. The abalone dish comes next, followed by chicken, lobster, and steamed fish.⁴ Starch dishes – typically fried rice and/or noodles – complete the savoury portion of the menu, to be capped off by dessert.

While the number of courses is reduced in a less formal dinner, the template and progression of dishes still mimic those in a formal banquet.

The following courses in the Cantonese banquet menu are crucial to the meal while being relatively unfamiliar to the western palate.

BBQ/Marinated Meats

The BBQ chef occupies his own section of Chinese kitchen. His creations, including roasts and poached marinated meats, lead off the dinner menu. The crackling skin of a roasted suckling pig, garnished with marinated jellyfish, is traditional in the most formal banquets. More often, a combination platter of four or five items is served. The roasted Peking Duck, due to its immense popularity with westerners, is now a common “cold appetizer” to start a less formal Chinese dinner. It is interesting to note that the dish is almost never used in formal banquets.

Pairing wines with this category is problematic not only because diverse flavours compete in a combo platter, but also because condiments including Hoisin sauce, plum sauce and granular sugar accompany the courses, not to mention the steamed dough wrappers and garnishes (scallions, chili) that may also be present.

In theory, the wine that matched best with these dishes was the Drouhin Côte de Beaune Villages 2005. While it did quite well with many of the dishes, the wine lacked the sweetness of fruit needed to match the Honey-glazed Pork and the Hoisin sauce for the Peking Duck. A New World Pinot Noir from a warm growing region (Napa, Santa Barbara) or a Merlot are better recommendations.

Since these crucial dishes traditionally start the dinner, it is necessary to have palate cleansers on the table (water, tea) for the lighter wines that will match the fish dishes to follow.

⁴ There are variations depending on local customs. In Asia, lobster is not as common in banquets as it is here in North America. Frequently, the steamed fish, being the more expensive course, is served ahead of the chicken.

Shark's Fin Soup

Shark's Fin Soup has been a popular Chinese delicacy at formal banquets since the Ming Dynasty. Sold dried, the fin is reconstituted through an involved process of soaking and steaming, with the rich broth added just prior to service in the major recipes.

Shark's fin itself is rather like skate wing without the colour and without the flavour. Its gelatinous texture gives it a pliant mouth-feel. What makes it interesting is its ability to deliver the flavours of the broth, but in the end it is a rather hard protein with no taste of its own. So basically, it is the broth you are matching to the wine rather than the fin itself. With the controversy surrounding shark's fin today, the argument can be made that a substitute should be found for the fin in terms of texture and mouth-feel, or to forego the fin altogether and just focus on the broth.

The broth is usually a concentrated form of the standard Cantonese kitchen stock, which has in it lean pork, beef shank, mature chicken and cured ham.⁵ Shredded chicken, crab meat or dried sea delicacies are added in different variations. As in many Chinese soup recipes, the broth is reduced and thickened with cornstarch in the wok, where wokking expertise and sometimes the addition of superheated cooking wine intensify the broth's flavours.

The main consideration is finding a wine with a soft mouth-feel but with enough acidity to overcome the intense salty flavour of the cured ham, which serves as a garnish as well. An unoaked Chardonnay or a Chablis from a warm vintage (a touch of residual sugar helps) works well.

Abalone and other Sea Delicacies

Abalone, a large, edible mollusc (known in Australia as 'mutton-fish'), has a sweetish buttery taste with a marine note – rather like clam only 'meatier' and firmer – and like shark's fin, it has a distinctive mouth-feel that is chewy and rubbery. Unlike shark's fin, however, abalone delivers intense, natural *umami*⁶ flavours while possessing great absorptive qualities.

The dried "whole" abalone, from Japan, South Africa and now China, is by far the more expensive and desirable form of the mollusc sold. The drying and aging process vastly intensifies the sea salts and amino acids naturally trapped in the meat. In the best species, the nutrients within crystallize to present a soft, chalky and sugary core. After a couple of days of reconstitution with water and steam, the whole abalone pieces are pot braised for five hours with mature chicken, pork, chicken feet, ham, preserved vegetables and

⁵ Traditionally, premium *Jinhua* or *Yunnan* cured ham is included for its distinctive flavours. Where it is not legally available in North America, Virginia ham is substituted for somewhat reduced intensity in taste.

⁶ *Umami* is the fifth taste sensation, distinct from the standard sweet, sour, salty and bitter. It was first identified by Japanese chemist Kikunae Ikeda in 1908, and the flavour occurs naturally in sea fish, shiitake mushrooms, seaweed, as well as meats and cheese. Long a controversy because it is also the flavour delivered by artificial MSG, Scientists at UCSD conclusively demonstrated that humans possess specific taste receptors for *umami* in 2001. (From "On Food & Cooking" by Harold McGee.)

rock crystal sugar. Prior to serving, the concentrated broth resulting from the braising is wok thickened as a “jus” or sauce for the dish.⁷

Frozen or canned abalone that are typically larger in size (and therefore served in slices) are a less expensive substitute. The sauce in this case consists only of stock and oyster sauce. In a gourmet dinner, abalone is frequently served in conjunction with another sea delicacy such as fish maw or sea cucumber. Goose or duck web as an accompaniment is also common, but that vastly complicates the flavours on the plate.

Again the preparation will determine the best wine choice. A light red with good fruit – Pinot Noir from New Zealand or Oregon, or a named village Beaujolais at room temperature pair well.

Steamed Fish

The steamed sea fish is a staple of the Cantonese gourmet meal, reflecting the availability of the delicious garoupa (grouper) family in the South China Sea bordering Guangdong (Canton) province. Symbolizing abundance, fish is an indispensable course.

For osmotic balance, sea fish contains sea salts which are a natural source of the *umami* sensation so crucial to Chinese cooking. The light sauce accompanying the Cantonese steamed fish – a soya sauce and sugar blend⁸ depending on recipe – seeks to intensify this unique flavour. The addition of artificial MSG as a *umami* enhancer is often crucial especially when fresh water fish that lacks the natural sea salts, like that more readily available in Ontario, is used in the dish.

The delicacy of the fish is infused by the scent and flavour of ginger, scallions and the soya sauce blend. These additions give the fish an aromatic quality that is as appealing to the nose as it is to the palate.

The accompanying wine needs to have good acidity to cleanse the palate of fish flavour and yet possesses enough sweetness of fruit to stand up to the combined spiciness of ginger and soy. Pouilly-Fuissé is a beautiful fit.

Tasting Results

In our initial evaluation, we held a total of three tasting sessions. Session one focused on varieties from the BBQ/Marinated Meats kitchen. Session two was spent on dishes based on shark’s fin, abalone, and other dried *fruits de mer*. Session three covered various seafood dishes.

⁷ Due to the complexity of the preparation, braised dried abalone are often prepared in bulk and frozen ahead of time, with the pieces reheated with the jus just prior to service. Many restaurants use only an oyster sauce and stock based jus when reconstituting frozen braised abalone, resulting in much less flavour.

⁸ The blend includes different types and makes of soya sauce, fish essence, Chinese cooking wine, and pepper. Scallion, chili and coriander are used as garnishes.

Session One: BBQ/Marinated Meats

As noted, the Drouhin Côte de Beaune Villages 2005 did well with many of the dishes but lacked the sweetness of fruit needed to match the honey-glazed pork and the Hoisin sauce for the Peking Duck. A New World Pinot Noir from a warm growing region or a Merlot are better.

Having tasted the single wine with the BBQ category of dishes we were able to refine the selection to specific dishes as individual choices, with the following results.

BBQ/MARINATED MEAT COURSES	WINE STYLE	EXAMPLES
Roast Suckling Pig	Off-Dry Medium-Bodied white	German Riesling Spaetlese Alsace Gewurztraminer or Pinot Gris
	Fruity, Light-bodied red	German Spaetburgunder Beaujolais Crus, New World Pinot Noir/Merlot
	Rose	California Rose California White Zinfandel
Honey Glazed BBQ Pork	Semi-sweet medium-bodied white	Late-Harvest Riesling (Ontario) Semi-sweet Vouvray Monbazillac Verduzzo (Friuli) Viognier (California, Pays d'Oc)
Roast Crispy Duck	Medium-bodied dry red	Beaujolais Crus Red Burgundy Oregon/California Pinot Noir
Roast Peking Duck	Medium-bodied red	Red Burgundy New World Merlot Napa/Santa Barbara Pinot Noir
Soya Chicken	Dry New World white	California Chardonnay Chilean Chardonnay
	Dry Old World white	Alsace Pinot Gris or Pinot Blanc Cervaro de la Sala (Antinori)
Salt-baked Chicken	Off-dry white wine	German Riesling Kabinett Alsace Pinot Gris Australian Riesling
Deep Fried Chicken	Full-bodied dry white	Napa Chardonnay New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc Rhône white
	Medium-bodied New World red	Oregon/New Zealand Pinot Noir German Spaetburgunder

Session Two: Dried Sea Delicacies

The single wine chosen to accompany all these dishes was the Leon Beyer Riesling 2006 from Alsace. The wine accompanied many of the saltier dishes well but where there was ham or duck meat involved a wine with more fruit and less acidity was needed. Abalone has a meatiness that requires a more substantial white wine (white Rhône) or a lively red (Beaujolais cru).

SEA DELICACIES	WINE STYLE	EXAMPLES
Shredded Jelly Fish Salad	Off-dry white wine	German Riesling Kabinett New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc Soave Unoaked Chardonnay (Ontario)
Double-boiled Shark's Fin in Supreme Soup	Medium-bodied dry white	Alsace Pinot Blanc Soave Gavi Vernaccia di San Gimignano
Braised Shark's Fin in Thickened Broth	Dry acidic white wine	Dry Riesling Unoaked Ontario Chardonnay Chablis Muscadet
Duck Meat Soup with Conpoy	Dry white wine Light red	White Burgundy California Chardonnay Beaujolais/Gamay
Seafood Soup	Off-dry white wine	German Kabinett Riesling Ontario Riesling Orvieto
Braised Whole Abalone with Braising Sauce	Light red Rose	Beaujolais Crus Oregon/Ontario Pinot Noir Dry rose
Braised Fish Maw	Dry white wine	Alsace/Ontario Riesling White Burgundy Soave
Braised Sea Cucumber	Dry white wine	Dry Riesling Gavi Chablis
Sliced Canned Abalone With Oyster Sauce	Dry white with acidity	White Rhone Muscadet Loire Sauvignon Blanc
Steamed Conpoy in Vegetable Marrow Ring	Dry white wine	Austrian Gruner Veltliner New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc Chablis

Session Three: Seafood Dishes

The single wine chosen to accompany these dishes (apart from dessert) was the Tiefenbrunner Pinot Grigio 2006 from Alto Adige. With some of the dishes the Tiefenbrunner was actually too heavy and in other cases too light, especially when ginger was involved in the preparation of the dish, particularly the lobster. Based on this tasting the following specific wine matching suggestions were made.

SEAFOOD COURSES	WINE STYLES	EXAMPLES
Braised Fin of Sea Bass	Full-bodied dry white wine	White Chateauneuf-du-Pape / Hermitage Marsanne White Burgundy Ontario Chardonnay
Steamed Lobster with garlic	Full-bodied, dry white Rose	Alsace Pinot Gris/Riesling California Chardonnay Chilean Sauvignon Blanc Tavel Rose
Wok-fried Lobster with Scallions and Ginger	Full-bodied, dry white	Oregon Pinot Blanc Dry Vouvray California Chardonnay
Deep-fried Crab Claws	Medium-bodied, dry white	New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc Pouilly-Fume (Loire) Alsace Pinot Blanc
Stir-fried Crystal Prawns	Medium-bodied, dry white	New World Chardonnay California Sauvignon Blanc Alsace Gewurztraminer
Wok-Fried Sea Scallop with Candied Walnut	Off-dry white wine	Off-dry Vouvray German Riesling Spaetlese Alsace Pinot Gris
Dessert: Almond Syrup Soup	Sweet white wine Sweet red	Ontario Vidal Icewine Sauternes Monbazillac Banyuls

Matching a sample Cantonese Banquet with Wines

In our fourth session, we took the raw results from the first three tastings and attempted representative wine choices for a sample banquet to test our theories and illustrate the subtle adjustments that may be needed based on specific food preparations. The following was the menu and our wine pairing notes and some recommendations⁹:

Roast Suckling Pig: The meat is best with the Studert-Prum Riesling Spätlese, but with scallions as a garnish (wrapped in rice-dough flat bread) the Brouilly or another Cru Beaujolais works better.

Sautéed Jumbo Prawns & Fresh Scallops with Pine Seeds: The Leon Beyer Pinot Gris is too aggressive. The Marc Bredif Vouvray 2006 works much better because of the sweetness that balances the ginger and the fleshiness of the scallop.

Deep Fried Crab Claw: The deep-fried batter renders a Pouilly-Fumé too delicate. The New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc works better because of the more intense flavour.

Shark's Fin Soup with Sliced Yunan Ham: Thirty Bench Riesling is too assertive, and so was a Dry Sack Sherry. An unoaked Chardonnay works well as will a Chablis, such as Chateau de Maligny 2007. Both are very refreshing.¹⁰

Braised Whole Japanese Abalone & Fish Maw with Pea Sprouts: The Brouilly is good but a red with a little more extract may work better to match the meatiness of the Abalone. Amity Pinot Noir worked well especially with the pea shoots. A New Zealand Pinot Noir will also match well.

Steamed Black Bass with Ginger, Scallions in Light Soya Blend: The seamless match is Bouchard Pere & Fils Pouilly-Fuissé. No contest.

Wok-baked Lobsters with Scallion & Ginger: The Marc Bredif Vouvray 2006 has the right level of sweetness to match the ginger and enough acidity to cleanse the palate.

Deep-fried Chicken in Garlic Sauce: While the Franciscan Chardonnay has the rich spicy tropical fruit that seemed in theory the best match, it turns out that the Brouilly works best: its fruitiness balanced the garlic flavour.

Braised E-Fu Noodles with Fresh Crabmeat: This dish, a proper end to the menu, was not included in our tasting. But we suggest a Pouilly-Fuissé or a Soave in Anselmi or Pieropan style.

Red Bean Cream with Lotus Seeds & Lily Bulbs: An off-dry Prosecco is an inspired choice.

⁹ The notes and recommendations are also available at <http://www.laiwahheen.com/wine/>

¹⁰ Perhaps a Fino or Manzanilla would do the trick but none was available at our tastings.

Matching wines to a Casual Dinner

In our fifth tasting session, we leveraged our findings to match wines to a less formal but equally sumptuous dinner menu more suitable for corporate entertaining or a posh family gathering. Here are our recommendations:

Peking Duck (1) – Sliced Duckling with Scallions & Cucumber in Warm Rice Crepes:

We paid special attention to this important and popular dish that is served in two styles. We found that none of the examples we had chosen based on theory worked well. The Valpolicella Ripasso and Trumpour's Mill Gamay are too acidic for the Hoisin sauce. The Schug Pinot Noir is better but lacked a sweetness at the core of the wine that would make it ideal. We determined that a Pinot Noir from a warmer climate than Carneros is needed – Napa or Santa Barbara or perhaps a Chilean Merlot or a Cabernet with soft sweet fruit is a better fit.¹¹

Peking Duck (2) – Stir-fried Minced Duckling with Diced Vegetable: This dish too has Hoisin sauce so a sweeter Pinot Noir (or a Washington Syrah like McCrea) is needed.

Thickened Chicken Broth with Diced Seafood, Egg White & Diced Bean Curd: The Riesling Kabinett, Avelsbarber Altenberg is the right weight and very delicate but a little too sweet for the dish. The Ruffino Orvieto has an almond note that didn't work. What is needed is a Mosel Riesling of Kabinett style or Spätlese Trocken.

Braised Fish Maw with Pea Sprouts, Oyster Sauce: The gelatinous nature of this dish with its very delicate flavour and soft mouth-feel calls for a wine with good acidity to refresh the palate. The Bouchard Pouilly-Fuissé does the trick.

Chicken Baked in Rock Salt: Again the Riesling Kabinett, Avelsbarber Altenberg is too sweet for the dish and too assertive. The Leon Beyer Pinot Gris works very well, prolonging the succulent flavour of the chicken and cleansing the palate of the fat in the skin.

Deep-fried Fin of Sea Bass Braised with Bean Curd, BBQ Pork & Shiitake Mushroom:

A very complex dish with many taste sensations. The wine that goes best with each element, including the ginger, is Chateau La Nerthe Chateauneuf-du-Pape. A truly great match.

Wok-baked Lobster in Supreme Sauce on Soft E-fu Noodles: The preparation of this dish made it lighter in style than the Wok-baked Lobsters with Scallion & Ginger served in

¹¹ Tony took home the duck crepes with Hoisin sauce and scallions and opened four bottles of wine: Firesteed Pinot Noir 2002 (Oregon), Sandford Pinot Noir 2002 (Santa Rita Hills, Santa Barbara), Errazuriz Don Max Shiraz 2007, and Errazuriz Don Max Cabernet Sauvignon 2007. The best match was the Sandford but a younger vintage would be better. Second best was the Errazuriz Shiraz. Roger, in New York, tried a McCrea Syrah from Columbia Valley. It had good concentration of fruit without being jammy, had good spice, was not overly tannic and was very approachable. It was intense and sweet enough to stand up to the Hoisin Sauce. These are viable options.

the traditional banquet menu. The Cave Spring Chardonnay (matched with the banquet preparation) works very well, although the Vouvray and Monday Chardonnay are too heavy, as was the white Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

A Practical Approach

As noted, the order of courses in a Chinese dinner does not make for the optimal sequencing of individually matched wines. For the ideal wine-pairing experience, it is best to protect the integrity of each pairing by ensuring its isolation from the overall dining experience – treat each dish as a distinct and separate course. This can be done most effectively by having water as well as green tea available to cleanse and refresh the palate since you may well be switching back and forth between white, red or rosé wines.

But it may be impractical – and expensive – to serve a different wine with each course in a traditional Chinese dinner or banquet. We found the following wine styles versatile enough to match well with multiple dishes:

- Medium-dry Vouvray (or Viognier from the Rhône)
- Riesling Kabinett or Spätlese Trocken
- Unoaked Chardonnay (Chablis)
- White Rhône wines
- Beaujolais Crus from warm vintages like 2005
- Pinot Noir from New Zealand or Oregon.

If serving only one wine is the only practical choice, using champagne throughout is an option. Beer has also been widely consumed as the accompaniment of choice for Chinese food.

Conclusion

The pairing of wines to Chinese food is difficult not only because of the myriad ingredients and flavours in each dish, but also the awkward sequencing of courses in a typical dinner. The task is further complicated by customs and myths that have developed.

By deconstructing the recipes and ingredients in many variations of the Cantonese banquet, we formulated a knowledge base of wine pairing alternatives based on wine styles and practical examples that are applicable to less formal dinner settings as well. While the pairing methodology was not as straightforward as with western cuisines, we showed that a systematic approach is indeed possible.

In selecting wines to match Cantonese dishes, it became apparent that the weight of the wine is as important as the vintage and the producer's particular style. Many products from the New World and offbeat wine regions were surprisingly good matches, and in

general the most expensive appellations and varietals were not required. White wines worked remarkably well. In fact, after studying all of the relevant dinner courses, including the precious shark's fin and abalone, we found that the expensive Bordeaux reds were perhaps too tannic to pair well with the subtle flavours throughout dinner.

We showed that, with judicious choice, it is possible to pick wines that greatly enhance the Chinese dining experience in a cost effective manner. Wines that are practical and readily available are sufficient, as long as one makes pairing choices properly informed by the ingredients, flavours and service of the dishes.

We hope that exercises like ours will only increase the popularity of wine with Chinese dining. We also hope that this is a step in the formalization of a wine-pairing discipline around the Chinese cuisine.

Further Work

In this study we have focused our attention on the Cantonese dinner. With the exception of the Peking Duck, all the recipes investigated are traditional Cantonese preparations. A similar approach – a broad sampling of cooking methods and ingredients using the formal dinner as a template – is a logical approach that can be applied to other regional Chinese cuisines.

While this information on pairing wines with Cantonese food should have direct relevance on fine dining in many parts of Asia, some of the popular dishes consumed by North American diners originated from other regions of China and have undergone radical local transformations. With its own distinct characteristics, Dim Sum is a unique cuisine in itself and merits a dedicated wine pairing methodology.

We made our wine recommendations based on the classical Cantonese banquet and deliberately refrained from suggesting any modifications to the traditional recipes and sequencing. Crafting a progressive Chinese dinner especially friendly to wine pairing and service may be an interesting topic.

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Appendix A Recommendations from Session Four: Cantonese Banquet

Course	Style	Wine	Examples
Roast Suckling Pig – Crackling Skin with Scallions on Rice Dough Flat Bread, Hoisin Sauce & Sugar	Off-dry medium-bodied white	German Riesling Spatlese	Riesling Spatlese, Studert-Prum, Mosel 2006
		Alsace Gewurztraminer or Pinot Gris	Gewurztraminer, Paul Blanck, Alsace 2006
	Fruity, light bodied red	German Spaetburgunder	Brouilly, Chateau de la Perriere, Georges Duboeuf 2006
		Beaujolais Crus	
Rose	Spanish or California Rose		
	California White Zinfandel	White Zinfandel, Beringer, California 2007	
Sautéed Jumbo Prawns & Fresh Scallops with Pine Seeds	Off-dry white	Off-dry Vouvray	Marc Bredif, Vouvray 2006
		German Riesling Spatlese	Riesling Spatlese, Studert-Prum, Mosel 2006
		Alsace Pinot Gris	Pinot Gris, Leon Beyer, Alsace 2006
Deep-fried Crab Claw with Shrimp Mousse	Medium-bodied dry white	New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc	Sauvignon Blanc, Stoneleigh, Marlborough 2007
		Pouilly-Fume (Loire)	Pouilly Fume, Domaine Masson-Blondelet, "Villa Paulus" 2005
		Alsace Pinot Blanc	Pinot Blanc, Trimbach, Alsace 2005
Braised Superior Shark's Fin in Thickened Broth, Sliced Cured Ham	Dry Acidic White	Dry Riesling	Dry Riesling, Thirty Bench VQA 2005
		Unoaked Ontario Chardonnay	Chardonnay, Non-oaked, Henry of Pelham VQA 2006
		Chablis	Chablis, Chateau de Maligny 2007
		Muscadet	Muscadet Sevre et Maine, Domaine Gildas Cormerais 2007
Braised Whole Japanese Abalone & Fish Maw, with Fresh Sprouts	Light Red	Beaujolais Crus	Brouilly, Chateau de la Perriere, Georges Duboeuf 2006
		Oregon Pinot Noir	Pinot Noir, Amity Vineyards, Willamette Valley, Oregon 2006
		Ontario Pinot Noir	Pinot Noir, Henry of Pelham VQA 2006
		Dry Rose	Rose Cuvee, Konzelmann VQA 2006
Deep-fried Chicken in Garlic Sauce	Full-bodied Dry White	Napa Chardonnay	Chardonnay, Franciscan, Napa Valley 2006
		New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc	Sauvignon Blanc, Stoneleigh, Marlborough 2007
		Rhone White	
	Medium-bodied New World Red	Oregon/New Zealand Pinot Noir	Pinot Noir, Amity Vineyards, Willamette Valley, Oregon 2006
		German Spaetburgunder	
Wok-baked Lobsters with Scallion & Ginger	Full-bodied Dry White	Oregon Pinot Blanc	
		Dry Vouvray	Marc Bredif, Vouvray 2006
		California Chardonnay	Chardonnay, Coastal, Robert Mondavi 2006
Steamed Black Bass with Ginger, Scallions in Light Soya Blend	Dry White	White Burgundy	Pouilly Fuisse, Bouchard Pere & Fils 2006
		Unoaked Chardonnay	Chardonnay, Non-oaked, Henry of Pelham VQA 2006
		Gavi	

Appendix B Recommendations from Session Five: Casual Cantonese Dinner

Course	Style	Wine	Examples
Peking Duck - Sliced Duckling with Scallions & Cucumber on Rice Crepes, Hoisin Sauce	Medium-bodied red	Red Burgundy Ontario Gamay Sonoma Pinot Noir	Cote de Beaune-Villages, Drouhin 2005 Gamay Noir, Trumpour's Mill VQA 2006 Pinot Noir, Schug, Carneros 2005
Thickened Chicken Broth with Seafood Medley, Egg White & Diced Bean Curd	Off-dry white	German Kabinett Riesling Ontario Riesling Orvieto	Riesling Kabinett, Avelsbarber Altenberg, Mosel-Saar-Ruwer 2005 Riesling, Cave Spring, VQA 2006 Orvieto, Ruffino Classico 2007
Braised Fish Maw & Vegetable Sprouts, Oyster Sauce	Dry white	Alsace or Ontario Riesling White Burgundy Soave	Riesling, Cave Spring, VQA 2006 Pouilly Fuisse, Bouchard Pere & Fils 2006 Soave Classico Conte Carello 2006
Baked Chicken in Rock Salt	Off-dry white	German Riesling Kabinett Alsace Pinot Gris Australian Riesling	Riesling Kabinett, Avelsbarber Altenberg, Mosel-Saar-Ruwer 2005 Pinot Gris, Leon Beyer, Alsace 2006
Deep-fried Fin of Sea Bass, Braised with Bean Curd, BBQ Pork & Shiitake	Full-bodied dry white	White Chateauneuf-du-Pape or Hermitage Marsanne White Burgundy Ontario Chardonnay	Chateau La Nerthe, Chateauneuf-du-Pape 2006 Bouchard Pere & Fils 2006 Chardonnay, Cave Spring, Reserve VQA
Wok-baked Lobster on Soft E-fu Noodles	Full-bodied dry white	Oregon Pinot Blanc Dry Vouvray California Chardonnay	Marc Bredif, Vouvray 2006 Chardonnay, Coastal, Robert Mondavi 2006