

This Lunar New Year, Raise a Glass of Sherry

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By Dave McIntyre

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Ask wine lovers what to drink with Chinese food, and they'll probably say "beer." Press for a wine recommendation, and one might grudgingly suggest Riesling or Gewuerztraminer, explaining that the sweetness in those wines is a necessary counter to the aromatic and hot spices typical of Chinese or other Asian cuisines.

With Lunar New Year on Monday, I suggest we say good riddance to the Year of the Rat and welcome in the Ox by raising a glass of sherry.

Sherry, which traditionally hails from the Jerez region of southern Spain, might not be an obvious choice for Chinese food, but there are several reasons to consider it. Chinese cuisine is remarkably varied, from the numbing heat of Sichuan to delicate Cantonese seafood dishes and smoked or roasted meats. Sherry, too, covers a wide range of flavors and styles, from light, delicate fino and manzanilla to fuller, robust oloroso and unctuously sweet dessert wines. Sherry's relatively high alcohol (it is fortified to anywhere between 15 and 20 percent) helps it match the sometimes complex fermented flavors of soy and black beans used in Chinese dishes. And its nutty, oxidized flavors resemble those of Chinese Shaoxing rice wine, a flavor bond that spans continents.

Pairing wine with Chinese food is challenging because of what we're eating and how we're eating it. A typical Chinese dinner can be a riot of dishes served side by side, making it difficult to choose a wine based on a particular seasoning or ingredient. Where else have you seen such a jumble of flavors, where a plate of clams might share the table with a beef dish? At a Spanish tapas bar, where nimble sherry traditionally reigns supreme.

To test that theory, my wife and I invited some friends to join us for a Lunar New Year meal prepared by my Taiwanese mother-in-law (everyone should have one of those!), supplemented with takeout from Joe's Noodle House in Rockville. The wines were supplied by Todd Ruby, a Silver Spring-based broker whose extensive portfolio includes Lustau, a leading sherry bodega. Aside from offering a large variety of excellent sherries, Lustau is the most widely available sherry brand in the Washington area.

The Lustau fino and manzanilla proved excellent matches for the crispy-salty seafood and spicy steamed fish from Joe's. They even stood well beside heartier, more savory dishes, though here they were less exciting, essentially hanging on rather than adding to the food. With those dishes, heavier sherries played best. Amontillado's nutty flavors latched on to the peppery spice of hoisin-glazed spare ribs, while a palo cortado and a rich oloroso, with their hints of dried orange peel, shone with beef braised in soy sauce and star anise.

A muscatel dessert wine, pressed from dried muscat grapes, was a perfect partner for eight treasure rice, a steamed pudding of sticky rice, champagne-macerated figs and raisins, and sweet red bean paste. Its candied citrus flavors proved sublime with clementines -- and how many wines go with fresh citrus fruit?

Ruby acknowledged that he had never before matched sherry with a Chinese meal. "This is something everyone should try at least once," he said.

At least once, indeed. But with sherry's wide variety of styles and Chinese cuisine's delicious diversity, there are endless combinations to explore. One meal is not enough.