

# Cooking With Wine

Along with herbs and spices, wine is  
a must-have for every pantry

BY SAM GUGINO / ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL WITTE

A great deal has been written about matching wine with food. However, not nearly enough has been said about putting wine in food. Yet wine as an ingredient in cooking is as basic as fresh rosemary or pepper. "Wine is versatile. People shouldn't be afraid of it," says John Ash, culinary director of Fetzer Vineyards and author of *John Ash: Cooking One-on-One* (Clarkson Potter). "A little splashed in almost anything makes things taste better." Cooking with wine isn't difficult and shouldn't be intimidating. But that doesn't mean there are no rules. Here are some of the hows and whys of wine in cooking.

## Why Wine?

One of the most important things wine does for a dish is carry flavors that fats and other liquids don't. "Most compounds dissolve in fat or water. Alcohol is a kind of 'mongrel' molecule. It acts a little bit like fat and a little bit like water," says Harold McGee, author of the recently revised classic *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* (Scribner). When you add alcohol to tomatoes, for example, it stimulates the release of flavors that water and fats don't. That's why there is more flavor in a tomato sauce with vodka than without, even though vodka has little flavor on its own.



But beyond merely its alcohol content, wine creates more complex flavors in a dish. "With wine, you have a very complex flavor system to begin with," says food chemist Sarah Risch, whose company, Science by Design, helps food companies with product development. "By adding wine to other flavors, you don't just get the flavor of wine; you add building blocks for more flavor."

## Which Wine?

Wine can enhance or detract from a dish, depending on how much of any one of its various components is present. For example, tannins can add astringency that's akin to bitterness, one of the five tastes. But, warns Risch, tannins don't diminish as the wine reduces. The presence of salt, protein and fat can help mitigate the influence of tannins, but be judicious when using a seriously tannic wine in cooking.

Acidity too must be kept in check. "All wines are acidic to one degree or another," McGee says. "But a wine that is too acidic can throw off the balance of a dish." I made a chicken sauté (recipe appears on page 120) with two different wines: an acidic Muscadet and a barrel-fermented California Chardonnay. The Muscadet chicken was a bit too tart; the Chardonnay version came out rounder and a touch sweeter.

Acidic wines (and other sources of acid, such as lemon juice) will also turn green vegetables a dull gray and make beans difficult to soften. So adding them at the very end of cooking (or just before serving if used in a vinaigrette) is advised. Because of wine's acidity, food cooked with or marinated in wine should be prepared in nonreactive pans, which generally means avoiding aluminum, cast iron and steel that isn't stainless.

Oak is another major component of many wines. Oak in small amounts can add complexity to a dish, says Risch. But, again, too much can create an imbalance. Thus, the best wines for cooking are, like the best wines for drinking, those that are in balance—nothing overly tannic, oak or acidic.

Don't cook with a wine you wouldn't drink—or is too good to cook with. The subtleties of a great Burgundy would be lost in cooking much the way the nuances of a great Tuscan extra-virgin olive oil would vanish were the oil used for deep frying. There is a range of wine suitable for cooking, but don't expect to create something ethereal just by adding a cup of Château Pétrus.

Once quality and balance have been taken into account, the rest is fine-tuning. For example, when a recipe calls for a dry white, you have several to choose from, including Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc. I like Sauvignon Blanc because it is a better food-wine, but in cooking, the difference from one dry, balanced white to another is hardly noticeable.

alcohol Zinfandels. Robert Carter, chef of the Peninsula Grill in Charleston, S.C., likes to use lighter reds, such as Pinot Noir, even for rich red meats such as venison. "My sauces are a lighter jus. The meat flavor comes through, not the sauce," Carter says. In her book *Cooking With Wine* (Abrams), Anne Willan agrees, writing that "fruity, fresh wines are generally better for cooking than dense, full-bodied ones."

As for specific wines in specific dishes, the best rule is to consider what you'd drink with the dish. For example, for salmon, you could make a marinade or sauce from Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir or Chardonnay, all of which would suit salmon. Pinot Noir might also be appropriate where mushrooms predominate, since both the wine and the mushrooms have an earthy quality. Black pepper would signal Zinfandel or Shiraz, and so on.

How much wine to use varies. In braised dishes (such as the short rib recipe on page 120) and in marinades for large pieces of meat, you could use as much as a 750ml bottle. More typically a cup is appropriate, and generally less for sautéed dishes (such as the chicken sauté).

## Marinating With Wine

Cooking with wine can begin before the heat is turned on. Wine is a common ingredient in marinades for game and tougher cuts of meat, such as short ribs or brisket. However, there is a misconception that wine tenderizes meat. It doesn't, at least not effectively. "Wine does affect the muscle proteins that make meat more tender," McGee says. "But it moves very slowly. The outside [of the meat] turns to mush before the inside gets tender enough."

Wine will "cook" fish (as in seiche), which is much less dense than meat.

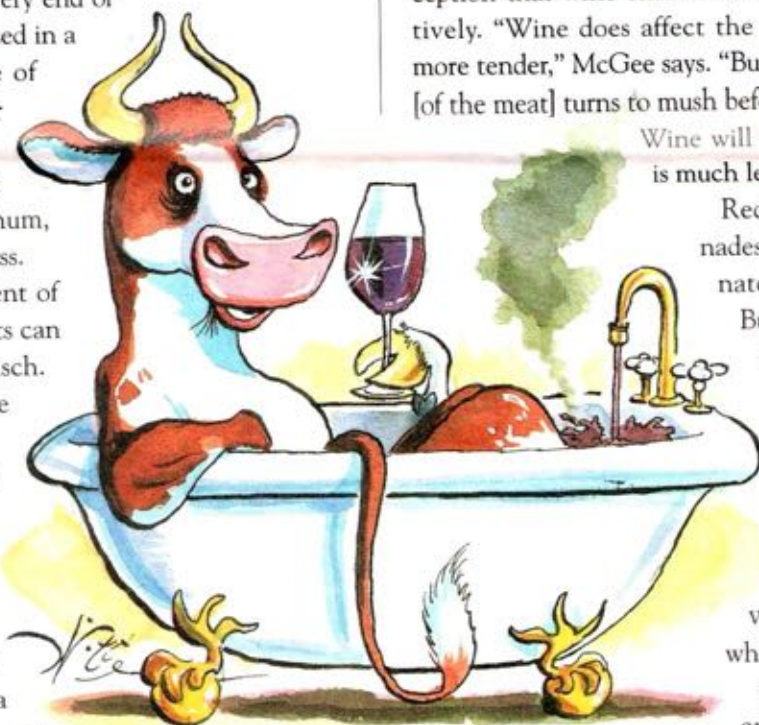
Red wine is typically used for marinades (likely because red meat is marinated more often than white meat).

But a white wine could be used for, say, breast of veal. Ash says one reason to choose white over red is aesthetic, so that your chicken breast doesn't turn pink, for example. But such conventions are routinely flouted in dishes such as coq au vin. "Chicken normally goes with white wine. But with red wine [in this case Pinot Noir] in the marinade and cooking, you've taken the dish

to a whole new level," Ash says.

Most marinade recipes do not call for heating wine before using it in the marinade. But in *Cooking With Wine*, Willan writes, "To release flavor and concentrate its impact, a wine marinade is commonly simmered and then chilled before being combined with raw food."

Herbs and spices are common to all marinades, but Cedric Tovar, chef of Django in New York, says it is important to also add sweet vegetables, such as carrots and onions, to a wine-based marinade, to balance the wine's acidity. Twenty-four hours is





# Cooking With Wine

One of the more elemental ways of using wine in cooking is in a pan sauce. Tender pieces of meat (usually boneless cuts such as veal or chicken cutlets) are sautéed in fat, butter or oil, or a combination thereof. Once cooked, the meat is removed from the pan and wine is added, generally not more than half a cup, to begin a process called deglazing. During deglazing, the mixture in the pan is stirred over high heat, and flavorful bits from the bottom are scraped up as the wine (and any other liquid, such as broth) reduces. Once the sauce is lightly thickened (and often enriched with a knob of butter), it is poured over the meat. Pan sauce variations abound, from adding shallots to stirring in heavy cream.

Key to a good pan sauce is making sure enough alcohol has burned off, which prevents the sauce from tasting too alcoholic. Another myth about alcohol is that it completely evaporates during the cooking process. True, alcohol begins to evaporate at a lower temperature than water, about 178° F, but it takes a long time for all of the alcohol to burn off most dishes. A chart by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that a long-simmering dish made with wine, such as a stew, that has cooked for 2 1/2 hours still contains 5 percent of the alcohol.

How do you know when enough alcohol has evaporated from a pan sauce? Ash suggests reducing the liquid by at least half.

One tip suggested by Wine Spectator editor at large Harvey Steiman in his book *Essentials of Wine* (Running Press) is to "prereduce" wine before cooking with it by boiling it for 5 minutes or so. Prereduced wine can be put in ice cube trays and frozen for future use.

Deglazing is a good way to make gravy from roasts. Remove all but a few tablespoons of fat from the pan in which the meat was roasting. Then put the pan on top of the stove (straddling two burners if necessary) and proceed as you would with a pan sauce. As with pan sauces, broth and/or juices that have seeped from

the removed meat (see the chicken sauté recipe) may be added along with the wine.

## The Warm Wine Bath

Using wine in braised dishes such as osso buco follows a similar routine. Meat is browned well in a skillet, then removed to a braising pan. The skillet is deglazed with wine, and the reduced liquid is added to the meat, along with vegetables and broth. All are slow-cooked for a few hours until the meat becomes tender. Molly Stevens, author of the recently published *All About Braising* (Norton), says that one of the biggest mistakes in braising occurs when the wine is not reduced before it is added to the meat. "It's not going to be as interesting a dish if you don't reduce the wine ahead of time," she says. One reason, again, is that even after braising, a fair amount of alcohol will remain.

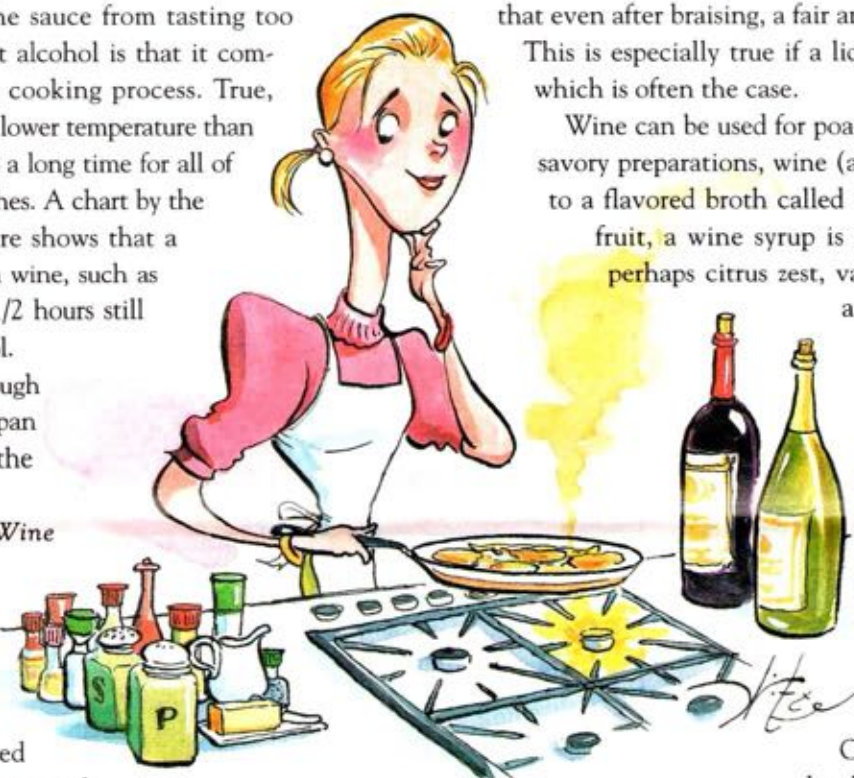
This is especially true if a lid is kept on the braising pot, which is often the case.

Wine can be used for poaching poultry, fish or fruit. In savory preparations, wine (almost always white) is added to a flavored broth called court bouillon. For poaching fruit, a wine syrup is made with water, sugar and perhaps citrus zest, vanilla and sweet spices (such as cinnamon).

In addition to evaporating at a lower temperature than water, wine also freezes at a lower temperature. That means that when wine (or any alcohol) is used in frozen desserts such as ice cream or sorbet, it should be added in smaller amounts than in cooking and just before the mixture freezes.

Otherwise the dish will not harden fully.

Cooking with wine takes food to a higher level. Not only does wine provide myriad flavors and textures on its own, from fruit and acid to richness and body, it helps to transform other elements in the dish. Yet using wine in cooking isn't any more complicated than using salt and pepper. So don't stash all the wine in the cellar. Keep some in the pantry. □



## Fortified Wines and Beyond

Molly Stevens likes to use white wine in cooking, but she doesn't drink a lot of it. So instead of opening a bottle that might then languish in the refrigerator, she uses dry vermouth. It keeps much longer because it's fortified. "It's a great cook's tool," Stevens says. "I find I like the herbal flavor that it gives and the stronger alcoholic kick."

There really isn't a vermouthlike alternative to red wine, except possibly ruby Port. Because of its fresher fruit flavor, ruby Port is used more often in cooking than tawny Port, especially with game (particularly venison) and with berries such as cranberries. Sherry

delightful nuttiness to dishes. Sherry, if dry, can be used in a lot of Asian dishes where rice wine is called for, as well as in poultry and pork dishes. Madeira, also usually dry, is good with mushrooms, pork and poultry, and especially in gravy for turkey.

Sweet wines, too, have their uses, although they tend to not involve cooking as such. Maceration is a process much like marinating. Instead of tenderizing, maceration adds sweetness and draws out juices from underripe fruit—usually melons, berries and stone fruits, such as peaches. Dessert wines such as Sauternes, late-harvest Sauvignon Blanc, sweet Riesling, Beaumes-de-Venise and Vin Santo are good choices for this.



# Wine-Based Recipes to Please the Palate

## Chicken Sauté With White Wine

The following recipe uses boneless chicken breasts, but the technique can easily be transferred to veal cutlets, turkey cutlets and many fish fillets. It is adapted from *How to Cook Everything: Simple Recipes for Great Food* by Mark Bittman (Macmillan).

2 tablespoons oil (olive, canola or grapeseed)  
2 tablespoons butter, divided  
4 boneless and skinless chicken breasts (about 6 ounces each),  
pounded between sheets of plastic wrap to half their original  
thickness  
Salt  
Freshly ground black pepper  
2/3 cup flour  
1/2 cup dry white wine  
1/3 cup low-sodium chicken broth  
2 tablespoons minced parsley

Heat a large skillet over medium-high heat. (If you don't have a skillet large enough to hold all the chicken breasts without crowding, sauté the chicken in stages or use two smaller skillets.) Add the oil and 1 tablespoon of the butter.

Season the chicken on both sides with salt and pepper. Dredge the chicken thoroughly in the flour and shake off any excess.

When the fat in the pan is hot but not smoking—when a pinch of flour added to the pan will sizzle—add the chicken breasts. Cook 2 minutes. Move the chicken as needed to make sure it is cooking evenly. Cook 2 minutes more and turn over. Continue to cook, again moving as needed to make sure chicken is cooking evenly, 3 to 4 minutes or until the chicken is firm to the touch. (Cut into one chicken breast with a paring knife. Juices should run clear, and no pink should remain.) Remove the chicken to a platter and cover loosely with foil.

Add the wine to the skillet and immediately start scraping the bottom with a wooden spoon. Cook until the volume is reduced by half, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the broth and any pan juices from the chicken that have seeped onto the platter. Cook until the mixture becomes slightly thickened, at least 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Stir in the remaining tablespoon of butter and the parsley. As soon as the butter is incorporated, pour the sauce over the chicken and serve. Serves 4.

## Red Wine-Braised Short Ribs With Rosemary and Porcini

The following recipe is adapted from the recently published *All About Braising* (Norton) by Molly Stevens, who recommends accompanying it with polenta or mashed potatoes flecked with freshly chopped parsley.

### MARINADE

2 bay leaves  
1 teaspoon allspice berries, coarsely crushed  
10 black peppercorns  
4 whole cloves  
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
1 large yellow onion (about 8 ounces), coarsely chopped  
1 celery rib, coarsely chopped  
1 carrot, coarsely chopped  
2 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed

750ml bottle robust dry red wine, such as Zinfandel or Syrah  
4 pounds meaty beef short ribs, trimmed of fat  
1 1/2 teaspoons coarse salt

### AROMATICS AND BRAISING LIQUID

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided  
Coarse salt  
Freshly ground black pepper  
1/2 ounce dried porcini, soaked in 1 cup hot water for 30 minutes  
1 large yellow onion (about 8 ounces), thinly sliced  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
1 can (14.5 ounces) diced tomatoes with juice  
2 fresh rosemary sprigs (3 to 4 inches each)

For the marinade, put the bay leaves, allspice, peppercorns and cloves in cheesecloth. Tie to make a small sack. Set aside.

Heat the oil in a large sauté pan or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the onion, celery, carrot and garlic and sauté, stirring once or twice, until the mixture begins to soften but not brown, about 7 minutes. Pour in the wine, add the spice bag and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes to draw the flavors of the aromatics and vegetables into the wine. Set aside to cool to room temperature.

Season the ribs with salt and place in a large wide bowl (or in sealable plastic bags). Pour the cooled marinade over them. Rearrange the ribs if necessary so that the marinade covers them. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 12 to 24 hours, turning the ribs two or three times so that they marinate evenly.

Remove the ribs from the marinade and pat them dry with paper towels. Strain the marinade into a bowl. Reserve the wine and spice bag and discard the vegetables.

Pour 2 tablespoons of the oil into a large frying pan over medium heat. Season the ribs with salt and pepper. Add only as many ribs as will fit without crowding and brown them well on all sides, 4 to 5 minutes per side. Be careful not to burn the meat. Put the browned ribs in a single layer in an ovenproof casserole dish or Dutch oven.

Heat the oven to 325° F. Remove the mushrooms from the soaking liquid and strain the liquid through a double thickness of cheesecloth or a coffee filter. Reserve the soaking liquid. Coarsely chop the mushrooms.

Pour off and discard any remaining fat from the frying pan. Add the remaining tablespoon of oil and heat over medium heat. Add the sliced onion and sauté, stirring, until browned and softened, 8 to 10 minutes. Add the garlic, the tomatoes with their juice and the mushrooms. Continue to cook for a few minutes, stirring once or twice. Pour in the reserved mushroom soaking liquid and the reserved wine, and bring to a boil. Let the liquid boil until it has been reduced by about one-third.

Pour the contents of the frying pan over the ribs. Tuck the reserved spice sack and the rosemary sprigs between the ribs. Cover and put onto a rack in the lower third of the oven. After the first 20 minutes, remove the lid and check to see that the liquid isn't simmering too furiously. If it is, reduce the oven heat 10° or 15° F. Turn ribs gently with tongs every 45 minutes, until the meat is fork-tender, 2 1/2 to 3 hours total.

Transfer the ribs to a serving platter and loosely cover with foil. Discard the spice bag. Tilt the braising pan and skim the fat off with a large spoon. The liquid should be the consistency of a thick vinaigrette. Heat the sauce, if needed, to thicken. Add salt and pepper to taste. Spoon the sauce over the ribs. Serves 4 to 6.