

# REAL BEER, REAL FOOD

Match-making for a perfect meal BY LANCE SPARKS

**A**re these guys wild, uncontrolled, monkeys-on-the-loose-with-guns crazy, asking a self-admitted wine-fiend to write about pairing BEER with food? BEER. WITH FOOD.

Ask wine-folk about matching food with wine. Be prepared for a long, complex exploration. We can find a wine for almost any food; the wines will range from the most delicately airy Champagne to a pinot noir complex as a Fabergé egg to the deepest, darkest, most explosively flavorful shiraz or some gaucho-bustin' Argentine malbec, ending (for dessert) with wines so sweetly unctuous as to deserve the term nectar. All that because for centuries we've known — and enjoyed — the synergy between wine and food: Wines taste better with foods, foods taste better with wines. Simple. Almost profound. Fun, too.

But food and BEER?

OK, admittedly it can be done, although Americans have been doing it badly for decades. 'Course, that's largely because they've been making/drinking bad beer for about that long and pairing it with pretty nasty grub: Bad brew and tasteless dogs, bad brew and burgers, bad brew and soggy 'za. Sure, plenty of good ol' boys found those combos nearly ambrosial, especially after enough — better yet, too much — bad brew.

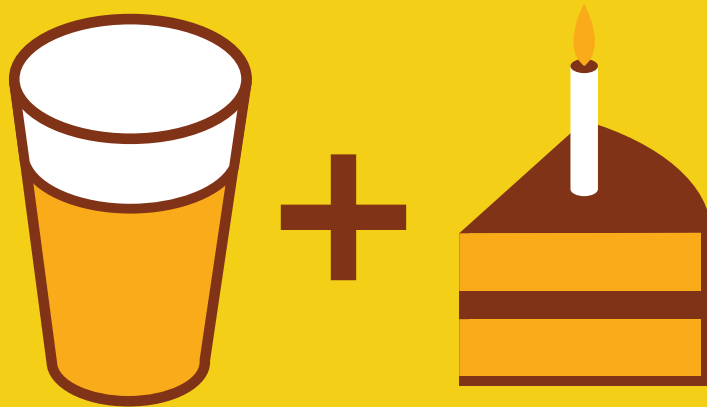
Thing is, though, the last couple decades have seen the emergence of really superb, well-crafted, tasty ales and lagers, brewed by folk who love flavor in drink and in food. The Dark Ages of Bad Beer are, certainly in the Northwest, over and gone, and good riddance. In fact, we've entered a sorta Beer Renaissance.

Beer-matched cuisine has also improved dramatically, with more folk insisting on fresh ingredients, range-fed beef, well-made sausages, hand-crafted sauces. Even pizzas have taken a quantum leap in quality. Might be a chicken/egg or cart/horse question as to which came first, or which drove the other — finer foods or finer beers — but what matters is our soaring pleasure quotient.

Now, to match good brews with good grub: Turns out that there are legions of flavor-sophisticated food/brew pros on the current scene, men and women who know lots more than I do about the wide world of ales, lagers, bochs and porters. So I just sent my mouse a-Googleing through a wealth of Web pages (2.3 million hits in 0.14 seconds for "food beer matching"). Among the most convincing voices I encountered was Garrett Oliver, writing in *All About Beer Magazine* (allaboutbeer.com).

Oliver's a brewmaster for Brooklyn Brewery and author of *The Brewmaster's Table: Discovering the Pleasures of Real Beer with Real Food*; the distinctions noted in that title — real beer, real food — established Oliver's credibility for me and mark his book as one for the beer/food-lover's home library.

This I knew: Like wines, beers come in a wide range of flavors and textures, from light, bright, citrusy ales to inky-dark, flavor-dense porters, so they can also match with a wide spectrum of foods, from salads to desserts. Garrett Oliver scales the range in terms of "impact," meaning the measure of flavor intensity in the beer and the impact that's likely to have on food; low-impact beers are the lighter, more delicate "while imperial stout, which is roasty and powerful, would be a 'high-impact



beer." Amen to that, and to smart distinctions.

Oliver also refers to beers' "flavor hook ... the part of the beer's flavor and aroma that matches, harmonizes or accentuates the flavors in your food." Important point here, one we'd also make for wines: Sometimes you'll want beer that complements food; sometimes flavor contrast works better. Case in point: Some centuries ago, when my wife and I had a small piece of a fine restaurant, we hosted a beermaker's dinner, the capper of which was a rich chocolate-based dessert, a challenge for any drink. Although winepros keep trying to argue that some wine will stand up to dense, creamy chocolate, I've never found one I liked; however, in this case, the beerpros matched this dish with a dark, sweet, blackberry beer that just made mouth-music with the chocolate.

So here're the breakout results of my source survey, noting that all depends on the treatment/preparation of

particular foods:

**Appetizers:** General agreement that lighter beers — hoppy, citrusy ales — work best to stir appetites and complement most nibbles.

**Salads:** Depends on dressing, of course, but Oliver likes the versatility of wheat beers; others prefer browns and ambers, sometimes more for contrast than harmony.

**Cheeses:** Note the plural. In the Dark Ages, we might be talking about processed cheeses, mostly high-fat/low-flavor. Lately, renaissance has come to cheeses in America, and we have a cart-full of cheese choices. In general, though, Oliver's impact scale should apply: light cheese, light beers; bold cheese, bold brew. Oliver also argues (wrongly, I think) that beers match with cheeses better than do wines.

**Chicken, pork, light meats:** Wheat beers work here, but so do lagers with malty flavor hooks.

**Red meats:** Consensus praise for deep ambers, heavy brown ales; some folk extol porters while others warn against self-canceling contrast. Warning: Do not argue with porter-lovers.

**Spicy foods:** For Asian spicing, Oliver likes his wheat beers; others like hoppy PILS or lagers that have a touch of sweetness. Experiment.

**Modern pizza:** For 'za that goes beyond mere pepperoni, check ingredients for matchings; for more traditional 'za, try ambers and ales with toasty malts.

**Fish:** Yep, depends on the fish: For wild salmon a lively amber could work well; for shellfish, Oliver returns to the wheat beers (he calls them the most versatile of beers and distinguishes a range of styles, from Belgian to Bavarian).

A note on beer and temperature: In the Dark Ages, beers were served ice-cold. Good idea for bad beer and bad wine. Turns out our mouths have a taste threshold; below 45 degrees F, we can't taste much, and ice-cold (and refrigerator-cold) beverages fall way below that number. So if we're drinking good beers that we actually hope to savor, we'll want to cool them down but not kill the flavor. On the other hand, beer is best when fresh; light and heat are enemies to freshness, so storing beers very cold (and in the dark) turns out to be a very good idea. Result: Keep 'em cold, serve 'em cool. 'Nuff said.

So the wild monkeys might not be so nutso after all, if you get giggles out of watching a wine-fiend admit, shamefaced, that, yes, beers can taste awfully good with food. So skoal, dammit.



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