



Having Dosas? Then Drink Champagne, of Course!

By SHIVANI VORA



Richard Patterson for The New York Times
Bottles of Chateau Lafite Rothschild 2005 in the cellars of a store in New York City.

When it comes to finding the perfect glass of wine to go with French, Italian or American cuisine, the options are endless. Finding the ideal match for Indian food, however, is more complicated.

“Indian food is most challenging cuisine to pair with wine,” said Raj Vaidya, 32, the Mumbai-raised head sommelier of Daniel, a three-Michelin-star restaurant in New York City. “Finding a wine to stand up to the aggressive flavors isn’t easy.”

The wine shouldn’t be too delicate because the Indian food will overpower it. White Burgundies, for instance, would not be an ideal choice. But varietals that are too strong, like cabernets, should be avoided because they will clash with the food. Mr. Vaidya also suggests skipping wines heavy on the tannins because they can make Indian food take on an unpleasant texture and almost astringent taste.

What works are low-alcohol varieties like Rieslings because they don’t accentuate the heat in Indian food. And slightly spicy grapes like Gewurztraminers make for a good pairing because they balance out the spiciness in the curries and masalas.

Fruit-forward and slightly sweet picks, as well as moderately acidic grapes like the white chenin blanc from France, are also good matches. And since Indian cuisine is an amalgamation of different spices, a wine with a blend of grapes can stand up to the myriad of flavors in the dishes.

Mr. Vaidya also recommends champagne as a pairing because the added sugar gives the drink a richness that complements Indian food. The acidity balances out the acid in the cuisine, and the bubbles bring in a layer of texture.

Wine and Indian food aren’t a natural fit, because wine drinking has historically never been a part of Indian culture, said Vikram Vij, who owns Indian restaurants in Seattle and Vancouver, including Vij’s. “If you look at countries like Italy and France, the practice of enjoying food and wine together has existed for centuries, which is not the case with India,” he said. “The drink of choice with the meal was always and continues to be water because it’s the most neutralizing, or beer.”

Water or Kingfisher beer may never go out of favor, but as wine consumption has increased in North America, high-end Indian restaurants are devoting more attention than ever before to creating wine lists.

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The Indian Scene, as Seen From New York

Tamarind and Tamarind Tribeca, for example, are Michelin-starred spots in Manhattan, where wine has increasingly become a top priority, with more than 200 choices available by the bottle and glass. The restaurants' owner, Avtar Walia, said that when he opened the original Tamarind more than a decade ago, only 10 to 15 percent of diners would order wine with their meal, compared with 90 percent today.

"Before if people ordered any drinks, it would be a beer or mango lassi," he said. "But now diners have become very particular about their wine so we have also stepped up by offering more options."

The choices lie within a wide price range, including a \$40 bottle from Sula, which is made in India, a \$175 Two Hands Shiraz from Australia and a \$5,000 Chateau Lafite Rothschild from Bordeaux. To make sure the waitstaff is knowledgeable about these offerings, Mr. Walia has instituted weekly seminars in which employees participate in wine and food tastings.

Also in Manhattan is the Michelin-starred Tulsi, where wine is emphasized as much as the food, with a seven-course tasting menu that's paired with five varietals for \$100. Nirupama Srivastava, a wine consultant, works with Hemant Mathur, the restaurant's partner and chef, to come up with new matches when the menu changes several times a year, and the multicourse dinner is the most popular order at the restaurant.

Vij's, in downtown Vancouver, has 150 bottles on the menu, which range from \$39 to \$250. "My customers were resistant to the idea of wine with Indian food when I opened back in 1994, but now 85 percent of them order either a bottle or glass and get excited about the idea," Mr. Vij said.

One wine label that's recently become a staple on lists at more than a dozen Indian restaurants in the New York City area is Mirza Ghalib, produced in the South of France and introduced in September. A former Continental Airlines executive, Sam Bhatia, created his three wines — a red blend, a white viognier and a rosé — specifically to go with Indian food. "I love a good glass of wine with any meal but could never find anything that worked well with Indian food, so I decided to come up with my own," he said.

Most Indian restaurants in the United States that serve wine carry winemakers from India, including Sula and Grover Vineyards, but owners say that the quality of these varieties doesn't compare with those from other parts of the world. Just because the wine is made in India doesn't mean it's always the best match for Indian food, they say.

For those of us who need more help when it comes to seeking out the ideal pairing, Mr. Vaidya offers suggestions for popular Indian dishes:

Tandoori chicken: A German riesling that is between 15 and 20 years old

Dosa: Champagne

Dum aloo: A red Rhône like the Saint-Joseph varieties

Saag paneer: Chardonnay

Chana masala: Chenin blanc

Gulab jamun: Gewürztraminer

Lamb biryani: A Bandol with five to six years of age, spicy and rich with a good amount of tannin. The mourvedre blend will pair well with the rich spice of the lamb.

Vegetable biryani: A young trousseau or pousard from Arbois in the Jura region of France, fruity and light with fresh acid and yet has an earthy note to pair with the gaminess of the biryani spice.

Samosas: Cour Cheverny from the Loire. The grape is romorantin, and it's best to choose one with a little sweetness to balance any heat from chilies or chutney and to invoke the sweetness of the peas and potatoes in the samosa.

Bhel puri: A young blanc de noirs Champagne with a high amount of pinot meunier is great here. The texture offered by the bubbles goes great with the fried puris and that chalky earthiness plays well off the bhel and also with the sweetness of the chutney.

Dal makhani: Here a unoaked chardonnay from California, especially from the Santa Rita Hills, can be great, with the sweetness of the fruit balancing the richness of the sauce.