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The Best Wines to Pair With Chinese Food

For most people, beer, not wine, is the drink of choice when it comes to Chinese. Wall Street Journal wine columnist Lettie Teague took on the vinous challenge of finding a worthy match, with surprising discoveries



By **LETTIE TEAGUE**

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“**WE NEVER DRINK WINE** with Chinese food,” my friend Michelle Shih, a first-generation Chinese American, confessed during a recent dinner at Peking Duck House in New York with our husbands and a food-critic friend, Alan.

Michelle isn’t alone. Most people I know pair beer, not wine, with Chinese food. Its unfamiliar, frequently intense flavors make pairing wines with it a difficult undertaking. A single dish can flood the palate with sweet, spicy, salty and sour flavors, sometimes all at once. And then there are the condiments: Sauces like soy and the ubiquitous black vinegar not only up the pairing challenge, they almost discourage wine-drinking.

Of course, all wine lovers—especially professional ones—relish a challenge, and finding a worthy match for Chinese seemed to me like a public service of sorts. But where to begin? There’s no such thing as “Chinese” food, after all, but rather eight distinct regional cuisines. Three in particular—the sweet Cantonese and the spicier Hunan and Sichuan (Szechuan)—show up most often on American menus.

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The Peking Duck House on Mott Street in Manhattan’s Chinatown (there’s also a location uptown) doesn’t feature the food of one particular region—“unless you want to consider Mott Street a region,” as Alan said. Like most Chinese restaurants in the U.S., it serves dishes from several regions, as well as some purely American inventions, such as General Tso’s chicken, the classic, sweet-spicy fried chicken.

While the restaurant's fare is representative of the kind of Chinese food most American diners encounter, the real reason I'd chosen the place was its BYO policy. Patrons can bring multiple bottles of wine, with no corkage fee.

I bought three bottles each of white and red wine and one rosé, almost all under \$20 a bottle. I avoided white wines that were too oaky (think big, rich Chardonnays) or too high in acidity with too little weight (New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc). When it came to reds, I eschewed those with lots of tannin or oak, since they can make a spicy dish taste like wood. Instead, I chose wines that were young and lively, with an abundance of fruit and bright acidity—two qualities I deemed necessary to complement intensely flavored food. I also made sure they could work with competing flavors, since Chinese restaurants rarely serve in courses.

2015 JCB No. 5 Côtes de Provence Rosé

\$17

This soft but lively Grenache rosé works well with all but the spiciest dishes (I'd probably also give ginger-heavy dishes a pass). Five is said to be the favorite number of producer Jean-Charles Boisset's sister Nathalie.



Our Peking Duck Dinner for Five featured an array of dishes, including hot and sour and duck soups, steamed dumplings, barbecue beef, General Tso's chicken and, of course, Peking duck. Save for the dried-out strips of barbecue beef, it was all very flavorful—and a pretty good deal at \$33 per person.

The first wine we opened was the 2015 JCB No. 5 Côtes de Provence Rosé (\$17), a Grenache blend that Michelle's husband, Jon, regarded with approval. "The French believe that you should drink rosé with Chinese food," Jon said. He wasn't quite sure why, but this particular rosé supported the French view, at least in part. With a lively nature, bright acidity and juicy red fruit, the No. 5 paired well with the sweeter dishes. Spicier fare, however, knocked it flat.