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CRAFT Beer & Brewing Magazine ***Beer and Food Pairing 101***

Steve Koenig - October 08, 2015

Turn a duet into a perfect “brew-et” with these tips on how to select the right craft beer to accompany any dish. Making great pairings isn’t just about serving an incredible craft beer with a great dish. When harmony exists between well-executed cuisine and a perfectly paired beer, the effect can be unforgettable. But pairing your dishes with the right great craft beer doesn’t have to be hard or intimidating. In fact, it’s really quite easy and very, very fun. Of course, there are personal preferences in both food and beer, so make sure you take the beer preferences of your guests into account as you develop your menu. You would not serve a steak to someone who hates red meat, so don’t serve an imperial stout to someone who you know doesn’t like big, dark ales. While there are many different factors that go into making a great pairing, there are arguably only two primary approaches that cooks must consider with each dish they are trying to pair. Ask yourself this: Do I want a beer that is going to contrast with the flavors in this dish, or complement them? Both approaches can create incredible results.

Contrasting

Think opposites attract. This is the riskier approach to pairing, but when it works, it can really pay off. Pair a sour beer with a sweet dish, or a malty stout with briny seafood or a pungent blue cheese. Contrasting pairings can work best when the dish you are pairing has a singular dominant flavor or texture characteristic. The contrasting beer can bring balance to the dish by toning down the dominant characteristic of the food, but leaving intact the flavor that made you choose the dish in the first place. For example, a dish with a heavy alfredo cream sauce can be tempered with the bitterness and cutting power of a highly carbonated fresh pale ale. Pairing a crisp, clean IPA with an oily fish can add a new dimension to both the fish and the beer (not to mention the fat of the fish heightens your tastebuds’ perception of the beer’s bitterness). Pairing that same IPA with a complex dish such as Mole Poblano can keep the over-the-

top richness of the mole from becoming overpowering.

Complementing

If you are looking for complementing flavors, you’re looking for perfect-pitch harmony between the two. Think about the aroma, flavor, and mouthfeel of the dish. Which beers help accentuate those elements, raising them to an even higher level? For example, if you are making a dish that has deep roasted aromas and flavors, consider what kinds of beer have the same types of roast characteristics. Slow-roasted ribs pair well with a nice barleywine. The smoked flavor of the ribs meshes beautifully with the roasted character of the barleywine’s malt, while the sweet and tangy spiciness of the barbecue sauce matches the residual sweetness in the beer, and the strength of flavors in both means that one does not outweigh the other. For lighter, more delicate fare, a general rule of thumb is to serve lighter, more delicate beers. You can create excellent beer pairings with everything from salad to sorbet. Match the intensity of the beer to the intensity of your dish.

Carbonation

A few other things to consider when pairing beers with your dishes are temperature and carbonation. Most of the craft beer on the market is carbonated with carbon dioxide. Carbonation occurs naturally in bottle-conditioned beers, as the yeast creates carbon dioxide as a by-product of the fermentation process. Some beers, however, are carbonated with nitrogen (nitro), which has a smaller carbonation bubble than carbon dioxide and results in a smooth, creamier mouthfeel. Depending on the effect you want, these can be a great way to smooth out really salty or greasy foods—one of the reasons that Guinness (on nitro) has been a favorite of fish & chips lovers for hundreds of years.

Serving

One of the mistakes many cooks make is thinking that they have to pair a single dish with an entire beer. Nothing could be further from the truth. You want to serve just enough to get the most flavor out of the dish, while leaving the palate refreshed. Think one sip for each bite of food. I like to serve a half ounce of beer for every bite on the plate. Your guests won’t be drinking between every bite, but you want to make sure that they can start and finish with a mouthful of beer. You might serve only 4

ounces of beer with a light appetizer, while the entrée may require a full pint.

Don't forget serving temperature. Many beers actually taste better when they've had a chance to warm up a little bit. While not a hard and fast rule, the higher the alcohol content of the beer, the warmer it should be served. There are plenty of exceptions to this (some farm-house ales, Goses, etc.), but make sure you are serving your beer at the correct temperature and planning accordingly. Remember, too, that beer should rarely be just sipped. Make sure your guests know to inhale, take a mouthful of beer, and exhale through the nose to get the maximum flavor, aroma, and experience.

Glassware is also extremely important when it comes time to serve. You've put a lot of thought into the presentation of your dish. Your beer pairing deserves the same respect, and the overall experience will be heightened with the proper glassware. That being said, don't fret if you don't have the perfect glass for your beer. If the beer is great, it'll be just fine.

Like anything, the more you practice pairing beer and food, the better you'll get. Cheers and Bon Appétit!