



# WINE & FOOD PAIRING: Now I believe

BY EMILY RASMUSSEN



**EMILY RASMUSSEN** is a writer living in Sonoma, California, with her husband, Cody, and their golden retriever, Kinley.

## What I learned at an afternoon food and wine pairing boot camp.

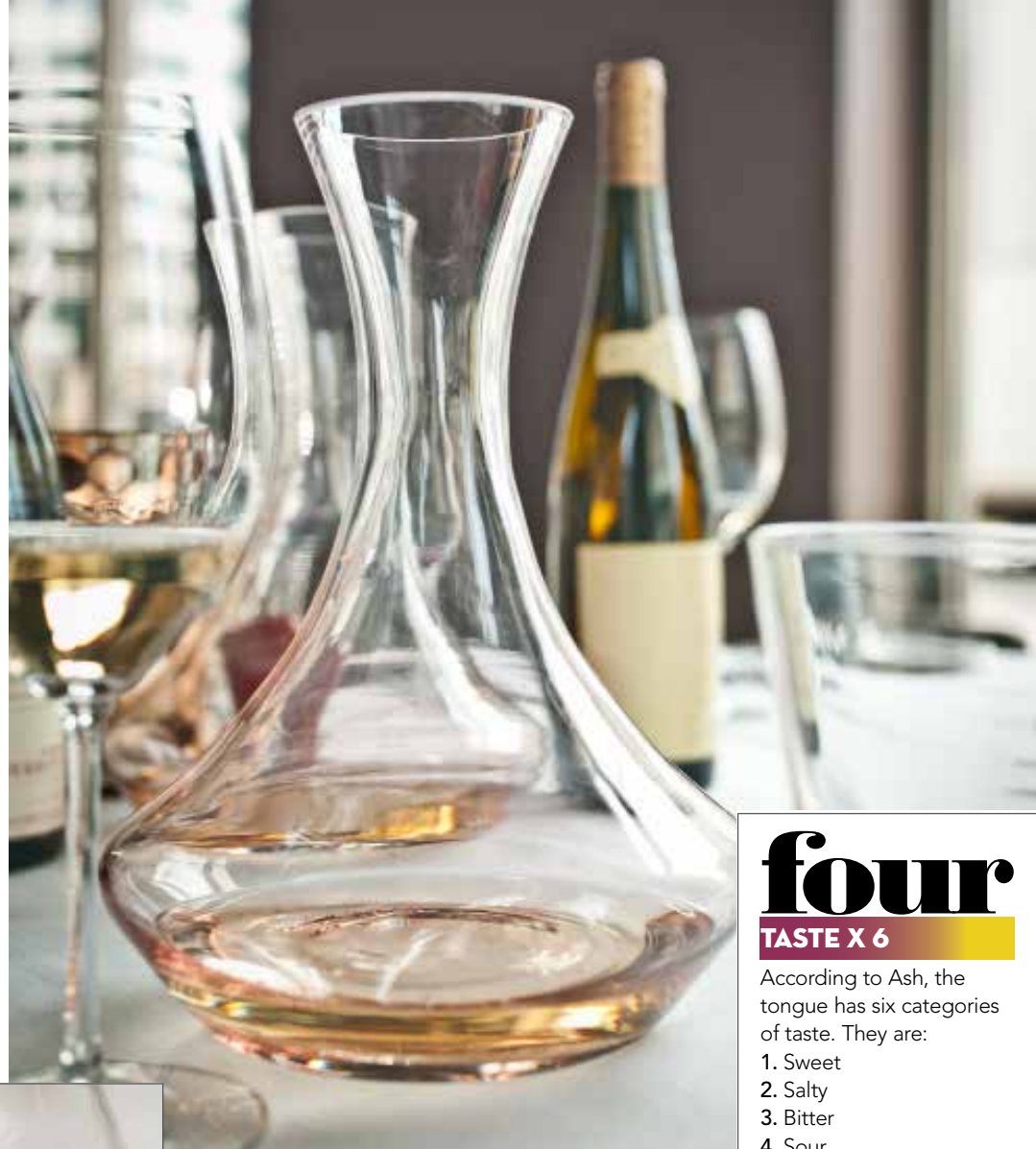
I used to be a card-carrying unbeliever in wine and food pairing. I'm embarrassed to admit that. When my husband (then boyfriend) told me he wanted to step away from his suit-and-tie job and become a vintner, I figured we'd become instant converts into the wine universe. But alas, 384 days later, I was still an unbeliever. My go-to pairings: Pinot Noir with a sitcom, Chardonnay with a novel, Champagne with a sunset.

Then I went to food and wine pairing boot camp at the **CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA**. My three-hour oenophile obstacle course at the "CIA" (which one author and food critic describes as the Juilliard of the culinary scene), led by the brilliant, charming chef John Ash, opened my eyes and made me a believer. Here are the seven lessons I learned and tips you can use at home when pairing wine with your favorite foods.

# one

## ALWAYS DECANT EVERYTHING

Chef Ash recommends decanting every wine (not just aged or tightly wound reds), even if it's as simple as pouring the wine from one carafe to another, letting the wine, in technical terms, "swoosh."



# two

## SWIRL, SNIFF, SWALLOW AND SAVOR

The nose is the single most important organ of taste. So to savor a culinary experience fully, Ash recommends Julia Child's sound advice: "You must thoroughly masticate your food!"

# three

## ADOPT THE DIALECT

Wine tasters draw from a vast library of flavor descriptors—geranium, eucalyptus, honey, vanilla, hemp, green pepper, watermelon and orange peel, to name just a handful. But the better we can identify what's in the glass, the better we can describe what we like, and the easier it is to find our favorites.

**TAKE A CLASS:** The Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, California, offers a variety of classes. Visit [ciachef.edu/california/enthusiast.asp](http://ciachef.edu/california/enthusiast.asp) for a complete class schedule. Looking for something closer to home? Publix Aprons Cooking School offers classes at a number of their stores.

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# four

## TASTE X 6

According to Ash, the tongue has six categories of taste. They are:

1. Sweet
2. Salty
3. Bitter
4. Sour
5. Umami (also described as savory)
6. Pepper (as in peppercorns or jalapeño)

To have a truly incredible palate experience, any and every food should contain at least three of the six tastes. For example:

- Chocolate chip cookies (sweet) with bittersweet chocolate (bitter) sprinkled with salt (salty) instead of sugar.
- Sweet potato fries (umami) with brown sugar (sweet) and cayenne (pepper).

# five

## DISSECT

A single grape, crushed and fermented, gets its myriad flavor attributes from three places:

- The grape itself (fruity)
- The wine-making (nutty, creamy or yeasty)
- The terroir, or land where it was grown (earthy, stony, mineral)

# six

## SHAKE UP CONVENTION

Food pairing is not solely about the "meat of the meal." You have to look beyond Chardonnay with chicken. Cabernet with beef. Pinot Noir with pork. Far more important are the accessories—seasonings, crusts, toppings, spices, cheeses and salt. The best part? You can make any wine pair with any food by adjusting which of the six basic tastes you emphasize.

For example: What to pair with chicken?

- With lemon juice and orange peel zest • *Sauvignon Blanc* or *Viognier*
- With a cream sauce and white wine reduction • *Chardonnay*
- Grilled with lemon or aromatic spices • *Pinot Noir*
- Grilled with barbecue sauce or some spice • *Zinfandel* or *Syrah*
- Roasted with savory herbs and served in a thick sauce • *Merlot* or *Cabernet Sauvignon*
- Fried Tennessee-style (my favorite) • *Rosé* or *Champagne*



# seven

## DO THE MATH

When a wine and food combine, an almost mathematical experience occurs on the palate: Any flavors present in both the food and the wine tend to cancel each other out, backing away from the flavor to leave room for the others to shine through. (For the number gurus, this is the vinous equivalent of the Multiplicative Inverse Property.)

For example, the classic and beautiful pairing of goat cheese and Sauvignon Blanc:

Sauvignon Blanc: (acidic) (fruity) (mineral or grassy)

Goat Cheese: (acidic) (creamy) (salty)

When the crisp Sauvignon Blanc slices through (or, rather, divides) the smooth goat cheese and acidities cancel each other out, what results is a beautiful flavor experience:

$$\frac{\text{SAUVIGNON BLANC}}{\text{GOAT CHEESE}} = \frac{(\text{ACIDIC}) (\text{FRUITY}) (\text{MINERAL OR GRASSY})}{(\text{ACIDIC}) (\text{CREAMY}) (\text{SALTY})} = (\text{FRUITY}) (\text{MINERAL OR GRASSY}) (\text{CREAMY}) (\text{SALTY})$$

The primary beauty of a food pairing is when one bite and one sip have an incredible reaction on the palate: when they create a flavor sensation that neither on its own could do. In a sense, what remains isn't just one food + one wine or even one wine dividing through the flavors of a food, but the pairing's components times Y. The Y factor is the indescribable sensation that couldn't come from the food or from the wine but that results in a quasi-chemical explosion of flavor and pleasure across the palate: the sweet, the telling, yum.

And to find Y, all we have to do is experiment.