

Wining and dining with specialities from South-West France

Local specialities from South-West France – cassoulet, foie gras terrine, duck breasts and aligot to name just a few – are some of French cuisine’s most iconic dishes. Whether prepared traditionally or given a modern twist, they invariably over-deliver on flavour and are ideal for sharing with family and friends. Oozing with character, they make perfect partners for wine. The challenge is deciding which bottles to uncork...

BY ALEXANDRA REVEILLON

Gourmet cuisine in South-West France is not reserved for the select few. From the plains of the Lauragais to the Gironde estuary, via the Lot valley, the Basque country and the foothills of the Pyrenees, love of good food is passed down from generation to generation. Tradition is everywhere in a region where agriculture and livestock farming provide a livelihood for many. Animals reared in South-West France – ducks, geese and black pigs for instance – are renowned for the delicate flavour and quality of their meat. Served with locally-grown vegetables, they are the essential ingredients of the region’s iconic dishes that are duck confit, duck breast, foie gras, cassoulet and aligot with sausage. All of these delicious specialities can be fully appreciated when paired with wines that enhance their unique flavour. Whether you stick to classic pairings or go for more unusual combinations, each dish has the perfect partner.



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At the Genty Magre, in Toulouse, Romain Brard prefers classic pairings with South-West specialities

CASSOULET AND WHITE WINE: A SURPRISING COMBINATION

Three towns in South-West France claim to be the birthplace of cassoulet: Castelnaudary, Carcassonne and Toulouse. Hence, there are three different recipes or three variations on a theme involving one basic ingredient common to all: the haricot bean. In Carcassonne, mutton is added, whereas the Castelnaudary version includes goose confit. In Toulouse, dubbed the 'pink city', chef Romain Brard runs the kitchen at Genty Magre. His recipe for Toulouse-style cassoulet focuses on Tarbais beans grown in the foothills of the Pyrenees. They are cooked in a large casserole dish which he puts in the oven after adding a heel of ham and some pieces of unsmoked streaky bacon. The duck confit is cooked separately in a frying pan.

The sausages made from pork rind, which thicken the sauce and also add flavour to the cassoulet, are browned in a frying pan with the Toulouse sausages. The chef then finally adds them to the beans and leaves everything to cook for two and a half to three hours at 180°C. As soon as a crust forms on the top, the cassoulet is ready to be enjoyed.

Traditionally, this typical regional dish is served with a local red wine like Gaillac or Marcillac. "These are tannic wines that pair extremely well with sauce-based dishes like cassoulet," points out Fabrizio Bucella, a sommelier and lecturer at Brussels university. "The sauce counterbalances the astringency of the tannins."

Perhaps more unexpectedly, pairing cassoulet with a dry white wine also works very well. Made in the Gers, Pyrénées-Atlantiques and Hautes-Pyrénées departments from Petit and Gros Manseng grapes, Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh combines its aromas with the flavours of the cassoulet. "There are no tannins to hinder the taste experience," explains the sommelier. "White wine brings out the richness of the dish whilst the fattiness of the cassoulet is offset by the acidity of the Pacherenc."



DUCK CONFIT PAIRS PARTICULARLY WELL WITH TANNIC RED WINES SUCH AS CAHORS AND MADIRAN

DUCK CONFIT AND TANNIC WINES: A QUINTESSENTIAL, CLASSIC COMBINATION

Some dishes lend themselves to modern-day wine pairings whereas others prefer classic, age-old formulae. Duck confit sits firmly in the latter category. Cooked in its fat before being transferred to preserving jars, it is often served as a leg. Whether simply pan-fried or oven-baked then served with parsley and garlic-flavoured potatoes cooked in duck fat – Sarlat-style potatoes – the confit is enhanced by the tannins in red wine, especially Cahors and Madiran. "This is a regional combination which truly established the pedigree of local gourmet foods," comments Fabrizio. "It is important to keep up a tradition when it works as well as this one." The wines' tannin structure and volume on the palate highlight the delicate flavour of the confit, whilst the tannins counterbalance the speciality's fatty edge. There is a prerequisite though: the wines have to be young. "Young wines show expressive primary fruit aromas that impart a hint of freshness to the dish."

FOIE GRAS: THINKING BEYOND SWEET WINES

The appellations commonly recommended for foie gras – Barsac, Sauternes and Monbazillac for instance – all have one thing in common: they are sweet or noble-rot wines.

Although the pairing works, it is not necessarily the ideal combination. “Adding the fattiness of the liver to the sweetness of the wine makes the two slightly heavy,” bemoans lecturer Fabrizio. Carole Garreau, owner of the château of the same name, suggests foie gras should be paired with Armagnac. “A few drops can be poured onto the dish and a small glassful served as an accompaniment.” The idea is a novel one and can offset the sometimes overly-rich taste of this iconic dish, providing the right vintage is served. “Avoid ‘hors d’âge’ Armagnacs,” recommends Fabrizio. “They are too mature. Younger spirits that are still exuberant are structured enough not to obscure the delicate flavour of the foie gras.” Armagnac’s candied fruit and vanilla aromas recall the slightly sweet flavours of the food, irrespective of whether it has been prepared in an earthenware dish or wrapped in a muslin cloth. Romain Brard is a firm believer in the traditional style. After entirely deveining the liver, he adds 11g of salt and 6g of pepper per kilo before adding 20 cl of Cognac or Armagnac and then baking it for half an hour at 140°C. “Bain-marie is not necessary, an earthenware dish with a lid is all you need,” explains the chef at Genty Magre. During baking, the alcohol in the spirits evaporates, allowing the fruit aromas to come to the fore.

DUCK BREAST AND DESSERT WINES: MAKE WAY FOR SWEET AND SOUR COMBINATIONS

The tenderest part of the duck should be cooked simply – pan-fried and served on its own or with a dried fruit sauce. Duck breasts with figs or honey have long since won acclaim. Red wine lends itself very well to pairings with duck breasts, as long as a slightly mature bottling is chosen.



CAROLE GARREAU, SUGGESTS FOIE GRAS SHOULD BE PAIRED WITH ARMAGNAC

“The combination is a lot more interesting with a slightly older vintage,” stresses Fabrizio. “The tannins are velvety and the aromas more evolved. Notes of undergrowth and mushroom are revealed and partner extremely well with duck breasts.” A bottle of Madiran though also Saint-Emilion and Saint-Julien can be opened, safe in the knowledge that they will enhance the delicate flavour of rare-cooked duck meat.



Either truffle-flavoured or plain, foie gras works better with Armagnac than the traditional pairing with sweet wines

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A more unusual combination that works well is duck breasts with dessert wines. “There is an excellent resonance between meat cooked with prunes, figs or apricots, and a dessert wine like Banyuls or Maury,” comments sommelier Fabrizio. The sweetness of the wine recalls the dried fruit whilst the wine’s alcohol content is a good match for the powerful flavour of the duck. Duck breasts can also be served with a glass of Armagnac. “The sweetness of the dish offsets the dryness of the spirit,” explains Carole.

ALIGOT AND SAUSAGE SPAN THE COLOUR RANGE

Toulouse sausage and Aligot from the Aubrac region is a combination renowned for its character and delicious flavour. The dish pairs well with three different styles of wine. Firstly, a tannic yet acidic red wine like Fronton: made from the Négrette grape variety, “It imparts a touch of freshness to this filling dish,” notes Fabrizio. Secondly, it can be paired with a white wine like Entre-Deux-Mers. “This is a dry wine that counterbalances the fattiness of the Toulouse sausage.” Finally, rosé wine offsets the density of Aligot with sausage. “The best choice is a Bordeaux Clairet which contains enough tannins to take on a dish like this, and yet is fairly acidic.”

DESSERTS HAVE THEIR PAIRINGS TOO!

From apple croustade to canneles from Bordeaux, sweet treats are legion in the South-West. Whether they are fruit-based or revolve around eggs, they pair particularly well with Armagnac. Youth is of the essence here as it allows aromas of prune, vanilla and quince to be exuded, highlighting the delicious flavour of the desserts. So delay no more – get cooking!



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SOMMELIER FABRIZIO BUCELLA LIKES TO EXPERIMENT WITH NEW FOOD PAIRINGS