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WINE WITH CURRY?

By Peter May. (22 July 2003)



What to drink with Indian meals is the question and too frequently beer is the answer, which is understandable when you read the lacklustre wine lists featuring once fashionable names like 'Piersporter' and 'Liebfraumilch' presented by many restaurants.

It's difficult for curry restaurants because their operators rarely have any background in wine and are often forbidden by their religion to taste them.

Help is on the way from a couple of sources. Cobra Beer, already served in many Indian restaurants, is now distributing a selection of wines selected to match the cuisine. Wine for Spice has gone one stage further. They have worked with a winery crafting wines especially to match hot and spicy foods, and aimed them at beer drinkers.

So what are these wines like?

There was only one way to test them, and so we ordered a selection of takeaway dishes from Chad Rahman, Curry Chef of the Year at St Alban's Mumtaj Restaurant. Using International Standards Organisation tasting glasses we first tasted the wines on their own and then with food.

GENERAL BILIMORIA

Cobra's General Bilimoria range comprises wines from southern France and South Africa. This is a clever choice as both areas are currently making some of the worlds most exciting wines at reasonable prices. We tasted five of them:

Terret/Sauvignon Blanc 2002 (white blend from southern France) - Golden yellow colour, crisp dry and refreshing, medium aftertaste. Retains its excitement with food and has the sharpness and depth to cope with quite spicy food. Refreshes the palate and is very 'moreish'

Columbard/Chardonnay 2002 (white blend from South Africa) - Pale straw colour, not much nose, soft buttery but seems thinner than it should and a sour finish with a long lingering unpleasant aftertaste, soapy and acidic. With food it becomes bland, flabby and oily. Nothing going for it. Didn't want to drink

[Chapatti/Roti/Rotli](#)
[Parathas \(plain\)](#)
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any more of it.

Pinotage 2001 (red from South Africa) - Bright red colour with purple rim, wood smoke nose, plum fruits and cigar box flavours. Some hard tannins which are softened somewhat by food, but remains a powerful distinctive wine with a prominent smoky smell. This is the only wine that identifies its producer, the capable Beyerskloof winery.

Shiraz/Pinotage 2002 (red blend from South Africa) - Bright red colour, subdued nose, sweet up-front spicy fruits with firm underlying tannins. The sweet spiciness of this wine makes it an attractive match with food. It doesn't dominate but matches well with the sweetness of Chicken Tikka Massala and the spiciness of chilli rich dishes.

Merlot 2002 (red from southern France) - Unattractive medicinal/bandage smell, dark purple colour, but pleasant soft spicy cherry fruit flavours. Seems a bit thin bodied, but makes a good match with food.



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 (L-R Mrs Bilimoria, General Bilimoria, Navin Bhatia - Executive Chef at Cafe Lazeez)

The story is that when Lt General Bilimoria was in the Indian Army his mess served only the finest wines. After he retired as Commander-in-Chief he instructed his son to find wines to complement Indian cuisine. His son, Karan introduced Cobra Beer to the UK market and the wines he chose for his father are now being made available to Indian restaurant patrons. It's a pleasant story but I can't help feeling sorry for old General Billy reduced to these after being used to having the world's best.

WINE FOR SPICE



'Wine for Spice' is the inspiration of Warren Edwardes who hopes to encourage British curryholics to pass on boring beer and try his range of three semi-sparkling wines designed especially to match spicy Asian foods. Warren, who comes from Goa, has family in Spain and it is there that he recently worked with a local winery to design lightly naturally sparkling wines that would not only tempt beer drinkers but also satisfy wine drinkers.

Warren told me that while he was drinking cold beers with a curry he realised that a lightly sparkling wine served ice cold would also make an ideal accompaniment.



Viceroy White - This is the driest, made from a blend of Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel-lo grapes. When poured the wine, which is a pale straw colour, produces a deep head of bubbles and thereafter

continues to produce a fine beading. The wine does not have a distinctive nose, but it has the body to stand up to quite spicy food and a clean mouth quenching taste with a lemon/lime finish.

Raja Rose - is a medium dry wine with a beautiful dark pink colour gained from Garnacha and Tempanillo with a meaty body reminiscent of rose hips and red fruits of the forest. Again, a good amount of bubbles on pouring followed by a steady flow. I enjoyed this wine that had an attitude often missing in roses. "The intention", Warren said, "is a wine a couple of notches above Mateus Rose", an aim it easily exceeds.



Rani Gold - with 16-19 grams per litre residual sugar, is classed as medium. It's the sweetest in the range and the one I was least expecting to like. But although it seems sweet on first taste - and especially after the first two wines - in practice it provided an excellent match with the chillies in my Murgh Jalfrezi and its sweet uplift on the aftertaste made a soft, palate pleasing finish which encouraged frequent top-ups. This had a nose of raisins indicating its Muscat parentage, which forms 60% of a blend along with Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel-lo.

Wines for Spice intend introducing these wines through Indian restaurants in the UK over the next few months. They are attractively presented in tall thin bottles with colour coded labels showing a Lutyens canopy and are meant to be served ice-cold in chilled glasses, like beer. But such treatment suppresses wine bouquets and flavours. These wines are not overly distinctive even at room temperature and ice cold it is hard to get anything much. We served them outside on one of the hottest days. With the temperature above 30C our wines soon warmed up. Thus we were able to taste not only at the recommended chilled temperature but also warmer where they displayed a little more character.

"A lot of hard thought and planning is going into Wine for Spice, but I find it hard to visualise beer drinkers I know foregoing pint mugs of amber nectar for stemmed glasses of pink sparkling wine. And at twice the alcohol content of beer they certainly shouldn't be gulped like lager. I am also doubtful that people who already choose wine will be tempted by ones served ice cold that have less flavour. But for those who switch to beer only when eating spicy food, these wines would be ideal."

ABOUT PETER MAY

Peter May writes about wine and travel for several websites and magazines. He has a monthly column on New Zealand's www.wineoftheweek.com and is a writer for the South African news site www.wine.co.za. He presents wine tastings and holds the Wine & Spirit Trust Higher Certificate. He is a regular at his local Indian restaurant where the staff know to add extra chillies!

Wines for Spice is at www.wineforspice.com

General Bilimoria is at www.generalbillys.com
Peter May write for www.winelabels.org

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