

# DRINKING

## *outside the box*

It can be tempting to stick with what you know when ordering wine in a restaurant, but exploring some of today's excellent New World wines can pay dividends, as **Natasha Hughes** finds out

It wasn't so long ago that the only viable wine choices in top restaurants came from France. The more forward-thinking restaurants might also list a small selection of wines from countries such as Italy, Spain and Germany, but rarely did they stray from the safe confines of the Old World into the New.

These days even the most traditional of haute-cuisine restaurants list wines from Australia, New Zealand, California and South America – but most still weight their wine offerings in favour of the Old World. Fear of the unknown has a large part to play: when diners fork out for an

expensive meal they often play it safe with a bottle of Sancerre, Burgundy or Bordeaux rather than make a less familiar choice.

It could be argued, however, that the bold flavours plated up in the most innovative restaurants are just as well served by a match with some of the New World wines now available as they are by the classics.

This was brought home at a recent tasting at Alan Murchison's Michelin-starred L'Ortolan, where five wines from Chile's Viña Ventisquero were matched with four subtle, sophisticated dishes.

The meal kicked off with a dish of hot-smoked salmon, accompanied by rhubarb pickled in ginger and gin, and the sharp tang of baby sorrel leaves. L'Ortolan head sommelier Stephen Nisbet explained that the plan had been to match the dish with Ventisquero's Reserve Sauvignon Blanc 2007, but at the last minute he'd decided to try it with the Reserve Chardonnay 2006, because 'it's refined, food-friendly and elegant'.

The two wines split the tasting panel. In the end, Nisbet decided that: 'The Sauvignon Blanc is the right match overall as the dish is very rich and this wine is quite refreshing. The Chardonnay doesn't do quite as good a job of cleansing the palate, but it works well with the caramelised flavours of the smoked fish.'

Nicolas Kowalski, wine buyer for Vinopolis, agreed, saying: 'I think the Sauvignon gives the finish a beautiful lift, while I found

the Chardonnay finishes a bit heavy, even though it matched the flavours better at the start.'

Murchison preferred the Chardonnay as a match: 'It works really well with the smoke flavours. I think the Sauvignon is almost overpowering with the salmon.'

The next course featured a pairing of various cuts of lamb – roast leg, braised shoulder and crisp sweetbreads – with a miscellany of Mediterranean vegetable flavours and Ventisquero's Pangea Syrah 2004. This top-end cuvée, made with the help of consultant winemaker John Duval (who used to make Penfolds Grange), puts the lie to the idea that New World Syrah is always jammy, over-ripe and in your face.

All the tasters found much to admire in the match. As Américo Hernández, export manager, Europe, for Viña Ventisquero, pointed out: 'This wine is so complex that there's always a facet that will go with the flavours on your fork.'

Nisbet, in critical mode, commented: 'The flavours are a bit strong for the sweetbreads, but the match of textures is lovely. The wine also helps the black olive flavours extend on the finish, and

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### THE TASTERS

**Américo Hernández**, export manager, Europe, Viña Ventisquero  
**Nicolas Kowalski**, wine buyer, Vinopolis  
**Alan Murchison**, chef-patron, L'Ortolan  
**Stephen Nisbet**, head sommelier, L'Ortolan





of the pips and skins of the original grapes, echoing the wine's ripe tannins.'

We rounded off the meal with a dish that, on paper, looked like a crash course in extreme matching: a bitter chocolate mousse with spiced cherries and vanilla ice cream,

paired with Ventisquero's Grey Cabernet Sauvignon 2005.

'This was the best match of the lunch – and the most surprising one,' commented Kowalski. 'I've always loved Campari because of its pairing of bitterness and sweetness, and there's something of that about this pairing.'

'It does have a bit more bitterness when contrasted to the sweetness of the dessert,' said Nisbet, 'but the cherry, chocolate and lime flavours all reveal facets of the wine.'

'The chocolate is full bodied, and that's why it works with this wine,' explained Murchison. 'With almost anything else you'd be left with an overall impression of sweetness, which would jar with the wine.'

'I think it's nice to finish with something like this,' said Nisbet. 'A dessert wine would leave you with a dense, rich stickiness, while this wine gives the dessert a chance to come through.'

And come through it did, loud, clear and utterly sublime. Although Nisbet and Murchison's matches looked risky on paper, this meal proved that some risks are worth taking.



the taste and texture really come together with the confit shoulder and tomato purée.'

'I like the depth of flavour and texture of the braised meat, which is cut by the fruitiness of the tomato,' said Murchison. 'It's very similar to the wine, whose weight is also cut by fruit.'

'It's a very big dish with lots of concentrated flavours,' said Kowalski. 'The wine also has a lot of personality, which is why they work so well together.'

Next up was Vertice 2005, also by Duval – a blend of 54 per cent Carmenère, 44 per cent Syrah and two per cent Cabernet Sauvignon – matched with a goats' cheese fondant,

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gingerbread, poached pears and candied walnut.

Once again everyone round the table agreed that the match was an unexpectedly good one, although Murchison felt it could benefit from a slightly heavier cheese. 'Ideally the wine needs something slightly more mature.'

'The walnut and poached pears have saved this dish for me,' said Kowalski. 'The cheese is blasted by the strength of the wine without the lift of either of those flavours.'

'The spice bread is spot on with the wine,' agreed Nisbet, 'and the bitter, earthy flavours of the walnut are wonderful – they remind me



## TASTING MENU

Square Meal readers can enjoy a similar dinner menu at L'Ortolan, accompanied by a selection of specially matched wines from Viña Ventisquero, from 21 October to 20 November. Call 0118 988 8500 to book.