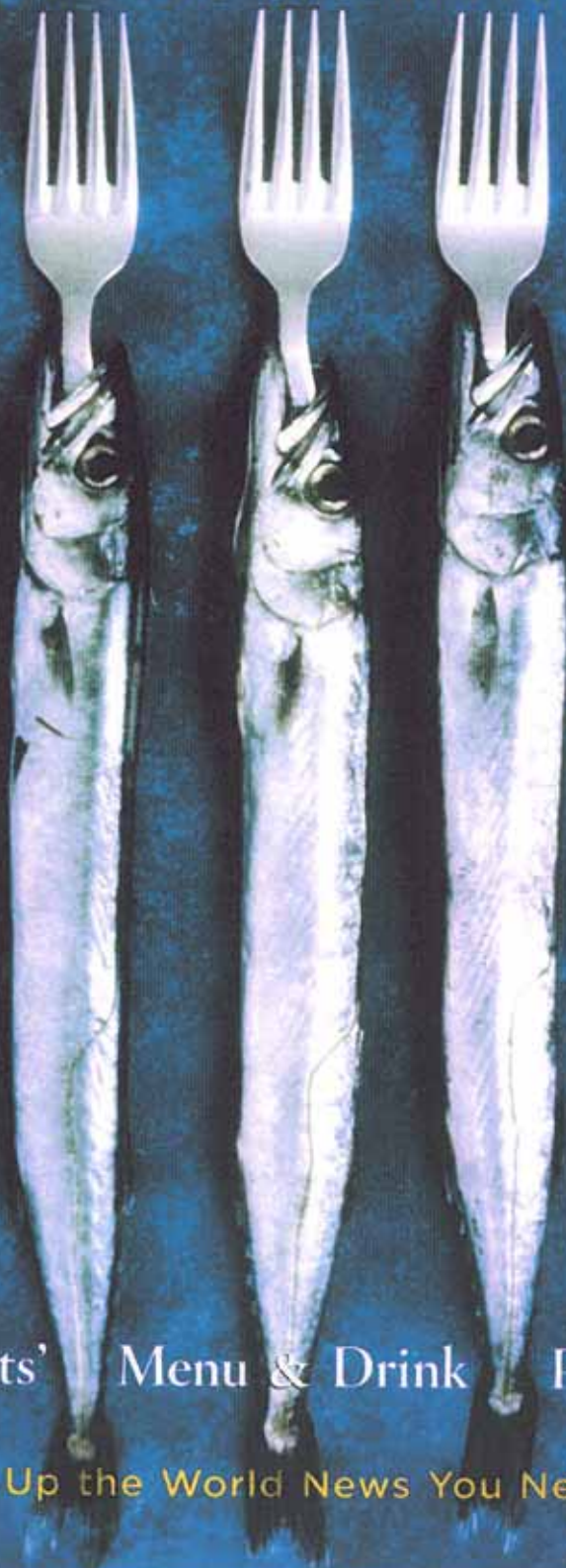


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# Hook, Line & Drinker

WINE REPORT WINE DIRECTORS HAVE HAD TO DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO KEEP RED-INCLINED CUSTOMERS HAPPY WHILE STILL RESPECTING CHEFS' SEAFOOD CREATIONS. JEFFERY LINDENMUTH REPORTS. PHOTOS BY LAURA JOHANSEN. FOOD STYLING BY VICTORIA GRANOF.



The popularity of seafood, embraced as much for its salubriousness as for its fresh flavors, presents a conundrum for American sommeliers: how to serve devotees of seafood, but not necessarily the wines that pair best with it. Even in restaurants serving primarily seafood, many wine directors are caught red-

handed, their lists teeming with powerful red wines that could swamp most fish with all the subtlety of a biblical flood. Their defense: these are wines that Napa-loving, expense account-toting and date-impressing diners demand, regardless of their meal.

In Las Vegas, where bigger is always better, **Christopher Janz**, sommelier and beverage director for **Restaurant RM** and **R.Bar.Café**, says he has served 36 oysters with two bottles of Silver Oak Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon to some high rollers. "It's not the perfect pairing, but if the customer is happy..." says Janz. "My move is to offer a complimentary glass of a wine that I think pairs better."

The list of 478 wines serving both seafood-centric restaurants is actually about 55 percent red and 45 percent white according to Janz, who does his best to show sensitivity to the food by leaning heavily on Pinot Noir and choosing aged Cabernet Sauvignon, offering more supple tannins. "Why wipe out a beautiful piece of Dover sole and destroy the flavors that **Rick [Moonen]** spends his time creating with the freshest and best seafood?" asks Janz. For tables committed to drinking red wine, the servers suggest seafood dishes with the chops to match, like Pacific halibut on a Pinot Noir/foie gras emulsion sauce with braised leeks and Hudson Valley foie gras, which Janz likes to pair with red Burgundy or a New Zealand Pinot Noir.

When asked how he arrived at the predominantly white list for **Bay 13**, a new seafood restaurant from **Moana Hotel and Restaurant Group** in Portland, Oregon's trendy Pearl District, wine and beverage director **Chris Blanchard** replies with good-natured sar-

casm, "Well, it's kind of a crazy concept, but I looked at the food. I mean, there are only a few dishes that could stand up to anything more than Pinot Noir. His unapologetic list takes a focused approach, with about 100 wines. Most selections fall between \$45 and \$60. Most are bright, fresh whites. Many hail from the Pacific Northwest, including a selection of promising Dijon clone Oregon Chardonnays.

Blanchard also relies on a selection of by-the-glass whites that he likens to his handy tool belt. "You need a glass you can reach for to match each dish," he's firmly convinced. "Grüner Veltliner is great with anything green, for its little touch of pepper and arugula. It goes well with cucumber and *edamame*. The semisweet German Riesling is there to work with anything with a little heat, or citrus, tangerine flavors. Sauvignon Blanc from South Africa is, for me, the best combination of New Zealand and Sancerre. And I also like a non-oaked Chardonnay, which represents the flavors that come out of the soil." His by-the-glass reds include an Oregon Pinot Noir and a cru Beaujolais.

Of course, certain seafood dishes do lend themselves to red wine, even those with considerable heft, according to **Jake Kokemor**, wine director for **Restaurant August** and **Besh Steak** in New Orleans. At August, the seafood finds its match in a list replete with red and white Burgundies. Kokemor also indulges his personal passion for Syrah. "I think Pinot Noir and Syrah are just the best wines with the chef's food, even with the seafood. I love Syrah with his shrimp and grits. It's not necessarily the main ingredient but the secondary flavors—*andouille* sausage, *piquillo* peppers and Creole



sauce—that I look at. The grits cool down the tannins in the wine and let the fruit harmonize,” says Kokemor.

Whites find their place at the August dinner table, too, in the form of Chenin Blanc with fresh seafood salads, or California Chardonnay with an almond butter-crusted sheephead. But the breadth that Kokemor finds in Syrah, especially American versions, makes it a favorite red pour with fish. “I’ve always thought clashing flavors can be good or bad. My whole philosophy is drink what you like. Then we can be dangerous and try something crazy,” says Kokemor.

**Ame Restaurant**, in the St. Regis hotel in San Francisco, serves seafood in its most delicate state, focusing on raw preparations in the form of sashimi, crudo, seiche, or inspired by carpaccio and kibbe. Sommelier **Jeff Anderson** says about 20 percent of their guests start the night with one of a dozen chilled premium sake, while others seize upon his recommendation of Champagne with such bubbly-friendly dishes as tartare of lightly smoked Tasmania Ocean trout with wasabi *panna cotta* and American sturgeon caviar. For his “no-brainer” white, he reaches for Riesling. “We don’t have as many spicy and sweet dishes, so I focus on the dry styles from Austria and Alsace. Riesling is great with the clean flavors of lighter fish, and with the oilier fish the acidity is perfect,” says Anderson.

But even with such big ticket whites as Domaine Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet Clavoillon 1999 (\$259) and Étienne Sauzet Puligny-Montrachet Les Folatières 2004 (\$185) the red specter looms. “It’s a big struggle, especially since we are in a hotel and we have a lot of Napa Valley connections. But people want to spend a lot of money and that means big reds. I feel a certain amount of pressure,” says Anderson.

At **Passionfish** in Pacific Grove, California, chef/owner/wine director **Ted Walter** has not only secured a who’s who of elusive California producers—Ridge, Lewis, Harlan Estate—but also sells them at retail price to accompany his menu of sustainable seafood with organic ingredients. “A lot of my peers think I’m crazy. But we’re not paying a chef, gm, or a wine steward, so we’re able to give our patrons a great deal,” he says.

Passionfish’s list corrals big red wines from Tuscany to the smallest producers of Aussie Shiraz, along with an interesting selection of off-the-wall whites like Txakoli, Scheurebe, and a white Amarone. “I love Northern Italian whites, Riesling, and all the lower alcohol whites that work really well with seafood. But as people get more knowledge and get into wine, they tend to drink more red than white, so that’s why our list has more reds,” says Walter.

This inspires Walter to reach for a broader spectrum of ingredients in designing his seafood menu, as he seeks to build flavors that stand up to red wines. In conceiving fish dishes for red wine, he avoids high acid and strives for meatier sauces, like a basil/red wine fish fumet, or he reaches for Moroccan spices. “We are all about sustainable seafood. But we have a broad range of flavors in our food and we have a broad range of flavors in our wine list, which is why it all works,” says Walter. ■