

Some simple rules for pairing wines with pizza

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One of my favorite haunts as a teenager was Pizza Town USA on Route 46 in Elmwood Park. As saucy and delicious as their pizza was (and still is), it was a single beverage on the drink menu that sealed the deal for me. I'd return time and time again on my skateboard in anticipation of speaking the happiest words on earth, "Two slices and a grape drink, please." It was a perfect pairing, and I'd never order one without the other. The same still holds true for me today — in a grown up sort of way, that is.



Wine Rack

The history of pizza begins in Naples, Italy, where only a few core ingredients were used in its creation: semolina flour, extra-virgin olive oil, San Marzano tomatoes, fresh mozzarella di bufala and basil leaves. To this day, an underlying code of ethics prevents many a Neapolitan pizza maker from slapping pepperoni, mushrooms, breaded chicken cutlet and sweet peppers on top. The pie is small, uncut, with its cheese pooled in the center of a crisp yet chewy crust that bubbles from a quick ride in the high heat of a brick oven. You'd have to taste one to understand the power of its simplicity. However, there's also something to be said about the modernization of

that Neapolitan delight, which thankfully found its way to New Jersey.

Regardless of where we are in the Garden State, it's almost certain a great pizzeria is within a stone's throw. You know, the kind of place that'll greet you with a "Whaddya like-a?" and the pies are lined up under glass like precious jewels. Large, crispy discs broken down into slices, topped with garlic powder and oregano-kissed sauce, shredded mozzarella and just about anything you'd want on top. There's little resemblance to that first Neapolitan pizza, but that's OK. Rules are, as the saying goes, made to be broken. I know I don't stand alone in saying, "I love our pizza." And what's more is I like a glass of wine with my breaded eggplant and black olive adorned slice.

As you might imagine, there's no real science behind pairing wine with your pizza. It's the kind of thing that's as casual as the delivery guy, but there are a few basic pair-

ing principles that could make for more of a "dining experience" than a quick slice.

■ **Pair by weight.** Think about it, we're dealing with bread, cheese and tomato sauce, three middleweight champions. Something too light, like pinot grigio for instance, might not work as well as a sauvignon blanc or a chardonnay. And, on the red side, even a pie with meatballs and sausage doesn't qualify as heavyweight, so maybe a cabernet sauvignon is just too big. A more medium bodied red such as sangiovese, tempranillo or pinot noir is the way to go.

■ **Pair by topping.** There's no question that mushrooms, pineapples and pepperoni each pack a different punch. So consider the toppings a focal point of the pie and pair them up the same way you would any dish. For example, veggies such as mushrooms, sweet peppers, onions and eggplant could benefit from an earthy red wine with dark fruit and Old World appeal, such as a Barbera d'Alba from Piedmont. A pie with meats might be better with a red that's carrying a little black pepper and spice, such as a malbec or a tempranillo. Meanwhile, white pizza and California chardonnay is a match made in heaven.

■ **Pair by mood.** You can take everything I just said and toss it out with the rest of yesterday's paper. Go ahead and drink whatever it is you're in the mood for. Don't hurt yourself thinking too long and hard about what wine goes best with that Hawaiian pie. Remember, it's pizza. The same meal that once made you perfectly happy paired with a fountain grape drink.

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Please see **WINE RACK, B3**

Which wines with which pizza toppings?

■ 2009 Planeta, "La Segreta Bianco," Sicily, Italy

Try if you like: chardonnay and viognier

The secret is a blend of the grecanico, chardonnay, viognier and fiano grapes. Tangerine, green apple and peach dominate the nose. It's clean and fresh on the palate with the tangerine repeating on the finish. Drink it young.

Pizza to pair it with: white pizza, margherita, pineapple (Hawaiian pie), shrimp

How much: \$12.99

Where to buy: Whole Foods, Paramus; 201-226-1244

■ 2008 Vietti, Barbera d'Alba, "Tre Vigne," Piedmont, Italy

Try if you like: medium-bodied, Old World Italian reds

One-hundred percent Barbera from one of my favorite producers in Piedmont, this rustic Italian wine is packed with dark cherries, earth and smoke that's integrated with softly textured tannins and finishes long with much of the same.

Pizza to pair it with: margherita, mushrooms, black olives, sausage, eggplant

How much: \$18.99

Where to buy: Patrick and Sons Super Cellars, Ridgewood; 201-444-0012

■ 2009 Erath, Pinot Noir, Oregon

Try if you like: Fresh, fruit-forward reds

Erath is consistently a great value in Oregon pinot noir. Medium bodied and loaded with raspberry and cherry. The youthful fruit is backed with a balanced acidity that makes for a lively and bright wine.

Pizza to pair it with: margherita, chicken cutlet, most veggies

How much: \$16.99

Where to buy: Total Wine and More, River Edge; 201-968-1777

■ 2009 Tarima, Monastrell, Jumilla, Spain

Try if you like: tempranillo, mourvedre, malbec

2009 is the first vintage for this wine and it just arrived here in the U.S. a couple weeks ago. It's a terrific value. Chocolate, cigar box, violets and earth are packed in an impressive and seductive red that shows no hard edges and finishes like silk. Intense aromas give way to a softer wine that'll work across the board with pizzas — including meat toppings. A must try.

Pizza to pair it with: margherita, veggies, sausage, meatballs, prosciutto, pepperoni, ham, onions, peppers

How much: \$9.99

Where to buy: Stew Leonard's Wines, Paramus; 201-649-0882

