

TASTE FOR LIFE



On Spirits, Food, & the Enjoyment Thereof

IN MY MORNING NEWSPAPER this week, there appeared an article on the emerging popularity of pairing Scottish whisky with food. This, as you might imagine, pleased me greatly, me being someone whose initial reluctance to partner spirits with food has mushroomed into an almost evangelical zeal for the practice, an evolution documented within these very pages.

Then I came to the following words from a prominent Toronto chef by the name of Jamie Kennedy: "A dining experience should leave you euphoric ... not rip-roaring drunk."

And then this, from the same chef: "It's fine for hors d'oeuvres. That's its place, at the beginning or the end of a meal. I wouldn't think for a moment of pairing scotch with roasted meat as a main course. That's the place of a red wine. Why ruin an amazing thing?"

Oh, bollocks!

What is it about the mere mention of the word "spirits" that causes so many people to assume that anyone interested in their enjoyment is destined to wind up sloshed? Would Chef Kennedy bemoan the potential drunkenness that would accompany a multi-course meal in which each dish is partnered with an appropriate wine? Probably not, since he seems to think that wine with a roast is perfectly fine. Yet if that wine were to be 12% alcohol and served in a five-ounce glass, then the diner would consume the exact same amount of intoxicant as if he or she had sipped on one and a half ounces of 40% alcohol whisky.

Or to put it another, quasi-clichéd way: it's the alcohol, stupid!

I have attended enough wine dinners to know that moderate consumption, even moderate behavior, is not necessarily the rule at such events. Oh sure, there are the oh-so-serious and prestigious dinners where ancient wines are measured out with eye-droppers and people sit around tut-tutting with every sip, but those are surely the exception and besides, who really wants to go to such staid affairs anyway? No, the majority of wine

dinners, indeed the *best* of wine dinners, feature more generous allotments of *vino* partnered with deftly-executed dishes that bring out the best in the wine, and vice versa.

So during, say, a five course meal, even if we get miserly and allow everyone but a meager four ounces of wine per dish, each person is going to consume the better part of a bottle, or the equivalent in alcohol of roughly four healthy drams of whisky. Yet is anyone going to wring their hands about these oenophiles leaving the table "rip-roaring drunk"? I rather doubt it.

Besides, and here is where Chef

alcohol. Simply, without that 12% of the wine, 5% of the beer, or 40% of the spirits, the whole experience just wouldn't be as much fun.

Neither, I might add, would the food and beverage pairings work so well. As I am sure Chef Kennedy knows, alcohol functions extremely well as a medium for the complex flavors one can find in a wine, beer, or spirit, as well as assisting in the delivery of said flavors, not to mention digestion afterwards, and is thus an intricate component of the food-friendly nature of these drinks. (Which is, I suppose, why we seldom see *lassi* dinners



Kennedy really misses the boat, *alcohol is an important piece of the equation*. It's the reason we drink, or at least a part of the reason, and when meted out in tolerable portions, it makes us feel good—that "euphoric" thing that Chef mentions above—and it increases our enjoyment of various aspects of our lives, like dinners. It is part and parcel of the pleasures and appreciation of wine, beer, spirits, and cocktails, and it is also, to quote Ms. Stewart, a good thing.

The most memorable wine dinners I have attended, and beer and spirits and cocktail dinners, as well, have all been at least somewhat rambunctious affairs, marked by the spirited—no pun intended—enjoyment of a good meal in the company of good people. As much as that joviality might be fueled by the pleasures of fine food, it is almost certainly, and at least equally, also instigated by the relaxing and uninhibiting effects of

or soda pop dinners.) The trick where spirits are concerned, then, is to hold the alcohol in check.

This is, I believe, a pretty simple task, although its execution seemed to elude all the people the author of the 'whisky with food' article interviewed. Where strong tastes are involved, as with caviar or aged cheddar, serve the spirit at full strength but in a glass that allows the aroma to bloom rather than concentrate. Where still powerful but more nuanced flavors are involved, add a little water to reduce the proof. For softer flavors still, try an ice cube or more water or, as I once suggested to the initial shock but ultimate appreciation of a room full of bourbon drinkers, the merest dribble of cola.

All of which is to say that there are plenty of ways to enjoy all the pleasures of whisky or other spirits combined with food, without having to leave the table that much the worse for wear. —