

Pairing Off: Doughnuts versus Pinot Noir.

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You have a bottle of wine open. Maybe a movie or a book to help occupy the day. It's all so serene until those doughnuts leftover from the morning begin to tempt you—so sweet, so shapely...

The siren call of a doughnut or three is nearly impossible to resist. But sommeliers are wary of the pitfalls that can result from a wine pairing.

Not that the subject comes up that often. Few doughnut shops have much of a wine list, after all, and not that many sommeliers are on duty before noon. Let's just assume the pairing gives them fits.

Now, a jam filling or chocolate coating would provide some direction, certainly. Maple bacon flavor might lead to some clear options, as well. Navigating the wiles of a simple glazed doughnut proves more daunting, however.

There's just not that much to it. Dough, yeast, sugar.

"You want something that can hold up to the sweetness but not overshadow the doughnut," observed Claire Sutton, sommelier and owner of Sovino Wine Bar & Merchant in Monterey.

Remember just a moment ago when we implied there's not much going on in a plain glazed doughnut? Take it back. It would indeed be a loss if the half dozen brought home from Dutch Door Donuts in Carmel fell victim to a gale force wine.

Shaped by hand, fried to order, Dutch Door crafts blissful pillows with notes of malt and custard lilted from the dough, a faint toasted essence in the crust and a sweet vanilla glaze.

But they still present a challenge. A big Cabernet? Too much swagger. A fruity Zinfandel or Sangiovese? They could topple into the sugary crust. And Sutton warns that the coating could wreck many white wines, as well.

"The first wine I think of is Pinot Noir," she says. "It has an earthy quality that will go good with bread"—a doughnut does, after all, start as a ring of bread—"and Pinots in this area have a dry fruit aspect."

Fortunately she has a bottle of 2018 Pinot Noir from Mansfield-Dunne with grapes from Monterey County's vaunted Santa Lucia Highlands. Juicy and floral on the nose, there's a promise of a fluttering wine with wisps of sage, tilled earth and spiced vanilla.

Yet a sip reveals a wine richer and far more intriguing than the bouquet allows. Raspberries and black cherries wear a deeper hue. There's a moodiness—dank earth, weathered staves, blackstrap—that is feathered and blurred by vanilla and falling petals.

It's easy to see why sommeliers might hesitate to bring wine and doughnut together. Even Sutton hedged a bit, ticking through the perceived threats to different varietals before confirming Pinot as the one.

The wine picks up a spicy tone, like ginger and cardamom. A toasty haze rises from the forest path foundation of the Mansfield-Dunne Pinot. Otherwise, the fruit remains dense and opulent. And the doughnut seems to relish in it.

The vanilla and custard sensation in the doughnut swell into something plush that lingers comfortably on the palate. Sugar softens, allowing vanilla to emerge for a creamy impression. A second helping of both becomes a welcome thought.

So maybe police officers on duty should stick to coffee with their doughnuts. But next time the rest of us drop by Dutch Door in the Carmel Plaza, ask for their wine list—and then slink out the door under the staff's questioning glare to see which tasting rooms open for breakfast.

As Sutton says, "Pinot just works."

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