

The Basics of Beer and Food Pairing

The dinner table has long been the domain of one beverage: wine. But as craft beer gains appreciation amongst the most discerning of drinkers, that monopoly has started to crumble. Restaurant bar managers and armchair foodies alike appreciate beer for its diversity in flavor and its ability to cut through palate-coating fat with bubbly carbonation. There are no hard rules when it comes to marrying food and beverage, but here are a few guidelines to get you started:

Match Intensity

Beers can be soft, gentle beings. Take the Belgian witbier: smooth, creamy, and low in alcohol, the pleasant spicing of coriander and orange peel pokes through wheaty graininess in a refreshing, satisfying beer. Now look at the American imperial stout. Levels of alcohol soar above 10%, the bitterness of hops and roasted grains vie for attention, and malt-derived sweetness fights to keep everything drinkable. It's an intense beer style that requires foods that look wildly different than those that should accompany the timid witbier. When attempting to find a good beer match for a given dish, consider all elements of that dish that would contribute towards intensity: richness, bitterness, sweetness, acidity, saltiness, savoriness. Then consider the same for beer, incorporating those tastes as well as carbonation and alcohol level. You're looking to find a match that allows both beer and food to maintain their presence without being overpowered by the other.

Find Flavor Similarities

The easiest way to establish a connection between beer and food is to find common flavors between the two. This can create a bridge of flavor and encourage a positive interaction across food and beverage. Thankfully, this is fairly easy to accomplish—there are tons of similarities in flavor between beer ingredients and common foods. Malt can display an array of character similar to fresh-baked bread, crackers, smoked meats, chocolate, coffee, burnt toast, caramel, and toffee. Hops can taste like flowers, citrus, stone fruit, tropical fruit, herbs, and pepper. Yeast can produce flavors akin to cloves, apples, bananas, and pears. Food ingredients themselves are often used in the production of beer too: coffee, chocolate, spices and herbs are all commonly used. In short, there are plenty of opportunities to find similar flavors across beer and food.

Find Pleasing Differences

Sadly, similarities alone across beer and food will not create a powerful pairing. To do so, elements of contrast must exist to provide depth. For example, bitterness, spiciness, and acidity in food can be pleasantly contrasted by sweetness in beer. Highly carbonated beers offer cutting power as a foil to the mouth-coating richness of fat and the cloying sweetness of some desserts. The acidic snap on the finish of some sour beers can be reminiscent of a squeeze of lemon on a piece of fish. There are endless combinations of beer character and the tastes, aromas, and textures that occur in food. Don't be afraid to experiment!