Vanessa Price. *Big Macs & Burgundy: Wine Pairings* for the *Real World*

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My wife and I were dining out with another couple last summer before the Delta variant reared its ugly head. The other couple ordered steak; I chose chicken, and my wife went for pork. As the designated wine person, I was searching through the light reds on the wine list for a suitable compromise when the waiter poured me a taste of a very full-bodied white Burgundy, and suggested that it would go well with everything we had ordered that warm evening. A taste made his claim plausible. I gambled, and he was right!

I agreed to review *Big Macs and Burgundy* because it promised more such surprises, and it does deliver surprises aplenty, of various sorts. This book is an upbeat, approachable collection of basic and not-so-basic information about wine and about the interaction of food and wine, bits of the author's history, and numerous interesting, often thought-provoking recommendations for wine pairings that involve foods ranging from caviar to Cheez-Its. I often found myself trying to imagine (there must be a taste/smell analog to "visualize"!) how this would really taste with that. The style is breezy (more on this to come) but authoritative, and the abundant photographs and illustrations add appreciably to what I found to be a very enjoyable read.

The author, Vanessa Price, starts at the beginning for beginners and those, like me, whose knowledge of wine is based more on accumulated anecdotes than on systematic study: how grapes ripen, the relationship between acidity and alcohol, and the roles of tannin and sugar. She discusses the influence of climate and terroir and describes the 12 main styles of wine. Turning to food, she explains the relationship between smell and taste and discusses the main elements of taste, adding spicy and fatty to the classic sweet, salty, bitter, savory, and sour.

She then discusses *congruent* pairings, between foods and wines that share similar characteristics, and *contrasting* pairings, which involve sensory elements that oppose each other in a way that yields pleasing complexity. Her illustrative congruent example is Meursault and fried chicken, while Champagne and fried chicken are an exemplary contrasting pairing. She ends the pairings section with general guidance for developing pairings: think about the dominant components of the food; consider its intensity and heaviness; and then consider the spices, sauces, and preparation involved. And, of course, she reminds the reader that things that grow together geographically generally go together.

What follows and constitutes the bulk of the text is an amiable mixture of autobiographical anecdotes, bits of wine information, and, mainly, lots of short

discussions of recommended wine pairings. The autobiographical anecdotes reveal that the author was raised in a fairly devout Southern Baptist home, took a shot at acting, and fell in love with wine more or less by accident. The wine information includes discussions of methods of making sparkling wine, Burgundy rankings, the origins of Super Tuscans, swirling and decanting, styles of Sherry, storing wine, Pinot Grigio versus Pinot Gris, the Judgement of Paris, and more. I will bet that even readers of this *Journal* will learn something from all this.

As the book's title suggests, many of the pairings it presents involve inexpensive foods for which (I think) almost nobody carefully selects a wine. Examples from each of the book's 16 chapters may give some sense of the wide range of sometimes very quirky pairings the author recommends and the usually sensible rationales she gives for them:

- *Subsistence Pairings*: We are advised to pair cheap pizza, one of the cheap eats considered, with Montepulciano D'Abruzzo, for its acid and tannin.
- *Southern Comforts*: Cote Rótie's robustness is said to make it a good match for BBQ Brisket & Ribs, a Southern staple.
- *Extra Value Meals*: Red Burgundy is paired with MacDonald's Big Macs, per the book's title, but the author argues that the more intense meatiness of a Quarter Pounder calls for a bigger Super Tuscan.
- *Roadside Attractions*: Among the snack-rack options considered, Smartfood, that cheddary popcorn, is paired with a light Bourgogne Blanc.
- *Fast-Food Fixes*: The author argues that the tannin and acidity in an Italian Rosato perfectly cut the fat in hot dogs. She also recommends wines to drink while binging particular TV series, for example, Côtes du Rhône with *This is Us* to match the show's diversity and because it's "as cockles-warming as the Pearsons, without all the tears."
- *Wine with Breakfast*: The bubbles in a demi-sec Champagne are said to cut the heaviness of French toast while its sweetness harmonizes with the sweetness of this "debauched" dish. (My wife points out that a mimosa made with a cheap sparkler does the same trick.)
- *Trader Joe's, A Love Story*: I confess to a weakness for Trader Joe's Mandarin Orange Chicken, which is paired with Clare Valley Riesling from Australia because of that wine's fresh citrus, minerality, and abundant acid.
- *Secrets of the Bargain Basement*: This chapter suggests cheaper wines that can substitute for more expensive wines in a few pairings, like substituting Minervois Rouge because of its "serious firepower" for Châteauneuf-du-Pape with Pad Thai.
- *Crave the Date*: Among foods served on special occasions, Thanksgiving leftovers are paired with Chinon for its acidity, fruit, structure, and soft tannins.
- *Dinner Party Duets*: The focus here is on appetizers like Jalapeño Poppers for which the author recommends Spätlese Riesling for its sugar to soften the Poppers' spice and its acidity to counter their grease.
- *Boring but Beautiful*: Among the healthy foods discussed, the Sweetgreen Harvest Bowl is paired with Bordeaux Blanc because both are blends of "competing forces."

- *What to Pair with Greens*: Italian Pinot Grigio is paired with Tuna Niçoise, for example, because its saltiness can "manage the cooked eggs," while its freshness can "slice through sensitive tuna like a laser."
- *The Standard Bearers*: This chapter is devoted to classic pairings, including one of my all-time favorites: grilled salmon and Oregon Pinot Noir. No explanation necessary.
- *Frightful Delights*: One of the foods that some find frightful is steak tartare, which is paired with Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc (or, perhaps, a Côtes du Rhône White) for its big body, low acidity, and arresting aroma.
- *Expense-Account Prep Course*: Among the high-end dishes discussed is pressed duck at Daniel's, paired with Cornas, the "biggest, baddest, roughest, and toughest" Northern Rhône appellation.
- *Surf and Turf*: Lobster rolls, a beach classic, are paired with Bandol Rosés for their strength, delicacy, "cool spiciness and lean, tropical-fruit spine."

As some of these examples may suggest, the writing style, described by one Amazon critic as having a "millennial-chic vibe" may strike some readers as a bit too breezy and over the top. For instance, Barolo is described as "the Tony Soprano of Italian wine," and on steak au poivre, the author enthuses, "Together with Pomerol, this, my friends, is the Immaculate Conception of wine parings, the Orgasmatron of meat and grapes, the 'You complete me' of pampered mouth holes."

This really is a serious, clearly written book, so it can be jarring when the author seems to be trying hard to be cute.

I have two bones to pick with the pairings themselves. First, while the author makes a nice general point about congruent versus contrasting pairings, for most foods she recommends only one wine—most commonly (I think) a congruent pairing. It would be good sometimes to have a suggested pairing of the other sort. Second, while most of the pairings sound attractive, I expect many readers will never try many of them—either because they are simply not going to buy a wine to go with Cheetos or Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia or Honey-Nut Cheerios, or because they cannot find the recommended wine, like the Tedeschi Vineyards Sparking Pineapple from Hawaii that's paired with the honey dipping sauce for Chicken McNuggets or Clare Valley Riesling. I would rather have had pairings for a few lamb dishes than for Cheetos, and a few more "if you can't find or afford that, try this" suggestions for wines would have been welcome.

But to be clear, I do highly recommend this book to experienced oenophiles and wine newbies alike. It is a light, entertaining read that conveys a great deal of useful information, and most of the suggested pairings are fun to imagine trying.