

eat to the beet

The days of the dreaded nut cutlet are long gone. And with vegetarian dishes an ever-present option on menus countrywide, our tasting and matching panel headed to newly opened **Saf** in search of perfect wine partners. **Chris Losh** reports

After the trial-by-spice palate blitz that was last issue's Thai food and wine matching, this time we thought something gentler might be in order. Gentler, but still not exactly easy, as we decided to put our panel in front of vegetarian food.

It is, as Glendola's Will Buckland said, 'always good to go outside your comfort zone', – and for all that vegetarian food features on just about every menu nowadays, our panel were, so to speak, somewhat undercooked in this area.

As always, first of all we picked a restaurant to supply the food: in this case the newly opened and super-chic Saf in London (which, incidentally, has some of the most helpful staff on the planet). Saf then picked a couple of fairly representative dishes off its menu, we fired this information out to our participating wine merchants (Fields, Morris & Verdin, Alliance Wine and Maisons Marques et Domaines) and asked them to send in wines they thought would match.

Our panel then tasted and scored the wines, first of all on their own and then with the two dishes.

STARTER

Slow-roasted beetroot and beet/Merlot reduction, with walnut chutney, freshly grated

horseradish and mustard cress

This was a solid selection of wines with impressive pricing, with all but one under £8. Unusually for this competition, which has (perhaps surprisingly) tended to lean towards the New World, most of the wines sent in were European. A reflection, perhaps, that our merchants felt bigger fruit wouldn't work with vegetables.

Stylistically, there was one white and one rosé followed by four reds at the light-to mid-weight end of the spectrum, which, the panel reckoned, was probably about right, though as always, they had their own ideas for potential matches.

'I'd perhaps have put in something a bit oilier,' said Zuma's Alessandro Marchesan. 'Maybe a Viognier or a Fiano which is ripe-fruited but has texture.'

This found approval with the whole panel, who felt that a good oily, spicy Pinot Gris or even an older Riesling might have been good contenders. Though with the sweet, earthy flavours of roasted beetroot no one felt that the submitted wines would be far away.

Top scorer was FMV's Grüner Veltliner. 'This actually tastes like Grüner!' said an enthusiastic Christine Parkinson, who felt it was likely to be the best match.

WITH THE FOOD

This is one of Saf's few 'cooked' dishes (of which more later), but despite being roasted, the beetroot was less sweet and earthier than some had expected. Indeed, much of the dish's sweetness came from the reduction.

The chutney added a strong nutty character and texture, while the horseradish set off small grenades of flavour.

It seemed to be a fairly tolerant dish, because, apart from the Aussie rosé, just about all of the wines worked to some degree. Surprisingly, though, none were truly exceptional and the winner was an OK rather than nailed-on match.

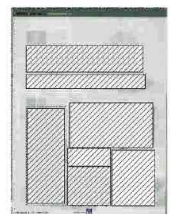
Only one of the wines improved its score – the Beaujolais tasting far better with the food than it did on its own – but since it came from such a low starting point, this was largely academic.

The Faiveley Burgundy held its score with the food (which took it from 5th place to 2nd) while the four most popular wines on their own all dropped their score. It was, in other words, a strange experience. What was it about beetroot that flipped expectations on their head?

CONCLUSIONS

This should have been a straightforward match. The dish more or less did what it said on the tin; there were no hidden ingredients to throw in curve-ball flavours, and the panel felt the wines were broadly in the right ball-park.

Yet the best we could manage was a match that would probably score a B-. The Grüner Veltliner won because its savoury, peppery notes matched the savoury notes of the beetroot and also chimed with the horseradish.



It was successful because it had three key characteristics: reasonable weight in the mouth and plenty of ripeness, but no overtly sweet fruit flavours. The least successful wine, by contrast, the rosé was almost the exact opposite: slightly herbal with jammy fruit but no great weight.

The other wines ticked one or two boxes, but fell down along the way. The Yarra Pinot, for instance, had plenty of weight, but too much sweet fruit; the Barbera was a good flavour match, but became rather bitter with the food. The Burgundy lacked weight, but its savoury, understated character was a good flavour match.

Given these factors, our panel felt that you needed wine with good ripeness and texture, no overt oak ('it adds a dimension that's unnecessary,' said Emily O'Hare) and a savoury element to it.

'It's a savoury but explosive dish,' said Marchesan. 'You need to contrast that with a dark fruit character, but also something that's light and unoaked.' His suggestion? A youngish Nero d'Avola.

'Anything that tends to bitterness won't work,' said Parkinson. 'I think you're looking towards the Old World here. I can't think of anything from the New World that would have the characteristics.'

MAIN COURSE

Croquette of wild mushrooms, marinated baby vegetables, cashew crème alfredo with truffle oil and micro herbs. Plus, salad of greens and flowers in a miso citrus dressing

Unsurprisingly for a mushroomy main course, the balance of the submitted wines heavily favoured white over red, ranging stylistically from a Burgundy and Yarra Valley Chardonnay through an Alsace Pinot Gris to a Provence white. Pricing was pretty high, with only one under a tenner.

The two reds varied in style, too – a pretty serious Rioja which was on the turbo-charged side and a mid-weight Côtes du Rhône. The latter, in fact, was

the highest scoring 'stand-alone' wine of the whole tasting, and, since it was also the cheapest 'main course' wine, it represented something of a bargain.

Either way, this was an interesting spectrum of wines that covered lots of bases – which meant we were optimistic of finding a good match.

WITH THE FOOD

Having expected something light, fluffy and vaguely mushroomy, our panel was astonished by the dish. This is one of Saf's trademark 'uncooked' dishes, where the food is processed in a 'dehydrator' below 48 degrees over a period of about two hours. The result was a dark and dense texture and an incredible concentration of flavours: the mushroom becoming almost gamey in its intensity, though this was leavened by the fabulous accompanying salad.

The panel had never eaten anything like it before and they were impressed. 'This is truly outstanding,' swooned Parkinson, 'really new and different. It's rare to get that in a restaurant. It's one of the best dishes we've ever had in this food matching series.'

It was, obviously, almost impossible to find a wine that worked with both the zippy, citrusy salad and the powerful mushroom croquette (though the Phi Chardonnay just about managed it), so we scored on the main course.

It was quickly obvious that the reds were going to walk this matching. The lighter whites saw big falls once they were put up against the food, though the richer Yarra Chardonnay stood up well. Tasted alone there were only eight points between the first-placed wine and the last; with the food, the spread was over 20 points.

CONCLUSIONS

From the first forkful, it was obvious that this was going to be a red-wine match, though there was real sympathy for our submitting merchants, because this mushroom-based course was more in the pâté/liver spectrum flavour-wise. As Spock

might have said, this was mushrooms, Jim, but not as we know them.

As a result, the Burgundy and the Provence white were absolutely steamrollered by the food, while the sweetness in the Alsace Pinot Gris was a clash. The Phi Chardonnay managed the near-impossible feat of just about working with both the salad and the mushrooms, but the reds were the clear winners.

The Rioja had the weight and structure, though didn't add much. But the Perrin Côtes du Rhône was exceptional. The wine's fresh juiciness leavened the weight of the food, while its savoury, leathery characters provided a genuine counterpoint.

An understated, quietly classy wine, it went about its business quite superbly.

'This worked because of lack of ego,' said O'Hare. 'It didn't try too hard.'

Will Buckland agreed, describing it as 'a very simple wine with lots of complexity'.

Past experience suggests that it's rare for a wine to hold its stand-alone score with the food; to improve it is practically unheard of. This was one of the best matches we've ever had in this series of tastings. An outstanding winner. The key to its success was its ability to combine ripe fruit with great structure and a gently savoury core – characteristics that, the panel felt, would stand it in good stead for a wide variety of vegetarian food. 🍷

SPECIALIST ON-TRADE MERCHANTS & STOCKISTS

MMD – Maisons Marques et Domaines

020 8812 3380

FMV – Fields, Morris & Verdin

020 7819 0360

ALL – Alliance Wines

01505 506060

WINNERS: MAIN COURSE

WINNERS: STARTER



BEST Weingut Hiedler, Grüner Veltliner Spiegel 2006, Kamptal, Austria

Characteristic mineral nose
with plenty of white pepper
on the finish, this salty,

savoury, spicy Grüner was a popular choice with
the panel at a good price. Would be a good bet
with a wide variety of vegetarian food.

On its own: 37/50 – 1st

With the food: 35/50 – 1st

£7.10, *Fields, Morris & Verdin*



RUNNER-UP Joseph Faiveley, Bourgogne Pinot Noir 2006, France

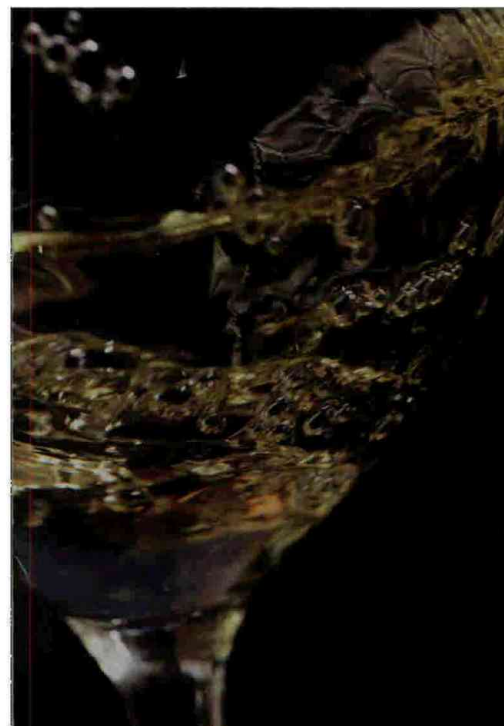
Soft, light strawberry fruit
with a fresh, crunchy
mouthfeel. Although it lacked

weight on the palate, its savoury character
complemented the flavours of the dish.
Likely to be a versatile food match.

On its own: 30/50 – 5th

With the food: 30/50 – 2nd

£7.00, *Maison, Marques et Domaines*



the panel

Will Buckland, head sommelier,
Glendola Leisure

Alessandro Marchesan, head
sommelier & wine buyer, Zuma

Christine Parkinson, group
wine buyer, Hakkasan

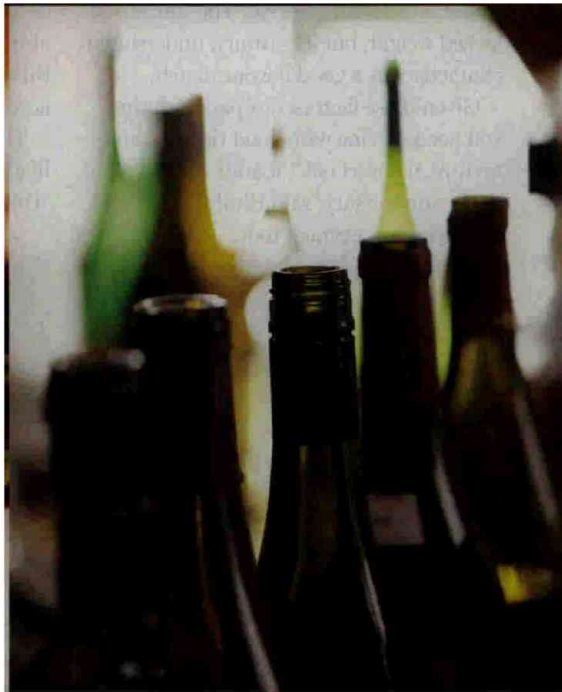
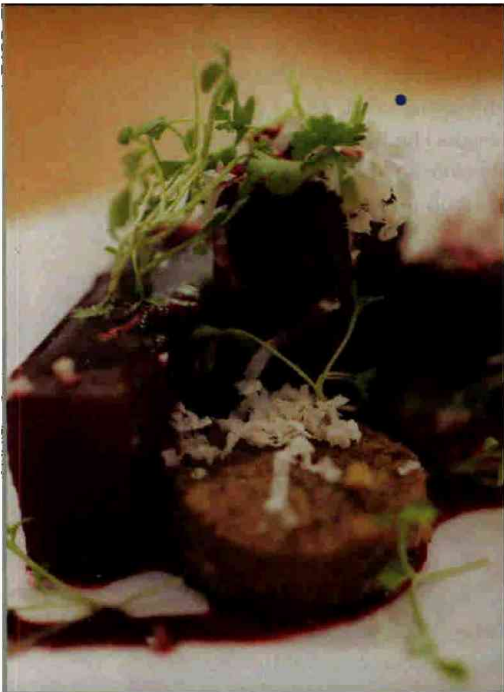
Emily O'Hare, sommelier,
The River Café

Chris Losh, editor, *Imbibe*

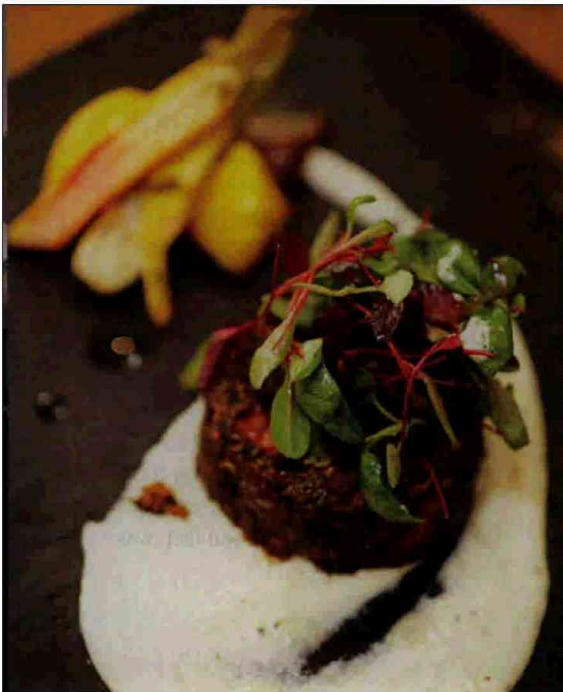


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ORDER OF MERIT – STARTER

	Alone	Rank	Food	Rank	£	Agent
Weingut Hiedler, Grüner Veltliner Spiegel 2006, Kamptal, Austria	37	1	35	1	£7.10	FMV
Joseph Faiveley, Bourgogne Pinot Noir 2006, France	30	5	30	2	£7.00	MMD
Pio Cesare, Barbera d'Alba 2006, Piedmont, Italy	35.5	2	27	3=	£7.50	MMD
Shelmerdine Pinot Noir 2007, Yarra Valley, Australia	35	3	27	3=	£11.09	ALL
Dom. Alain Chataux Beaujolais VV 2007, France	14	6	25	5	£6.30	FMV
Skuttlebutt Shiraz/Merlot Rosé 2007, Western Australia	33	4	22.5	6	£7.09	ALL

(All scores out of 50)

ORDER OF MERIT – MAIN COURSE

	Alone	Rank	Food	Rank	£	Agent
Perrin 'Nature' Côtes du Rhône 2006, France	40	1	43	1	£7.00	FMV
Remelluri Reserva 2003, Rioja, Spain	37	3	32.5	2	£15.54	ALL
Shelmerdine Phi Chardonnay, 2006, Yarra Valley, Australia	37.5	2	32	3	£19.73	ALL
Rieffel Pinot Gris 2004, Alsace, France	29	6	23.5	4=	£7.45	FMV
Dom. Ott Blanc de Blancs 2005, Côtes de Provence, France	31.5	5	23.5	4=	£13.00	MMD
Dom. Faiveley Clos Rochette (monopole) 2005, Burgundy, France	32	4	21.5	6	£10.00	MMD

(All scores out of 50)



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