

Beverage & Pork Pairing Guide

from CIA Greystone Wine Expert Rebecca Chapa

Pork can be prepared in so many ways – and its versatility makes it ideal for pairing with all types of beverages.

Generally, pork is described as ‘medium bodied’ – meaning it’s firmer in texture and weightier than fish, yet less intense and concentrated in flavor than beef. But because of the range of cuts and the many ways it can be cooked, pork defies easy categorization.

To create a masterful pairing, consider the origin, cut and flavor of the meat itself. Are you having a subtle and delicate Porchetta or charcuterie that melts in your mouth? Or are you working with a chop that has a firmer texture? When approaching pairings this way, look for lighter bodied wines to complement lighter textured meats, and heavier wines for fuller flavored cuts. Don’t forget that fat plays a major role – leaner dishes pair well with subtle wines, while a dish with more fat needs vibrant acidity to cleanse the palate. The tannins found in wine are not present in many other beverages, which makes wine perfect for cleansing the palate when serving fattier fare. A high acid, high tannin wine literally strips fat from your palate as you sip – making the second bite just as good as the first.

Cooking Technique

Cooking technique also impacts “pairability” – something to consider given the many ways pork can be prepared. Sautéing and simple direct heat cooking methods work beautifully with lighter beverages – think a bright white wine or a zesty citrus cocktail. More intense slow-cooking methods seem made for heavier wines like Syrah and Zinfandel or rich Belgian beers. And remember that the color of the meat can provide a clue to finding a match – think about a dark caramelized chop served with an amber brown Bourbon.

The Gravy

The rest is just gravy! Seriously! Sauces are key. When you say you like barbecue pork do you mean BBQ? Or barbeque? Or barbecue? From Korean-style to pulled pork with

vinegar to smoky, saucy St. Louis-style to spicy Carnitas – the options are endless. Do not fear! There's a beverage for each one. Asian-style pork dishes pair well with light, zesty German and Austrian wines that have light floral aromas and zippy acidity. When spice is involved, the low alcohol of German whites provides a seamless foil and prevent heat from building. Smoky sauces can be great with fruity wines – think of a simple Chilean Pinot Noir or juicy Shiraz from Australia – or a beer with a smoky malt quality that mimics the flavors in the food. Finally, meats smoked over hickory or mesquite can be great with spirits also aged in wood. Why not try matching wood notes in the meat to those in the spirit; reposado and anejo tequilas are aged in oak, so try pairing them with smoked pork, or try a spirit aged in the same type of oak as the pork. Bourbon is a natural match.

Wine

Traditionally, wine is great for pairing due to its naturally high acidity and, in the case of red wines, its tannins. Wine is perfect for fattier dishes because the acids and tannins help strip the palate of fats – making each bite of food equally vibrant and delicious. Pair lighter bodied wines with lighter cuts (cutlets, charcuterie), subtler cooking techniques and lighter sauces. Save heavier wines for richer sauces, longer cooking techniques like roasting and braising, and richer cuts (offal and chops). Remember that fuller bodied wines tend to be higher in alcohol, so keep that in mind while pairing – high alcohol can exacerbate spice in a dish. It's also fun to play with wine and pork pairings, so don't be afraid to try what seems like a light wine with a rich, fatty dish as long as it has enough acidity. Zippy Rieslings with sausages is a prime example.

Beer

The quintessential barbecue beverage, beer can be much more than something to wash down your meal. While a simple American lager (PBR or MGD please!) quenches the thirst, there are plenty of more intense beers that pair well with different types of pork. One of the main benefits of beer is its lower alcohol content –making it perfect for spicy dishes. Lower alcohol prevents a pairing from seeming too “hot”. That said, there's plenty of diversity in the world of beer; lighter beers are better with lighter dishes or to quench the thirst while hoppy or richer ales can be great with medium-bodied dishes – think ribs, bacon, ham, cured pork, sausages. Finally, porter-style beers can be sublime with some of the more intense preparations – think a complex pork mole or a classic pork Shepherd's Pie with a Guinness. Finding the right match can be tricky, so you might need to experiment. Get a few beers for the next barbecue and vote on the best matches.

Spirits and Cocktails

The world of spirits is almost overwhelmingly vast, but a few come to mind when you think pork. Just like beer, wine and pork, spirits vary depending on where they are produced, what they are made from and how they are made. Tequila, for example, can range from silver, a pure white spirit with bright flavors, to Anejo, aged in oak to achieve a much richer caramelized flavor. Each has a different affinity with pork. Spirits with less age pair better with lighter bodied dishes while those with more age can be great with heavier, richer preparations. Mescal is produced using agave smoked in an underground pit. Imagine it paired with a Kahlua pig prepared in the same fashion. While a spirit's origin is important, don't be afraid to make connections that may seem strange at first. Try an Islay scotch whiskey with smoky barbecue or, while a Jamaican jerk pork recipe might be natural with rum, branch out and make it a Mai Tai. Remember that while the base spirit establishes the theme, cocktails let you tweak the pairing to make it better. If a dish is fatty, add citrus to increase acidity. If a dish is spicy, sweeten the cocktail and dilute it with juices to bring the alcohol content down. Of course it is also fun to sip on spirits straight to taste their purity, consider adding some spring water or an ice cube to open up the spirit and release its aromatics.

Sake

Some people fear sake due to the myriad types and seemingly confusing labeling; sake can be fantastic with pork. Think dim sum pork buns, har gow and pork ribs, Ramen soups. The fresh bright flavors of sake and the moderate to rich alcohol can be a perfect match. And don't think sake is only for Asian dishes. Sake's savory character, umami, can be a great complement to more traditional pork dishes. Anything that has been cooked for a long time or with a complex sauce would be an interesting match; if you find cold sake on a menu grab a glass and compare how it matches versus a wine or beer. Remember that sake usually has lower acidity than wine, so it needs dishes moderate in fats.

Low Octane Alternatives

The same principles that apply to pairing alcoholic beverages with pork apply to selecting non-alcoholic drinks. All beverages are a study in balance and can be tweaked to pair with a dish. Think about iced tea to help cleanse the palate after a bite or two of a fatty dish. Serving something supremely spicy? Sweet tea is the ticket – the residual sweetness helps balance the spice. And nothing's more soothing than the gentle relief of a creamy horchata paired with the spicy kick of a Taco Al Pastor.

Try mixing up some virgin cocktails by crafting your own enticing syrups. Use herbs like lavender, rosemary or tarragon in syrup or muddle them with a bit of sugar, lime and a splash of soda to create a great match for herb rubbed pork loin. Don't forget the bubbles, a fruit juice spritzer made with juice and some soda water offers a lower calorie option and the bubbles and the bright acidity of the juice scrub your palate of fats and offer a cleansing sensation.

Putting it all together

Consider the main qualities of the beverage and the dish

Acid (both)

Astringency/Tannin/Bitterness (both)

Sweetness (both)

Alcohol (beverage)

Salt (food)

Consider the inherent texture, flavor, method of preparation, and sauces

Decide if you want to contrast or complement these characteristics

BASIC GUIDELINES

Tannin + Fat = lower tannin

Spice + Alcohol = higher spice

Spice + Tannin = higher tannin

Spice + Sweetness = less spicy

Salt + Alcohol = bitter/high alcohol

Salt + Wine = higher sweetness

Smoked + Sweet = higher sweetness

Smoked + Alcohol = high alcohol