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PENINSULA

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Five Tips from San Francisco's Best Sommelier

Born and raised in Padova, Italy, **Mauro Cirilli** spent his youth on his grandfather's vineyard in the Colli Euganei. There he developed a passion for winemaking and wine-sharing, which he would turn into a profession 20 years later with a Sommelier Diploma from the prestigious Italian Association of Sommeliers in Firenze. Cirilli went on to work at the esteemed Terrazza Danieli in Venice and Il Cibreio in Florence, and eventually took over as Lead Sommelier at the acclaimed San Francisco restaurant Aqua. He would hold that position for four years before joining the opening team of Perbacco in October, 2006. Perbacco has quickly become the newest hot spot in downtown San Francisco, and Chef Staffan Terje's imaginative North Italian menu has received knockout reviews. Cirilli's gorgeous wine list is equally as inspired, and praised, and the native Italian makes an effort to work with small producers so that his is a menu that looks like no other in town.

Amalia McGibbon sat down with Cirilli recently to press him for wine-pairing advice. For all the discourse on wine and all the discourse on food, not enough has been said on how the two should relate. We hope Cirilli's tips, as summarized by McGibbon, will help kick-start that conversation. →

1 It is most important that a dish and a glass of wine not overpower each other. You can make sure of this by paying attention to, and matching, the bodies of the two. Cirilli believes that the more complex the preparation of food, the more complex its accompanying wine should be. And if the food has an earthy tone (spare ribs), or perhaps a fruity one (cherry panna cotta, anyone?), you'll want to work with a wine that shows the same characteristics.

2 Pay attention to the historical and cultural origins of a dish, and try to pick a wine that comes from the same region. After all, an area's wine and food have "grown up" together; nature has probably done a better job pairing than any expert could. Perbacco is revered for its in-house *salumi* production, and Cirilli likes to recommend Lambrusco, a sparkling Italian red wine. The idea of slightly cold, bubbly red wine is a bit unusual by American standards, but the Italians pair the two together all the time. Give the combination a try next time you stop by Perbacco, and you'll agree that pairing along geographical lines tastes right.



Mauro Cirilli

3 For a meal, progression is key! Even if pairings aren't perfect, one should insist on moving from lighter to fuller. Whether you go the route of a light white, then a fuller white, and then a big red, or a light white, and then a light red, and then another red, it matters not. What matters is an evolution. As Cirilli puts it, to move from a big red to a light white "would cheat the second wine, because your palate has gotten acclimated to the size of the first."

4 Acidity is your friend. It describes the quality of tartness, or sharpness, in the mouth when wine is consumed. Grapes that grow in warmer climates (Napa Valley) will have lower acidity than those grown in cooler climates (Chablis). For rich dishes, a wine with high acidity, like a Sauvignon Blanc or a Pinot Noir, will cut the fat and leave your mouth ready for the next bite (think of the *salumi* and Lambrusco example; the latter's acidity helps cut the fat of the former.)

5 And last, but not least, start your evening off with a bottle of champagne! The bubbly should not be reserved just for celebrations, as its joys and benefits are useful every day. As Cirilli explains it, the champagne's bubbles excite your stomach's gastric juices (stay with me now) and make your stomach more ready to receive the evening's food. So it seems it's only responsible to pop open that bottle of Cristal. ■