

# Wine and chocolate equal *r*♥*mance*

*Valentine's Day isn't complete without wine and roses,  
but Cupid would never forget the (dark) chocolate.*



**IF THERE IS A TASTE BUD NIRVANA**, it has to be when dark chocolate is paired with red wine. The rich, creamy cocoa flavors are intensified by the wine, and tannins in the wine are smoothed by the velvety texture of the chocolate. Wine and chocolate can be a match made in Heaven when they are right for each other.

If you think finding the right varietal for your Valentine is complicated, just wait until you try to figure out the percentage of cocoa you need in your chocolate to make a perfect union. To make it easier for wine enthusiasts to pair the two, an entire matchmaking industry has sprung up among chocolate producers and winemakers who partner to promote their particular products together.

The first rule of thumb is to choose dark chocolate, which is healthier than milk chocolate and a potent antioxidant. Dark chocolate also contains heart-healthy and mood-enhancing phytochemicals, much like red wine does. Couple the two together and it can be bliss.

But like any great marriage, only one partner can be in charge at any given time. If you have a milder

chocolate, such as one with 70 or 72 percent cocoa, you don't want to pair it with a complex, sturdy wine. The wine can completely overpower the chocolate and make it taste bitter. My favorite everyday pairing is a 70 percent cocoa dark chocolate with a lighter Pinot Noir. Special occasions, like Valentine's Day, call for Amarone, an Italian wine from the Veneto region. This underappreciated wine (probably because of its cost) has notes of raisins, cherries, and a touch of spice. Paired with a rich, bittersweet chocolate, it's a luxurious finish to any meal.

An 85 percent cocoa dark chocolate is best for bold wines with sturdy structures. The intense chocolate is not one that most people are passionate about when they bite into it by itself; however, the intensity of the cocoa is softened by a complex Syrah or Cabernet and many wine connoisseurs think this is the perfect pairing. The wine enhances the chocolate and vice versa.

As in most matters of the heart, no one can predict with certainty which combinations will work and which ones won't. From my informal poll of friends and a few members of the International Food, Wine & Travel Writers Association, I learned that love has no boundaries when it comes to chocolate and wine. Much like wine tastes, favorite pairings ranged from excessively sweet to bone dry.

Some folks fell madly in love with sweet dark chocolates, such as Dove or Hershey's, paired with Chianti. And forget all that talk about heart-healthy antioxidants, because a few people refused to forsake their milk chocolates paired with sparkling wines. One member of the writers association remembered an exotic pairing of ginger-flavored chocolate paired with a Chardonnay. Just like a dream date, the slight heat from the

crystallized ginger and the sweetness of the wine created a memory that has lasted years.

Others say Malbec paired with a salty dark chocolate works for them; another recommended a toffee-flavored chocolate paired with a hearty Zinfandel. Chocolate with bits of tart cherries was the perfect mate for a Merlot, said another wine writer.

If all this talk about cocoa percentages and wine varietals is just too complicated for one evening of romance, there is an easy solution — especially if you love both your wine and chocolate to be sweet. Several winemakers mix chocolate right into the wine. Many of these wines began as novelties around Valentine's Day a few years ago. Brands such as Cocoa Vino, The Chocolate Shop, and Confectioner's Chocolate Wine created a booming new market when they married fine wines with velvety chocolate. Just be sure to chill these sweet, creamy wines before serving for the best taste.

No matter which pairing you choose, a luxuriously rich chocolate melting in your mouth chased by a sip of fine wine is an indulgence that will make your day of romance memorable — with or without Cupid.

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**What is your favorite wine and chocolate pairing? Drop us a note on our Lake and Sumter Style Facebook page.**

