



What's On Your Menu?

Dazzle Them with Beer & Food Pairings





by Randy Mosher

More and more, people are expecting craft beer to be integrated into the dining experience. Of course, everybody has their own ideas about what they like, but I find that people are hungry for information and ready to be thrilled by new experiences revolving around the flavors of beer and food. It falls to us in the beer business to offer up meaningful, stimulating presentations of beer and food. The kind of thunderbolt revelations created by a great pairing translates to the kind of strong affinities that mean more business.

So they're queued up at the door. The beer's in lovely condition, a rainbow of malty, hoppy goodness. The menu awaits. They're looking for you to really knock their socks off tonight. What do you tell them? Where do you start?

If you've been in the beer business for a while, you have already found some great matchups. It's also probably clear that contrasting elements and complementary flavors play important roles. And it's obvious that there's no one simple rule like "red wine with meat, white with fish" that applies to beer. Because of beer's incredible variety, it just has to be a little more complex than that. Still, there's nothing more to it than common sense and a lot of practice.

The enormous range of flavors, aromas and textures makes beer a lithe and willing partner for all cuisines. From caramelly to bitter, roasty maltiness; from crisp and refreshing to deep and liqueur-like; from sweet to blisteringly bitter, beer can be Bambi or Godzilla. Beer has a greater range of flavors, textures and appearance than any other beverage on earth. It can pair with *anything*.



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The cooked, grain-based nature of beer makes it a food in itself, giving us a large vocabulary of flavors that pair easily with many kinds of food. Wine sommeliers, if you can get a beer or two in them, will grudgingly admit that wine has several gaping blind spots with food—more than just the asparagus conundrum—that beer happily fills.

The Big Three

In work with the Chicago Beer Society, the Siebel Institute and elsewhere, I have found that there are three basic things that need to be considered when seeking beer and food partners. Each one is important, but there is no particular order for the pairing process. Start with either a specific beer or food, and seek a suitable partner according to the following guidelines.

■ **Match Strength with Strength.** Delicate dishes work best with delicate beers, and strongly flavored foods demand assertive beers—no big surprise there. Intensity of flavor is not a single thing, but a sum of the taste experience. In beer, it may involve alcoholic strength, malt character, hop bitterness, sweetness, richness, roastiness and more. In food, richness (OK, let's just say it—fat), sweetness, cooking methods, spicing, texture and complexity all play a role.

■ **Find Harmonies.** Combinations often work best when they share some common flavor or aroma elements. The nutty flavors of an English-style brown ale and a handmade cheddar cheese; the deep, roasted flavors of an imperial stout and chocolate truffles; the clean caramelly flavors of an Oktoberfest lager and roasted pork are all examples of this. Familiarity with ingredients and preparation techniques, a memory for flavors and a willingness to be constantly surprised will all serve you well. Of course, it helps to keep notes on your beer and food odyssey.

■ **Consider Sweetness, Bitterness, Carbonation, Heat (spice), Umami* and Fat.** Certain

qualities of food and beer interact with each other in specific, predictable ways. Taking advantage of these interactions ensures that the food and beer will balance each other, with one partner not throwing the match out of whack. These are specific interactions, different from the intensity-matching mentioned above. One sort of has to parse these out one-by-one as the situation demands, and find flavors that will enhance one another. The chart below lays out the specifics.

(*Umami is a basic flavor [tongue] sensation that has a rich, savory quality about it. It may be found in aged or braised meats, aged cheese, ripe tomatoes, oily fish, soy sauce and many other foods.)

Beer	Interaction	Food
Hop Bitterness		Sweetness
Roasted Malt	Balances	Fat
Carbonation		Umami
Alcohol		
Sweetness	Balances	Spiciness (chili heat)
Maltiness		Acidity
Hop Bitterness	Emphasizes	Spiciness (chili heat)

Foods that have a lot of sweetness or fatty richness (or both) can be matched by various elements in beer: hop bitterness, sweetness, roasted/toasted malt or alcohol. Carbonation is also effective at cutting richness.

Chili heat is another specific interaction. Hoppy beer will make hot food taste hotter. If you're the kind of hothead that just can't get enough capsaicin, this won't bother you, but most of us want to proceed with caution. Malty sweetness cools the heat, so if you're leaning toward a hoppy beer with spicy food, make sure it has plenty of malt as well.

Other Considerations

■ **Look to classic cuisines.** The cuisines of beer-drinking countries offer many great beer and food combinations. The Belgians have a near-obsession with this, well worth investigating. Beer and cheese from the same monastery may be an obvious choice, as is bratwurst with pale lager, but who would have thought to put stout together with oysters? Classic matches are tried and true, and are a great starting point for further exploration.

■ **Practice makes perfect.** Not every pairing works as expected—and this can be fun if you can learn to appreciate the unexpected. If it's not so great, make a note of it and get on with your life. Build on the things that work and keep seeking out those magic combinations. Build a repertoire of sure-fire hits.

■ **Consider seasonality.** Lighter in the summer and heavier in the winter, the beers and foods of a given season pair very naturally and suit the mood as well.

■ **Deconstruct.** Foods contain many flavors, and this is especially true of appetizers and main dishes that may include a main ingredient, a cooking method that adds a layer of flavor, and perhaps sauces and other garnishes. This means there are lots of things to work with, but it also means that you have to consider all the elements when working out the contrast elements. There's a big difference between a grilled chicken breast and spicy wings.

■ **Contrast and complement.** All beer and food combinations should involve both of these principles. Some pairings will be more dependent on the contrasts, others on complementary flavors, but all should strive for some kind of balance. A creamy bock against the salty tang of ham, IPA with carrot cake, or a crisp pale ale with steak all work mainly on contrast. The chart shows the important contrasting elements. But even with contrasts, it's important that the beer

and food are of somewhat similar intensity, or one will overwhelm the other.

■ **Make use of familiarity.** Many pairs work because they use familiar flavors in a new context—a stout float, for example. One of my favorite examples is to put a toasty brown ale with a runny ripened cheese. *Voilà!* Liquid grilled cheese sand-

wich. Once you start looking for these, you'll find there are many more. These can be a lot of fun and highly memorable.

■ **Matter + antimatter.** By this I mean for you to pay particular attention to how beer and food change the taste of each other. There's always some of this effect, but some pairings are dramatic. A very sweet dessert

and a super hoppy beer come together in your mouth in a way that the hops and sugar kind of neutralize each other. A similar effect occurs with very rich, creamy cheese (gorgonzola, for example) and the bitterness of an IPA. It's a startling and very memorable effect, and something your guests will remember, for sure.

Beer Type	Flavor Impact		Bitterness		Suggested Foods	Cheese	Dessert	Glassware	Serving Temp
	Alcohol	Color	Color	Color					
1. Kölsch, Cream Ale, Blonde Ale					Lighter food: chicken, salads, salmon, bratwurst; Monterey jack cheese.	Monterey Jack, brick or similar light, nutty cheese.	Light apricot or mandarin cake, lemon custard tart.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
2. British-Style Bitter					Wide range of food: roast chicken or pork, fish & chips; mild cheese.	Mild English cheese such as Lancashire or Leicester.	Oatmeal-raisin-walnut cookies or some other satisfyingly basic dish.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
3. Pale Ale					Wide range of food: meat pie, English cheese; great with a burger!	English cheese such as cheddar or Derby with sage.	Pumpkin flan, maple bread pudding, bananas Foster.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
4. India Pale Ale					Strong, spicy food (classic with curry!); bold, sweet desserts like carrot cake.	Milder blue such as Gorgonzola or Cambozola.	Caramel apple tart, ginger spice cake, persimmon rice pudding.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
5. Double/Imperial IPA					Smoked beef brisket, grilled lamb; Southern chicken-fried steak.	Sharp and rich American artisanal blue.	Very sweet desserts like carrot cake, caramel cheesecake or crème brûlée.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
6. Amber/Red Ale					Wide range of food: chicken, seafood, burgers; great with spicy cuisine.	Port-Salut or other lightly tangy cheese.	Poached pears with dulce de leche, banana pound cake, pecan lace cookies.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
7. Scotch Ale/Wee Heavy					Roasted or grilled beef, lamb, game, smoked salmon.	Aged sheep cheese: Mizithra or Idiazabal (smoked!).	Brilliant with sticky toffee pudding or chocolate chip shortbread.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
8. Brown Ale, Altbier					Hearty foods: roast pork, smoked sausage, grilled salmon.	Aged Gouda or a crumbly Cheshire.	Almond or maple-walnut cake, pear fritters, cashew brittle.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
9. Abbey Dubbel					Barbecue, meat stews, or a nice thick steak or smoked rib roast.	Washed-rind abbey-type cheese or French Morbier.	Heavenly with milk chocolate; butter truffles, chocolate bread pudding.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
10. Abbey Tripel, Strong Golden Ale					Spicy Cajun food, crab cakes, pheasant or roast turkey.	Triple-crème such as St. Andre or Explorateur.	Non-chocolate desserts: apricot-amaretto tart, baklava, Linzer torte.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
11. Old or Strong Ale					Big, intense dishes such as roast beef, lamb or game, grilled or roasted.	Double Gloucester or other rich, moderately aged cheese.	Spiced plum-walnut tart, classic canolli, toffee apple crisp.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
12. Barley Wine					Easily overpowers most main dishes. Best with strong cheese or dessert.	Stilton and walnuts is a classic updated. Who needs port?	Rich, sweet desserts: chocolate hazelnut torte, toffee caramel cheesecake.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
13. Porter					Roasted or smoked food: barbecue, sausages, roasted meat, blackened fish.	Cow milk such as Tilsit or Gruyère.	Chocolate peanut butter cookies, toasted coconut cookie bars.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
14. Dry Stout					Hearty, rich food: steak, meat pie; a classic with raw oysters.	Irish-type cheese like a Dubliner cheddar.	Chocolate soufflé, tiramisu, mocha mascarpone mousse.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
15. Sweet or Oatmeal Stout					Rich, spicy food like barbecued beef, Oaxacan mole or hearty Szechuan dishes.	Great with very buttery, well-aged cheddar.	Chocolate espresso cake, cream puffs, profiteroles.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
16. Imperial Stout					Easily overpowers most main dishes, but stands up to foie gras, smoked goose.	Long-aged cheese: Gouda, Parmesan or cheddar.	Dark chocolate truffles, chocolate raspberry pound cake.		10–13 °C 50–55 °F
17. Hefeweizen					Great with lighter food: salads, seafood, sushi; classic with weisswurst	Simple chèvre goat cheese or herbed spread such as Boursin.	Strawberry shortcake, fruit trifle or other very light dessert; key lime pie.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
18. American Wheat Ale					Best with very light foods: salads, sushi, vegetable dishes.	Buffalo mozzarella or Wisconsin brick.	Generally too light for dessert, but could pair with fresh berries or a fruit soup.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
19. Witbier					Great with lighter seafood dishes—classic with steamed mussels.	Mascarpone or herb cheese spread on crackers.	Banana orange crêpes, blood orange sorbet, panna cotta with lemon.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
20. Dunkelweizen					Substantial salads; roast chicken or pork; excellent with hearty sausage.	Soft-ripened goat or smoked Gouda.	Sweet potato tart, peach pecan strudel, banana cream pie.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F
21. Weizenbock					Roast pork, beef, smoked ham or game dishes.	Aged provolone or Spanish Manchego.	Tarte tatin (caramelized apple), pine nut torta with dried fruit, banana soufflée.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F
22. Classic Pilsener					Great with lighter food: chicken, salads, salmon, bratwurst.	Mild white Vermont cheddar.	Light desserts: lemon shortbread, fresh berries with sabayon.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
23. Helles, Dortmunder					Lighter food: salads, seafood, pork; works with spicy Asian, Cajun, Latin.	Wisconsin butterkäse or other soft and mild cheese.	Light desserts: blueberry trifle, cranberry-apple cobbler.		4.5–7 °C 40–45 °F
24. Oktoberfest, Märzen, Vienna					Mexican or any hearty, spicy food; chicken, sausage, pork.	The perfect beer for spicy jalapeño jack.	Mango or coconut flan, almond biscotti, spice cake with pine nuts.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F
25. Amber Lager					Hearty, spicy food: barbecue, hamburgers, chili.	White cheddar, jack, brick.	Passionfruit bread pudding, pears poached in doppelbock.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F
26. Dark Lager, Dunkel, Schwarzbier					Hearty, spicy food: barbecue, sausages, roasted meat.	Authentic washed-rind Münster.	Pomegranate tart with walnuts, candied ginger pear cake.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F
27. Maibock/Pale Bock					Spicy food like Thai or Korean barbecue; great with fried chicken, too.	Classic Emmenthal Swiss cheese.	Apple almond strudel, white chocolate cheesecake, honey-walnut soufflée.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F
28. Doppelbock					Rich roasty foods like duck or roasted pork shanks; great with cured meats.	Limburger is a classic!	German chocolate cake, Black Forest cake, dried fruit (rumtopf) rum tart.		7–10 °C 45–50 °F

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Staging a Beer Dinner

Beer and food events may take many forms, but most typical is a multi-course dinner with a specific beer—or sometimes two—paired with each course.

Food-specific presentations can be a lot of fun: beer and cheese or beer and chocolate, for example. Beer-centric cuisines such as Belgian or German are can't-miss winners, but it's possible to get a lot more exotic. We once did a tasting of India pale ales with Indian cuisine that was a rousing success. Thai food with German lagers, Mexican Oktoberfest, barbecue with Belgian ales—there are many possibilities.

Like any gastronomic experience, the proper setting and preparation can make the difference between an ordinary experience and a fabulous one. Here are a few things to consider when planning your beer and food extravaganza.

Beer or food first? There's no rule here. In many situations, this question may answer itself. For a dinner featuring one brewery's beers, the beers are a given. Just sort them out by intensity, and start looking for food pairs. Assign the lighter beers to the appetizers and save the heaviest for dessert. What's left should fit nicely in the middle of the meal, so pick dishes that will

showcase the beers you have to work with.

Taste from less to more intense. Alcohol, hops, roastiness and sweetness can all beat up your palate, so it only makes sense to put the more delicate beers at the start of the tasting. This dictates a lighter to stronger-flavored food progression as well. Happily, this follows the classic pattern in a dinner presentation.

Don't overdo it. Tasting too many beers can lead to palate overload. When planning a dinner, try to limit the number of beers to six to eight tasting portions. This means a maximum of about four ounces a pour; somewhat less for strong beers. And always encourage the use of public transportation.

Present the beer in its best light. Serving temperature, proper beer-clean glassware, decent light and a setting free from smoke or other distracting aromas should all be considered when preparing for any beer and food event. It turns out that the pint glass we've all been using for years does a pretty poor job of showcasing the flavors and aromas of great beer. Any glass with an incurved top, such as a flute or wine glass, does a much better job. Snifters are great for bigger beers served with dessert.

I have found that cheese and desserts are really useful as a learning tool for the principles of matching beer to food. Cheese can have complex flavors without the layers of seasonings, sauces and cooked flavors that make other dishes more challenging. Plus, they're easy. It takes very little effort to line up half a dozen cheeses or desserts and try them out with your brewery's beers. This kind of experimentation is as enjoyable as it is instructive, and it's easy to see the principles of contrasting and complementary

flavors as well as intensity matching. As you do these and build skills and an understanding of the fundamentals, you also acquire a library of things that work well.

Beer as an Aperitif (Salads and Appetizers)

Crisp, refreshing beers are the classic way to start a meal. A characterful blonde ale is great with seared ahi tuna. Hoppy American pale ale can balance succulent appetizers such as cheese tartlets. Spicy

saison is the perfect counterpoint to New Orleans style shrimp. A full-flavored red ale or amber lager can be an ideal mate to smoked fish—or you might choose to present it with a smoky-roasty stout. As the richness goes up, the intensity of the beer can follow, but the idea is to present a great appetizer experience without wearing out the palate. Look for beers that are light in body that aren't aggressively bitter.

Salads may actually require a more intense beer than might be obvious. It's not the lettuce, but the bitterness of greens like radicchio, the acidity of the dressing and any added sweetness that really call for some hops to balance it out. Ripe tomatoes and cheese both contain a lot of umami, which can soak up (demand, really) a certain amount of bitterness. I like an English-style IPA or a really hoppy Pilsener, although a nice hoppy red works well if umami flavors are prominent, as in a caprese salad.

Beer with Main Courses

As noted, main dishes may need to be looked at in terms of their components to get a good match. Meat items range from fish all the way up to lamb in intensity, and these demand increasingly intense beers as you move up the scale. Also, the cooking method can be neutral or add deep crusty roastiness or caramelization—great places to look for resonance with similar elements in the beer. Sauces, glazes and salsas add another layer. Again, they can be light in flavor or searingly intense. Red snapper has a mildly meaty flavor, which in a simple preparation might suit a Dortmunder lager or wheat ale. But if you add a tropical mango habañero salsa to it, the equation changes, and a maibock or Belgian blonde ale might make a better match. And don't forget that the fruit might be a connection point to the beer. Remember that spicy dishes require a little caution, as very

Dessert works beautifully with beer, but rich, full-flavored ones are needed to balance their sweet richness.



hoppy beers may add fuel to the chile fire—although you may prefer it this way!

Beer with Dessert

Dessert works beautifully with beer, but rich, full-flavored beers are needed to balance their sweet richness. These days, there are plenty of choices. A fruity dessert like an apple strudel can be paired with a strong-but-crisp tripel. Caramelly bread pudding or a chewy pecan pie demands something with similar qualities—a strong brown ale or imperial red fills the role beautifully.

Other strong, highly hopped beers such as a double IPA make ideal partners for super-sweet items such as cheesecake or carrot cake. Spice and citrus qualities in many beers work well with desserts that highlight similar flavors. Of course, big fruit beers suit fruit desserts very nicely.

Chocolate loves a dark beer. Milk chocolate is beautiful with Belgian-inspired strong dark ales. Flourless chocolate cake or truffles call for an inky imperial stout. Fruit beers have an obvious affinity with fruit desserts, but they can be magic with chocolate as well.

Recently, a number of barrel-aged beers have become available. These offer sophis-

ticated tones of bourbon, vanilla and sherry, and are absolutely delightful with any rich dessert—think crême brûlée.

Beer and Cheese

Beer's bright carbonation and crisp hoppiness can handle the mouth-coating richness of cheese. Medium-intensity beers suit many cheeses, but one as powerful as Stilton requires an assertive barleywine. The herbal hoppy nose of an IPA blends nicely with the complex aroma of blue cheese, while the bitterness cleanses the palate. Fruity hefeweizen makes a nice match with simple mozzarella. The earthiness of saison or Brett-inflected beers is great with the mushroomy earthiness of soft-ripened cheese like Camembert or with the wild aromas of goat cheese. Nutty Comte fits with a nut-brown ale. Fruit beers are excellent with soft-ripened cheese such as Brie. Stout and cheddar are another great pair, and for the adventurous, smoked porter with a smoked cheese is a rustic joy.

Resources

There are a number of publications that might be of help when approaching beer and food. Lucy Saunders (www.beercook.com) just published a wonderful new book

through Brewers Publications called *The Best of American Beer and Food*. There's also the Garrett Oliver book, *The Brewmaster's Table*, and an earlier one by sausage guru Bruce Aidells called *Real Beer and Good Eats*. Both are bursting with ideas. And for a brief introduction largely paralleling this article, the Brewers Association also offers a low-cost booklet entitled *American Craft Beer and Food: Perfect Companions*. The Web is a great resource as well. Just Google "Beer Dinner Menu" and see what pops up. Also, Flying Dog Brewery recently launched www.beerdinners.com as an online resource for brewers and beer lovers.

Beer and food matching is like any other sport. The more you do it, the better you get. After a while the principles get absorbed and one's ability to visualize great pairings improves. One great idea leads to another, and suddenly you're an expert. We're lucky, really. In what other pursuit does the phrase "Practice, practice, practice" sound so delicious?

Randy Mosher is author of *Radical Brewing*. He is currently at work on an upcoming book.

The Guide to Selling American Craft Beer and the American Craft Beer and Food Guide – Essential selling tools designed for the beer and restaurant trade.

American Craft Beer and Food Guide



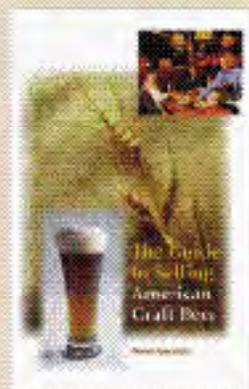
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