



The Art of Beer & Fine Dining Pairing

Wine aficionados have long lauded the importance of pairing wine with food. An accurate pairing will enhance both the flavours of the food and of the vintage, while making a happy marriage to tantalise the taste buds. This idea of wine pairing is now so entrenched that estates have sought ever more inventive ways of exploring the art, with everything from chocolate and nougat pairings to biltong and pizza ones. Something else that undoubtedly pairs well with biltong and pizza is a good beer, although you're more likely to find this at your local pub than at a five-star restaurant – until now.

Beer has long been viewed as the favourite drink of the masses, but with the emergence of a worldwide craft beer revolution, the malted liquor is now slowly being elevated in its estimation, with beer lovers beginning to actively explore the various styles and flavour profiles of their favourite drink. "The craft revolution has done us a favour," says Anton Erasmus, South African Breweries (SAB) Trade Brewer. "It has resurrected old styles of beer that were dying out."

With this emergence of "new" old styles of beer, the palates of beer drinkers are becoming more astute and thus the team at SAB thought the time was right to try the country's first fine dining food and beer pairing. And what better place to do it than

Cochon de Lait, beer-braised pork belly and apple served with
Newland's Spring Mountain Weiss

at Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient, a fine dining restaurant that is oft lauded as one of the top in the country, with Chef Chantel Dartnall (the 2014 Chef of the Year) known for her inventive and whimsical cuisine?

Chef Dartnall and Restaurant Mosaic's resident sommelier, Germain Lehodey, while having well studied palates for wine pairing, were admittedly out of their comfort zone when they were faced with pairing a selection of beer with a haute cuisine meal.

"I was quite nervous about it," says Chef Dartnall. "It was the first time that we were attempting this, so we wanted to create the best expression. I think the flavours that you pick up with beer are quite different than those that you pick up with wine, so it's almost like you have to learn new terminology and new ways of expressing the experience on your palate."

Lehodey agrees: "When it comes to wine we are looking for acidity, but with beer there is more bitterness. We were dealing with different ingredients, therefore we had to relook at the process."

Luckily the pair had good guidance from Erasmus, a passionate beer lover and brewer himself, who talked them through an in-depth tasting of each of the beers. Chef Dartnall took this a step further by acquiring some of the beers' primary ingredients, including malt and hops, to taste, while Lehodey experimented with the types of glasses each beer should be served in to find those that would best enhance the flavours of each beer – strong beers in wider rimmed glasses, for example, to dissipate their heady aromas, but tulip-shaped ones with narrowing rims to concentrate the flavours of the lighter beers.

The end result was a unique dining experience that was guaranteed to win over the palates of even non-beer drinkers, while educating the diners about the complexities of each beer.

The meal began with a selection of breads containing hand milled grains of the same sort found in beer to create a trio of tasty loafs: a green olive Pilsner rye loaf, crystal malt sourdough, and English ale fruit and nut loaf. These were followed by two seafood courses

in the form of the amuse bouche – a Luderitz oyster with citrus foam paired with Castle Lite Lime – and the first course of lobster, radish and grapefruit served with Peroni Nastro Azzurro. While most people probably associate beer with a good braai, Chef Dartnall specifically wanted to veer away from this. "We wanted to show as large a variety as possible. People would immediately think beef and steak, but not expect duck or lobster to fit into the equation." In the end it was a gamble that worked, as the lime of the Castle Lite Lime, as well as its sweetness, paired perfectly with the saltiness of the oyster, while the Peroni's long, lingering flavour on the palate ensured that the flavours of the lobster were brought to the fore.

One of SAB's speciality breweries, Newland's, provided the next pairing of Newland's Spring Jacob's Pale Ale with a queen quail terrine served with Iberico ham and wild mushrooms. While South Africans are more used to an American pale ale, this traditional English variety uses old hops varieties and crystal malt to create a robust, spicy character and a caramelised, toffee flavour that paired beautifully with the delicate dish.

A fresh Flying Fish sorbet cleansed the palate for the main course of beer-braised pork belly served with Newland's Spring Mountain Weiss, an unfiltered beer with a dense foam, full mouth feel and a strong clove character which is not to everyone's taste, but which made the perfect marriage of flavours with the succulent pork belly. "I think the one that worked the best was the pork dish," says Chef Dartnall. "The texture that the beer added to the pork was amazing."

"I always say that wine is the second sauce of the dish," says Lehodey. "Now here, the beer must be the second sauce of the dish – the food should lift the beer and the beer should lift the food. Chantal has a wonderful flexibility to adapt a dish – she will tune it a little bit until it is just right, and that was most evident in the pork belly dish, where she experimented with the beer to make the ideal sauce."

Another speciality beer creation, No 3 Fransen Street Irish Red Ale – with its characteristic dark red colour and butterscotch flavour – set the scene for duck confit with goose liver, followed by the cheese course which was married to the fruity flavour of Newland's Spring Passionate Blond. "The beers are not just beers," says Chef Dartnall. "I was totally amazed when we started tasting them that you could pick up hints of flowers and passion fruit – I could immediately say, 'Aah, this makes sense to me.' It was magic."

The final pièce de résistance was a Castle Milk Stout Chocolate infused Beer – created especially for the occasion by using nitrogen in the fermentation process to create a small bubble foam and creamy texture. Chef Dartnall's "Little Black Number" dessert course of dark chocolate, salted caramel and vanilla pear flavours was an ideal bedfellow.

By the end, the diners had the smug look that only happily satiated palates can produce, as well as a whole new appreciation of the complexities of beer. This, ultimately, was the main aim of the event, says Erasmus. "I think there's a misunderstanding about beer – that you have one or two before dinner and then switch over to wine, but I think today's pairings show that you can have different beers with different foods and they go beautifully together." Chef Dartnall agrees. "Going through the experience myself, I can easily see how you can incorporate the two with great harmony in a menu and into fine dining establishments – I am keen to try it again."

And while it is unlikely that beer and braais will ever be torn asunder, this event certainly proves that a good beer has as much a right to be invited into the main dining room, as it does to hang out in the stables.