



# USE YOUR NOODLES

Asian noodles, from cellophane to udon, are a versatile canvas for the many flavors and textures of Asian ingredients, and wine from around the world.

BY GRETCHEN ROBERTS

**R**ice may be the carbohydrate staple in Asian food culture, but noodles—made from such diverse ingredients as wheat flour and mung bean starch—are just as beloved. Think pad Thai, Chinese ramen (a staple of poor college students) and Korean pho. Street vendors all over Asia and in Chinatowns in major U.S. cities sell noodles from carts, serving up hot, steaming snacks made to order. “In Asian culture, noodles are considered a quick snack, but here in the West, we eat them as a meal,” says Corinne Trang, an Asian cuisine expert and author of *Noodles Every Day* (Chronicle Books, 2009). Plus, says Patricia Tanumihardja, author of *The Asian Grandmothers Cookbook* (Sasquatch Books, 2009), noodles are essentially a one-pot meal. “When you’re making a rice-based dish, you have the rice, the meat and a couple of sides. But with noodles, you have one big dish, which makes it easy to feed a crowd.”

Food historians aren’t sure where noodles truly originated—Far East, Italy or Persia—though theories abound. Italian pastas seem more diverse than Asian noodles, since they come in specific shapes designed for specific dishes (like wide, flat lasagna noodles for heavy casseroles or large shells for stuffing with meat sauce), but Asian noodles are pretty much interchangeable in dishes, says Trang.





Pho (Rice Noodle Soup) with Beef and Herbs is a dish that has been around for about a century.



That's good news if you've ever stepped into an Asian grocery store only to behold the giant aisle of noodles stuffed with seemingly hundreds of colors and types, all unrecognizable, and labeled in another language.

Not to worry, says Trang. She breaks Asian noodles into five basic types: wheat, egg, buckwheat, rice and cellophane, which is how most stores organize their selection rather than by country of origin.

While rice has one basic cooking method—steaming—noodles are prepared a variety of ways. Some noodles are softened in hot water before stir-frying. Other recipes call for boiling, or shaping noodles into a nest and frying. Some noodles are so thin they cook almost instantly when added to hot broth. One of Trang's favorite

cooking methods is braising rice noodles in a Chinese clay pot with chicken stock, shiitake mushrooms, garlic, ginger and shallots.

The recipes here, excerpted from Trang's and Tanumihardja's cookbooks, are a good introduction to three Asian noodle dishes from Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. Chopsticks are nice, but optional—a fork and spoon is perfectly acceptable, says Trang. So is absconding with the usual Western table manners: Slurping is *de rigueur* in many Asian cultures, since noodles are served hot and air intake helps cool your mouth.

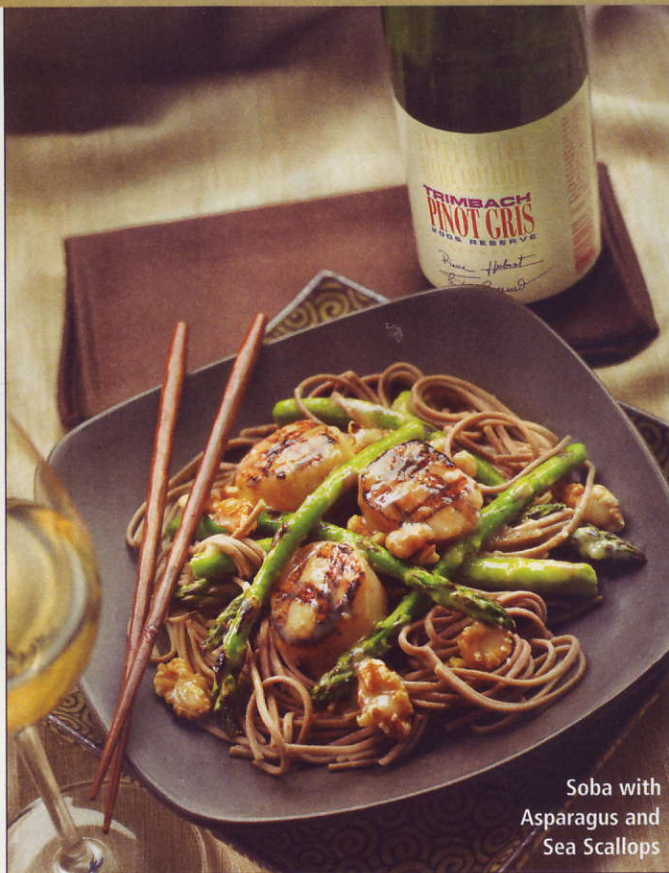
## No perfect pairings

Standard wine-pairing wisdom for Asian cuisine is simple: choose an off-dry Riesling or Gewürztraminer to complement the sweetness and offset the spiciness. But Jeannie Cho Lee MW, founder of *asianpalate.com* and the first Asian to be awarded the Master of Wine title says a new paradigm is in order, one that takes the context of Asian flavors into account, keeping in mind that wine isn't historically entwined with the development of Asian cuisine.

Versatility is the most important characteristic of a wine that complements the Asian table, says Lee. "The wine needs to be able to stand up to a wide range of spices, condiments and flavors," she explains. High-acid wines like Champagne, Sauvignon Blanc and northern Italian reds are refreshing and balanced.

Lee also likes wine that's compatible with the intrinsic umami character of Asian cuisine (such as aged Bordeaux or Burgundy), wine that is quiet and subtle rather than intense (avoid heavy Shiraz, Amarone and Châteauneuf-du-Pape), and that is high quality to mirror the fresh ingredients in Asian dishes.

Noodles aren't highly flavorful, but function rather as a *tabula rasa*, waiting to be brought to life with the myriad flavors of Asian cuisine. Lee suggests pairing wine with condiments, seasonings and spices, which give the dish its ultimate character, rather than with the meat or noodles. That means Riesling and Gewürztraminer are definitely in the running,



Soba with  
Asparagus and  
Sea Scallops

but you can branch out with a delicate Pinot Noir, aged Barolo and even Grüner Veltliner. And remember, you can slurp the noodles, but please don't slurp the wine.

## Soba with Grilled Asparagus and Sea Scallops with Sweet Miso Sauce

White miso, which is called *shiro-miso* in Japanese, can be found in health food stores. Smooth rather than grainy miso is preferable for this recipe. Recipe from *Noodles Every Day* by Corinne Trang (*Chronicle*, 2009).

3 tablespoons sugar  
¼ cup saké  
3 tablespoons mirin  
(sweet Japanese cooking wine)

2 tablespoons rice vinegar  
½ cup white miso  
1 tablespoon finely grated ginger  
4 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided  
10 ounces dried soba noodles  
36 medium asparagus spears, coarse woody ends removed  
18 sea scallops  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper  
12 walnut halves, lightly toasted (see note) and coarsely chopped

In a bowl, whisk together the sugar, saké, mirin and rice vinegar until the sugar is completely dissolved. Add the white miso, ginger and 1 tablespoon of the oil and whisk until well combined. Set the miso glaze aside.


Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat and cook the noodles until tender yet firm, about 3 minutes. Drain, shock by running under cold water, and drain again.

Heat a well-oiled grill pan over medium heat. Brush the asparagus and scallops with all or most of the remaining 3 tablespoons of oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill the asparagus first until just tender, 3 to 5 minutes, rolling them about to heat them evenly all around. Divide and top each noodle serving with asparagus. Grill the scallops in the same pan until cooked through and crisp on each side, about 2 minutes per side. Divide the scallops among the servings of noodles, and spoon some miso glaze over each. Serve garnished with toasted walnuts. *Serves 6.*

**Note:** To toast the walnuts, put them in a dry skillet over medium-low heat for about 3 minutes, shaking the pan so as not to burn the pieces. Remove from the pan and cool slightly before chopping.

**Wine recommendation:** This dish calls for an Alsatian white that can reflect the tangy miso glaze. Lee recommends a young dry Riesling from Trimbach or a dry Pinot Gris. An off-dry wine would add too much sweetness to this tangy, umami-laden dish.





**Rice noodles**, made from rice flour and water, are popular across Asian cuisines. From thick pad Thai noodles to thin rice vermicelli, rice noodles are what Trang calls the “workhorse” of Asian cuisine.

**Wheat noodles** include the white Japanese noodles udon and somen. They originated in the northern, wheat-based agricultural areas of China.

**Buckwheat noodles** are hearty, filling and nutritious. Japanese soba and Korean naengmyeon are made from buckwheat.

**Chinese egg noodles** are simply wheat noodles made with eggs, which give them a yellow color. They can be thin or thick, curly or straight. Ramen is a well-known example. Some dried “egg” noodles only contain yellow food coloring, so check the label for details.

**Cellophane noodles**, made from mung bean starch or sweet potato starch, are also called glass noodles since they become transparent when cooked. Their texture is chewy but they’re almost flavorless, so they are an ideal base for flavorful sauces and soups.



## Filipino Fried Noodles (Pancit)

Pancit is probably one of the most well-known Filipino dishes. This version uses both rice vermicelli and Chinese wheat noodles, but you can make the dish with either type of noodle, or flat egg noodles and cellophane noodles. Recipe from *The Asian Grandmothers Cookbook* by Patricia Tanumihardja (Sasquatch Books, 2009).

- 8 ounces dried rice vermicelli
- 8 ounces dried Chinese wheat noodles (pancit canton)
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus more as needed
- 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 pound skinless boneless chicken breasts or thighs, cut into bite-sized pieces
- ¼ cup citrus soy sauce
- ¼ cup regular soy sauce
- 1 small head cabbage, shredded
- 2 large carrots, peeled and shredded
- 2 stalks celery, trimmed and chopped
- Green onions, chopped, for garnish

In a heatproof bowl, soak the rice vermicelli in warm water for 10 to 15 minutes until soft and pliable. Cut into 4-inch lengths, drain and set aside. Cook the wheat noodles in a large pot of boiling water according to package directions, until al dente. Tip into a colander over the sink and rinse under cold running water. Set aside.

Preheat a large wok or skillet over medium-high heat for 1 minute. Swirl in the oil and heat until it becomes runny and starts to shimmer. Throw in the onion and garlic and cook until onion is soft and translucent, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the chicken and stir and cook until no longer pink, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the citrus and regular soy sauce and toss to coat. Toss in the cabbage, carrots and celery and stir and cook until the cabbage wilts, 2 to 3 minutes.

Throw in the vermicelli and noodles and stir everything swiftly around the wok until well-mixed and heated through, 4 to 5 minutes. Bite into a rice noodle to see if it's tender. Adjust seasonings if necessary. If the noodles are a little dry, add water or chicken stock a few tablespoons at a time. If the noodles start to stick to the wok, add more oil. Transfer to a serving platter, scatter with green onions, and serve. Serves 6-8.

**Wine recommendations:** A young, slightly chilled New World Pinot Noir will stand up to but not overpower the intense flavors, says Lee. From California, the 2008 Brewer-Clifton Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir would work well. From New Zealand, the 2008 Martinborough Vineyard is a feminine, restrained style with vibrant red-berry characteristics.



Filipino Fried Noodles

## Rice Noodle Soup with Beef and Herbs (Pho)

This is the national dish of Vietnam. Originating from the northern city of Hanoi, pho bo, as it is called in Vietnamese, is a rice noodle and beef soup with a fragrant, sweet beef broth. If the broth is made ahead of time, the soup requires little effort. Recipe from *Noodles Every Day* by Corinne Trang (Chronicle Books, 2009).

- 8 to 12 ounces dried narrow flat rice sticks, soaked in water until pliable
- 2½ quarts Vietnamese beef stock (stock simmered with cloves, star anise, and cinnamon sticks)

- 1 small yellow onion, thinly sliced
- Fish sauce or salt
- 2 cups mung bean sprouts
- 1 to 1½ pounds eye of round steak, partially frozen, and sliced paper-thin against the grain
- 3 limes, quartered
- 1 bunch fresh Thai basil or cilantro (leaves only)
- Fried shallots, for garnish
- Hoisin sauce, for serving
- Chili-garlic sauce, for serving

Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat and cook the noodles until tender yet firm, about 10 seconds. Drain and divide among large soup bowls.

Meanwhile, in another large pot, bring the stock to a gentle boil over medium heat. About 5 minutes before serving, add the onion, and adjust the seasoning with fish sauce or salt, if necessary. Right before serving, raise the heat to high and bring the broth to a full boil.

Add some mung bean sprouts and layer a few beef slices over each serving of noodles. Ladle the piping hot broth along with some onion slices over the beef, making sure to cover the noodles. Taking a lime wedge or two, squeeze fresh lime juice into each bowl, and garnish with freshly torn basil or cilantro and fried shallots. Serve immediately with hoisin sauce and chili-garlic sauce on the side for dipping. Serves 6.

**Wine recommendations:** A young, fresh, vibrant Sauvignon Blanc-Sémillon blend is wonderful with this dish. The Sauvignon Blanc heightens the flavors of the herbs, while the Sémillon adds body and weight to pair with the thinly sliced beef and flavorful broth. Lee suggests the 2009 Voyager Sauvignon Blanc Semillon blend from Margaret River (not available in the U.S.; the 2009 Leeuwin Estate pictured will make a reasonable stand-in), or the 2008 Château Smith Haut Lafitte from Bordeaux. **ME**

For classic noodle sauce recipes, go to [winemag.com/asiansauces](http://winemag.com/asiansauces)