

## 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.

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Rice 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.

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 stirfrying. 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 offdry Riesling or Gewürztraminer to complement the sweetness and offset the spiciness. But Jeannie Cho Lee MW, founder of [asianpalate.com](http://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, 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.