

It's not easy being green

TACKLING THE MOST DIFFICULT VEGETABLE PAIRINGS

By Terry Sullivan

I've had a special request of my own: to talk about what to drink with vegetables, particularly the notoriously grape-averse asparagus and artichoke. Not a problem: just serve an 1858 vintage Clos Montrachet and everything's copacetic.

I know this from reading the menu for the dinner served to His Royal Highness, the Crown-Prince Frederick William, in Hamburg in 1877. The eighth course was *fonds d'artichauts à l'Italienne* and *asparges en branches*, and the wine (the ninth of twelve) was Clos Montrachet.

Which doesn't solve your problem, what with 19th-century Montrachets being either unavailable or selling at auction for the price of a Toyota hybrid. And I'm not convinced it was a good pairing anyway. Let's look at why.

Take artichokes first. They are full of cynarin, a bitter flavor that will turn most wines sweet on your palate. White Burgundies, with their honey and vanilla notes, become just too tropical when paired with artichokes. Remember, they're Chardonnays, and while they have better acid than most New World

versions, they do spend half a year or more in oak and most undergo a malolactic fermentation, so they're not the dry version made farther north in Chablis.

You're looking for acid, bubbles and dryness in general. Grüner Veltliner is often suggested, perhaps for its pepperyness, or because it has vegetal notes. Any Crémants, Cavas or Proseccos are a better bet, because they're bright, with no residual sugar and acidic citrus flavors.

Avoid tannin, residual sugar, high alcohol, oak, and fruitiness. Tannin will turn the wine metallic when it hits cynarin, like drinking red wine with something that has a vinegar or lemon sauce.

Residual sugar will just taste even sweeter—so an off-dry Riesling will mimic a dessert wine when drunk with artichokes. Oak and fruit in white wines both translate as richness in your mouth—vanilla, peaches, mangoes—and the cynarin makes these stronger and overpowering. Go for Verdejo, Vernacchia, or any bone-dry, high-acid white.

Also, remember a few cooking points. The cynarin is principally in the artichoke leaves, so dishes with only the

choke don't really present a problem. Buttery hollandaise and rich sauces in general do a lot to mitigate the effects of cynarin and make the dish fit for softer wines. You can generally cook the problem away: Well-cooked artichokes will work with a lot of wines.

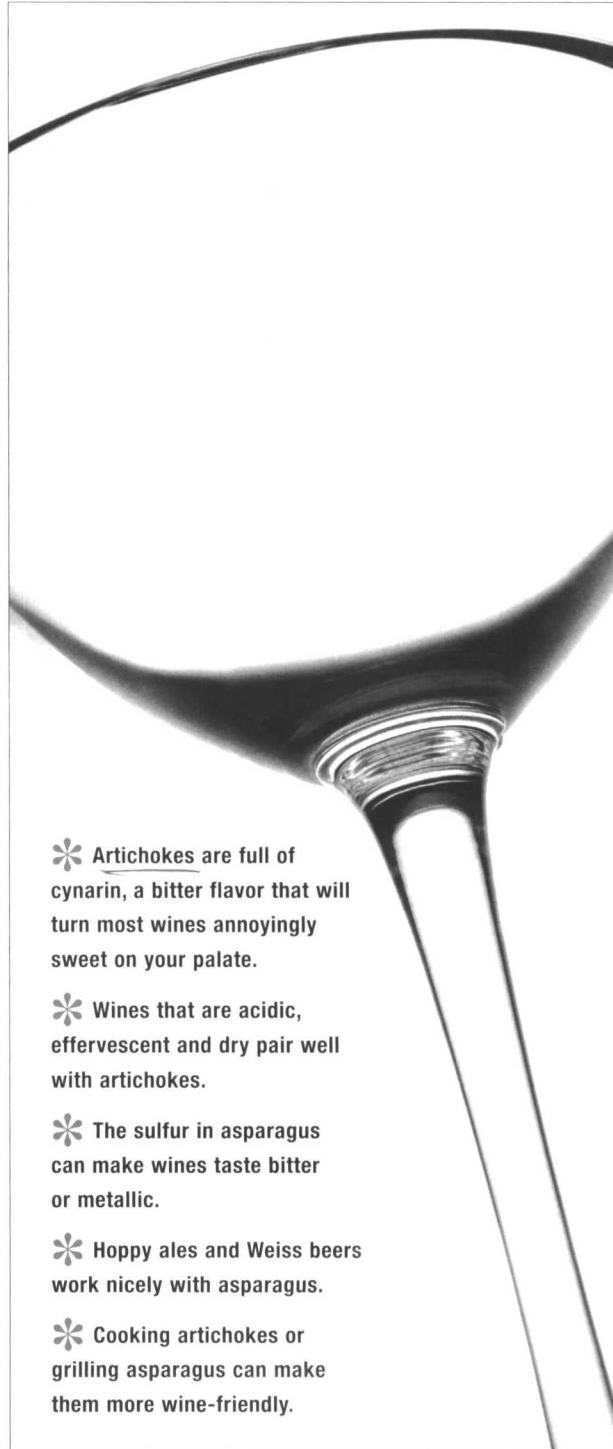
Asparagus is another animal altogether. The beasts inside in this case are mercaptans, or sulfur. You'll find them in Brussels sprouts, cabbage and cauliflower, too. Sulfur does the reverse of cynarin—it turns wine bitter and metallic.

Some of the same dry, high-acid prescriptions for artichokes also work, but so do dry but aromatic wines, like a Gewürztraminer, dry Riesling or Müller-Thurgau. Hoppy ales, India pale ales, ambers, or Weiss beer also work.

Buttery sauces will solve some of the problem, but not as easily as with artichokes. Although you can't cook the issue out, you can grill it away—asparagus grilled or sautéed with olive oil just seems to lose its wine-hating properties.

Terry Sullivan is a Chicago-based beverage writer and regular columnist for *Plate*.





* Artichokes are full of cynarin, a bitter flavor that will turn most wines annoyingly sweet on your palate.

* Wines that are acidic, effervescent and dry pair well with artichokes.

* The sulfur in asparagus can make wines taste bitter or metallic.

* Hoppy ales and Weiss beers work nicely with asparagus.

* Cooking artichokes or grilling asparagus can make them more wine-friendly.