



*Bourbons like Angel's Envy pair well with many meats (Angel's Envy with charcuterie pictured).*

# DRAM **AND** DINE

Pairing whiskies with food is a challenging but rewarding experience

By Sally Kral

Choosing a wine to match your meal is standard practice. “Most consumers are accustomed to the idea of pairing wine with dinner,” says Mitch Bechard, national ambassador for Glenfiddich whisky at William Grant & Sons, who has worked with on-premise partners over the past decade to encourage them to extend their understanding of wine pairings to include whiskies. “We provide pairing ideas that make Scotch less intimidating. Adding whisky to the mix can be an alien concept for a lot of people, but when it’s explained in a way that talks them through the idea of using the food pairing to tease out the nuances of the spirit, people really enjoy it.”

Indeed, with a little push, most consumers today are open to new drinking and dining experiences and eager to learn more about anything food and beverage related. “Over the past five years, I’ve seen the whisk(e)y dinner and general food pairing concept grow in a vast way,” Bechard notes, attributing this change to consumers’ thirst for knowledge on the category, plus a general loosening of rules for how whisk(e)y should be enjoyed.

“Whisk(e)y dinners are becoming very common—I’ve hosted multiple in my time,” says Robin Coupar, global brand ambassador for whiskies at Campari America. “Food provides a great

platform to not only highlight whisk(e)y, but also garner attention and excitement from guests.”

Kenny Lyons, director of hospitality and performance for Charleston, South Carolina–based Neighborhood Dining Group, says that pairing whiskies with food is getting more attention thanks to the popularity of whisk(e)y, particularly Bourbon. Adding food pairings to the mix elevates the whole experience, he adds. “Depending on the style of whiskey and what you are eating with it, there can be some interesting pairings that really enhance your sip and your bite.”

Wes Henderson, cofounder and chief innovation officer of Angel’s Envy Bourbon, notes that education is the key to making whisk(e)y and food pairings as ubiquitous as wine and food pairings. “If you can teach people that whisk(e)y pairs nicely with food, it lives beyond the trend—you’re normalizing food and spirits pairing and showing people that whisk(e)y isn’t just for bars or relaxing at home at the end of the day,” he says. “It’s a secret that many of us in the industry have known for a long time. We’re just glad that everyone else is getting in on it.”

### Keep It Complementary

Though pairing whiskies with food follows the same basic concept of pairing wine, there are some differences to be aware of, Lyons notes. “Unlike wine, where you can sometimes pair contrasting flavors together, whisk(e)y is stouter and asserts itself much more,” he says. “I always prefer to go with more complementary flavors.”

Rob McCaughey, Wine & Spirit Education Trust–certified educator for Pittsburgh-based Palate Partners, concurs. “Matching the intensity of the whisk(e)y to the intensity of the food is probably most important,” he says. “A delicate Lowland single malt Scotch would be better suited to lighter dishes, whereas a bold, cask-strength rye would be best matched with bigger, more robust flavors.”

When approaching whisk(e)y and food pairing, it’s important to understand the nuances of the spirit first, notes Adam George Fournier, bar manager at Faith & Flower in Los Angeles. “Different ryes have different spices, and understanding this is essential. Sazerac rye is different from Rittenhouse rye, and that’s different from Redemption rye, which has 95-percent rye in the mashbill. And a cask-strength whisk(e)y is going to pair differently than its lower proof counterpart. You have to be more aware of alcohol content when pairing whiskey and food

than you do with wine because the alcohol can overwhelm more subtle flavors.”

Bechard notes that even within the same style of whisk(e)y, the flavors and textures can vary greatly. “As Glenfiddich is a delicate single malt from the Speyside region of Scotland, the subtle characteristics within the Scotch shift within each expression,” he explains. “For example, the main characteristic in our 12-year-old is a pear note, while the 14-year-old is vanilla, and so on. So the variety of flavors we can match with is versatile and interesting—this is the main reason it works very well with food. The only thing that we advise against is heavy spices, as this will have a negative effect on the flavor of the whisky.”

From here, you can start to think about what food flavors would best complement the whisk(e)y. “It’s important to think about the sensory side of whisk(e)y and food, both for the nose and palate,” Campari’s Coupar says. “A sweet and floral single malt, such as Glen Grant 18-year-old, pairs beautifully with dessert. On the other hand, a bold Bourbon, such as Wild Turkey or Russell’s Reserve, pairs well with powerful flavors like a meat dish with a reduced sauce.”



*Rye in Leawood, Kansas, matches easy-going Bourbons like Buffalo Trace or Breckenridge with the hearty fried chicken (pictured), which stands up to the strong spirit of whiskey.*

### Be Bold

When choosing food to pair with whiskies, the bolder, the better. Most industry professionals point to hearty meats with rich marinades as their go-to pairing with whiskies, especially American styles.

“American whiskey is an excellent pairing for our menu, particularly some of our house cured meats and barbecue,” says Van Zarr, bar and dining room manager at Rye in Leawood,

Kansas. “The burnt ends and charcuterie, such as house-made coppa and prosciutto, go well with over-proof whiskey styles such as Booker’s or anything from the Buffalo Trace Antique Collection. We’re also known for our fried chicken, which pairs nicely with easy-going Bourbon like Buffalo Trace or Breckenridge. Hearty foods stand up to the strong spirit of whiskey and work with it, not against it.”

Johnny Livanos, general manager and bar program director at Ousia in New York City, loves to pair whiskies with grilled meats like the restaurant’s lamb chops or hanger steak. “I always stick to the saying, ‘what grows together goes together,’” he says. “I think about where Scotch and Bourbon come from and that tells me some foods that will pair well. Pub food, like burgers and fries, are an amazing pairing with whisk(e)y, as are Southern food and fried snacks.”

Faith & Flower’s Fournier also turns to American whiskies to pair with meat dishes. “We have a New York steak tartare with a miso cream sauce that pairs perfectly with a high rye Bourbon like Redemption,” he says. “The spice from the rye content in the Bourbon melds with the miso in the tartare and the natural Bourbon sweetness softens the spices in the dish.”

Angel’s Envy Henderson notes that steak with Bourbon is his personal favorite. “The meat lends a certain fatty umami quality to the whiskey that’s both surprising and delicious,” he says. “And when you go back to the steak after a sip of Angel’s Envy, it makes the flavors burst.”

At Neighborhood Dining Group’s Husk restaurant in Charleston, Lyons says that cured meats, particularly country hams, are a specialty and pair well with Bourbon. “There is nothing better than sipping a pour of your favorite Bourbon with some thin shaved slices of Broadbent country ham from Kentucky,” he says. “I’ve been drinking a lot of Willett 12-year-old Bourbon lately, which is also from Kentucky and is straight from the barrel and non-chill filtered. The heat of a barrel-strength whiskey is complemented by the amazing texture and flavor from the lack of filtering, which removes esters and fatty acids. That extra fat and oiliness makes a strong whiskey super palatable, and a beautiful pairing with the salty cured ham.”

## Rules Don’t Apply

Though many industry folks have certain go-to dishes for pairing with whiskies, most agree that there are no set rules, and that part of the fun is in testing new combinations.



*The fatty, cured meats at Husk in Charleston, South Carolina (country ham pictured top; Husk interior above) pair nicely with barrel-strength Bourbon whiskies like Willett 12-year-old.*

“We don’t adhere to any guidebook on how to pair Glenfiddich,” Bechard says. “We like to be as experimental as we can and always encourage any chefs we are working with to do so.”

Laura Bellucci, bar chef at SoBou in New Orleans, notes that Scotch is a bit trickier to pair with food than other whisk(e)y styles, but she likes the challenge. “Scotch can be intimidating to a lot of people, but it really sets off items from our menu,” she says. “We recently offered a very bold salad called the Sidecar Salad with meaty sous vide pears, Granny Smith apples, manchego cheese, rosemary crumble and cranberry vinaigrette. That was probably my favorite thing to have with a little glass of Scotch. It’s essentially a

PHOTOS BY (TOP) ANDREW GEBULKA; (BOTTOM) MICHAEL KELLEY



*Delicate Japanese whiskies go well with seafood dishes like sushi (Roka Akor's Nigiri Sampler pictured above left). Scotch and Bourbon pair nicely with grilled meats (Ousia meat platter right), while spicier whiskies match up with desserts like pecan pie (Sobou pie above right).*

tour of all of the non-meat things that Scotch can play well with: fall fruits, tangy, crisp flavors, bold cheeses and hearty herbs.”

Palate Partners' McCaughey also appreciates the trial-and-error experience of pairing whiskies with food. “I love trying combinations that people wouldn't expect,” he says. “I recently had a chicken mole taco with pickled radish and lime and avocado cream paired with a great rye that blew my mind. I also love an in-your-face, peaty, single malt Scotch with a half dozen cool water, briny oysters on the half shell. Experimentation is fun and can lead to fabulous results.”

For Japanese whiskies, Roman Petry, executive chef of Roka Akor in San Francisco, recommends pairing these more delicate spirits with bright seafood. “Our yuzu miso-marinated black cod at Roka Akor has a decadent texture—it's rich and sweet, yet savory,” he says. “The Hibiki 21-year-old whisky has notes of lemon and caramel, lime zest, and orange, and its subtle citrus notes easily complement the richness of the cod. Our Alaskan king crab, meanwhile, has sweet notes that pair well with the rich notes of toffee in Ichiro's Malt Chichibu. Ichiro also has a blended whisky, the Malt & Grain, which has sweet notes of vanilla, honey and tropical fruit, but also savory notes of black pepper and tobacco, which complements the buttery richness of our Toro Nigiri.”

Whisk(e)y is also a natural pairing for many dessert dishes. “American whiskey has those beautiful oak and toffee flavors, which are great with sweets,” Sobou's Bellucci notes.



“We have an especially whiskey-friendly dessert menu. Our Cherries Jubilee & White Chocolate Bread Pudding is practically begging for a tumbler of Blanton's Bourbon, and our pecan pie is so delicious with rye—the caramelization of the pecans pairs beautifully with the spice in a glass of Redemption rye or a Sazerac cocktail. The whiskey is big enough to stand up to intense dessert flavors.”

Introducing consumers to new dining experiences is what makes pairing whiskies with food so enjoyable, Ousia's Livanos says. “I love showing our guests something that they think they're familiar with in a different light,” he adds. “People don't often think about enjoying spirits with food, but these pairings can be magical.”

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