vinetur

Wine’s role at the table has evolved from ancient nourishment to modern dining essential

Centuries of cultural and culinary change have shaped wine’s journey from ritual drink to centerpiece of contemporary gastronomy

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Wine has become an essential part of the dining experience in contemporary society, both in restaurants and at home. This was not always the case. The relationship between wine and food has evolved over thousands of years, shaped by cultural, social,

and culinary changes.

Archaeological evidence shows that wild grapevines existed in Europe during prehistoric times. Early humans, still nomadic, ate grapes and likely noticed their properties changed when left to ferment. The earliest chemical traces of winemaking date back to between 5,400 and 5,000 BCE in the Zagros Mountains of present-day Iran. There, people consumed a fermented drink made from crushed grapes stored in clay jars. At this stage, wine was closely linked to eating but not in the way we understand today. It was often mixed with grains or even beer, creating a nourishing and hydrating mixture.

As societies became more settled, wine began to separate from its role as a food and took on the status of a beverage. This shift is evident in the design of containers specifically made for pouring liquids. Wine's production required specialized knowledge, making it more exclusive than beer. In ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, wine was reserved for royalty and religious ceremonies. Archaeological finds include clay tablets describing the daily lives of Mesopotamians who were discerning wine consumers.

During the Middle Ages, wine was both a drink and a medicine. Medical texts from the period recommended different types of wine for various health conditions. According to Hippocratic medicine, later expanded by Galen, the human body mirrored the universe's balance of hot, cold, wet, and dry elements. Wine was considered hot and dry, believed to aid digestion and act as a restorative agent. Sweet wines were thought to be even more nourishing due to their density.

The transformation of wine from food to drink accelerated in ancient Greece. Wine was consumed alongside solid foods at banquets and during symposia—events that encouraged conviviality and mild intoxication. Greek wine was rarely drunk pure; it was diluted with water and flavored with herbs or spices. The connection between red meat and red wine can be traced back to this era, as described in Homer's Iliad.

In ancient Rome, wine became a staple at meals as Romans shifted from porridge-based diets to solid foods that required beverages for easier consumption. Wine production expanded dramatically to meet demand across all social classes. Even Roman soldiers drank "posca," a mix of vinegar and water.

A thousand years later, religious orders played a key role in viticulture, especially in Burgundy. Wine became central to Christian rituals as it symbolized Christ's blood during Mass. Nobles also drank wine with meals, particularly game meats from hunting. In medieval cuisine, wine was widely used for cooking sauces and marinades.

Wine consumption spread among peasants as well, especially in southern France where other regions preferred cider or beer. Popular practices included adding wine to soup or dipping bread into sweetened red wine. The pairing of wine with cheese likely originated among rural populations; cheese remained a humble food until modern times.

From the Renaissance onward, wine consumption increased steadily in France's royal courts. Louis XIV favored champagne—then still non-sparkling—not at meals but throughout the day for refreshment and health reasons.

The systematic pairing of food and wine began to take shape only in the late 19th century. At Paris's Café Anglais in the 1880s, chefs sometimes created dishes based on selected wines or vice versa—a practice that foreshadowed modern food-and-wine pairings but was not yet widespread.

It wasn't until the 1960s that wine became truly inseparable from fine dining in France. Several factors contributed: improved quality through appellation systems (AOC), declining consumption of low-quality "table wines," and an overall drop in volume but rise in quality expectations. Restaurants began focusing on matching specific wines with dishes rather than serving one bottle throughout a meal.

The sommelier profession also evolved during this period. While sommeliers existed since medieval times handling various hospitality duties, their role as dedicated wine stewards emerged in early 19th-century restaurants and became professionalized through formal training by the 20th century. Today's sommeliers are key figures in high-end dining establishments, responsible for curating pairings that enhance both food and wine.

At the same time, chefs like Paul Bocuse and Joël Robuchon began paying close attention to how their dishes interacted with wines. Restaurateurs increasingly relied on wine sales for profit margins as bottle markups became standard practice.

Modern trends continue to reshape how wine is enjoyed at the table. Wine is now often served by the glass to allow more precise pairings with each course rather than one bottle per meal. White wines are now commonly paired with cheese—a practice almost unheard of two decades ago.

Despite its deep-rooted association with gastronomy, wine faces new competition from beer, cider, spirits, and changing dining habits that favor lighter or quicker meals. The future of wine’s place at the table remains uncertain as tastes evolve and global influences reshape traditional pairings. For now, however, it remains an integral part of many dining experiences across cultures and continents.