



CLASSIC EUROPEAN

2012 Castello Banfi Fontanelle Chardonnay
IGT Toscana, Italy



FOOD MATCH

Simone Fadda, head sommelier, Nobu Berkeley Street

'For our food you need wines with freshness, and that mixture of citrus and fresh pineapple is really important. With the food the flavours change, and you get more appley notes alongside the tropical body. It's a subtle wine, which is what we need for our cuisine. Our spicing is delicate, so you don't want a wine that is too overpowering, though the Fontanelle also has enough body to be able to go against things like tempura crab.'

'It's at its best with dishes that combine fattiness and also savoury elements. For me, it's particularly good with our yellowtail sashimi with jalapeno, where it picks up on the tart citrusy tang of the yuzu sauce. But the star match would have to be with the tempura king crab. It's a really rich dish, and the wine's acidity and minerality cut the fat, while its tropical richness is perfect with the meat.'

When Banfi met Sushi

With many courses and strong flavours, it can be hard to match wine with Japanese food. But Castello Banfi's selfless Tuscan Chardonnay is proof that it pays to think outside the box

If you wanted to draw up a blueprint for a classical Tuscan winery, it would probably look something like Castello Banfi. Majestic medieval castle? Check. Artisanal olive oil and balsamic vinegar production? Check. Vineyards sprawling over rolling Italian hillside? Check. Enoteca stuffed with amazing bottles of wine? Check. So you might be somewhat surprised by our wine choice here.

For starters, Castello Banfi is best known for its work with Brunello de Montalcino, the muscular red wine made from Sangiovese that is a peerless partner for giant fatty cuts of beef, yet our selected wine – the Fontanelle Chardonnay – is (at least stylistically if not geographically) a million miles away from that.

Second, while we could have chosen to put this Chardonnay in the fish and seafood section of the magazine, or (even safer) the Classic European section, instead we've decided to play on its credentials with Asian food, which is famously awkward when it comes to wine matching.

We're not suggesting that it's a great partner for a chicken madras. But put against elegant food with finesse and a deft touch, such as top Japanese cuisine, it can be breathtakingly successful.

'It's unusual to find a Chardonnay from Tuscany,' says Nobu Berkeley Street's head sommelier, Simone Fadda. 'On the nose,

I find notes of grapefruit and ripe pineapple, and it has good minerality through the palate.'

All of which, in his view, makes it spot on for their Michelin-starred cuisine. 'You need that freshness, and the citrus note is important,' he says. 'I like its delicate notes of white pepper, too.'

The interesting thing about the Fontanelle is that it is both complex and understated. It is perfectly balanced, with a winning combination of fresh citrus, warm pineapple, comforting creaminess and delicate, spicy oak, but in a line-up of 20 Chardonnays it would probably not be the one to leap out at you.

Yet this self-effacing character is exactly what you need for complex, balanced food of the kind you find at Nobu. A wine that's trying too hard or that has too much ego will either swamp the food or (worse) clash badly with it. Yet over the course of a many-plated evening, the Fontanelle worked well to brilliantly with every fish or white meat dish we tried it with.

'Sympathetic' and 'understated', incidentally, don't mean bland. This is a genuinely complex wine, and like all good bottles, different dishes brought out different elements of its personality. Try that with a cheap Pinot Grigio and you'll be disappointed.

'I like the way that it changes on the palate with the food,'

enthuses Fadda. 'It makes the wine more interesting.'

With yellowtail sashimi and jalapeno with soy and yuzu sauce, its elegant minerality comes into play; with tempura king crab, the richer, rounder elements go up against the heft of the meat and the batter. While you can imagine a Chablis, for instance, working with the former, it would be totally outpointed by the latter; for a Meursault the opposite would be true. No two ways about it, the wine's flexibility and accommodating nature is impressive.

So how does the wine do it? The answer, at least partly, lies in the Tuscan climate. The region is further south than where most European Chardonnay is grown, which means plenty of ripeness and body in the wine.

But there are two mitigating factors that counter the Italian sunshine. First, Castello Banfi's Chardonnay vineyard is located up on a west-facing slope at an altitude of 250m on the coolest part of the estate. The vineyards get sun from late morning to evening, and face towards any sea breezes that make it off the Tyrrhenian Sea 20km away.

The height helps, too. While daytime temperatures can reach 40 degrees in the valley, up on the slope they tend to top out around the low-30s and, crucially, dip significantly once the sun goes down, which helps the grapes to retain the all-important acidity that stops the wines from tasting flabby.

The other key factor is having a limestone-rich soil. Chardonnay responds well to limestone; it's the basis of great Burgundy, Chablis and the Côte des Blancs in Champagne. And it's probably the reason for the Fontanelle's minerality.



WHAT IT TASTES LIKE

An initial nose of pear and ripe grapefruit merges into fresh-cut pineapple and vanilla pod. Supporting oak adds a gentle spiciness to a wine that combines freshness and weight to perfection.



WHERE TO TRY IT

High St: £14; Bibendum, simplywinesdirect.com
Restaurants: Avista, C London, Caffé Caldesi, L'Anima, Nobu Berkeley Street (pictured)