



Kathy Morgan is the sommelier at Citronelle. She is one of just 180 Master Sommeliers in the world, and the only one in Washington, D.C.

Take it from a master: Viognier likes its food spicy and rich, but not too hot.

Kathy Morgan

As one of the great perks of being considered a local wine authority, I was recently lured from my downtown D.C. condo to venture into the country for a fantastic lunch celebrating local Viognier. As all of my fellow guests remarked on the quality of Virginia Viognier and how favorably it compared to the French example we were given, almost everyone seemed surprised by how well it paired with food.

The fact is, Viognier is much more successful with food than most people think. Sure, it's not as food-friendly as Riesling—for one thing, it lacks the acidity required to be as versatile as that perennial sommelier favorite—but when paired with dishes that flatter its attributes rather than focus on its limitations, it can create spectacular food and wine harmony.

Like many grape varieties currently grown in Virginia, Viognier is native to France. It is most famous in the tiny appellation of Condrieu (with approximately 330 acres under vine), which encompasses the much smaller single-estate appellation of Chateau Grillet. Both are entirely dedicated to white wines made from 100 percent Viognier. The good news for locavores is that Virginia growers have planted more than half as much of what many believe to be the state's signature wine grape (180 acres and growing, according to a recent Washington Post article) and, although Virginia's pricing is significantly lower, the differences in flavor are less significant.

The Virginia wines lead with very ripe, often tropical fruit flavors. The French fruit profile comes across as slightly more subdued, allowing the intense mineral flavors from Condrieu's granite soils to add complexity and interest. Condrieu also tends to have slightly more acidity, which can carry its finish to longer lengths. Such similarities are largely due to the nature of the grape itself. Unlike non-aromatic varieties like Chardonnay, which gains most of its character from vinification techniques (such as barrel aging) and region of origin, intensely aromatic varieties such as Viognier, Riesling and Gewurztraminer assert their own personalities above all other factors. And there is even better news. There is no need to put these wines in your cellar for several years; most palates find that Viognier tastes best young.

Within both regions, there are many different styles of Viognier. Some are over-the-top intense, and some are more restrained. Some producers age their Viogniers in new oak barrels, and some do not. Regardless of any viticultural interventions, Viognier is typically a richly textured wine with a complex array of exotic fruit, floral and spice flavors and aromas.

Chardonnay lovers embrace it for its creaminess, while Gewurztraminer enthusiasts love it for its exuberant spiciness. Many dishes that pair well with Viognier highlight its spice component with ingredients like ginger, cardamom, saffron and cinnamon. But be careful—since most Viogniers have higher than moderate alcohol, they will exacerbate the heat of chilies and other fiery ingredients.

Squashes and starchy root vegetables are also an excellent pairing, as they play up Viognier's texture and the implied sweetness created by the exuberance of its fruit flavors. A small amount of cooked or dried fruit on the plate has the same effect—these ingredients flatten and sour most other wines. There is also no need to be shy with the cream and the butter; this is a full-bodied wine that will not get lost under all that richness.



CITRONELLE'S SALMON WITH LOBSTER-SAFFRON SAUCE.