

my FAVORITE *things*

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There is no better time to indulge in "luxury" food and beverages than during the holidays. I've chosen my favorite fine food, what drinks to pair them with and how to choose the best quality of each to offer and impress your guests.

Truffles are one of the most expensive and highly-prized foods in the world, but it is in Piedmont, Italy that we find the king of all truffles, the White of Alba. This winter white truffle has a far more intense aromatic profile than the summer white truffle. The Alba may be the king of all truffles, but due to their high cost, it's challenging to be as luxurious and generous with your portions. That's why you might choose black truffles such as French Périgord or Australian Manjimup truffles, which can be enjoyed in relatively greater abundance relative to cost.

Showcase black truffles on a simple pasta, pizza or potato dish for a light country-style. Versatile and incredibly aromatic, these expensive mushrooms are at their best when paired with equally earthy wines such as old white Burgundy, old champagne, old red Burgundy or old Nebbiolo from Piedmont, which all work brilliantly. Detect a theme here? Yes, "old" is very much the key when thinking about wine and truffles.

Caviar has always been the delicacy of aristocrats and sophisticated gourmands. There are more than 400 species of sturgeon in the world, but only three of them—Beluga, Osciètre and Sevruga—are used to obtain caviar. When it comes to taste, higher grade caviar will feature a flavor with more depth and strength. It will also have a firmer texture and larger eggs for a bolder mouthfeel. Higher grades of caviar are typically lighter in color.

There is no "better" or "worse" caviar; it's all a matter of personal preference. Some caviars have a more robust "taste of the sea," however, such as Siberian or Shassetra caviars. Others have a milder, nuttier flavor, especially Ossetra and Transmontanus. If in doubt, choose a well-known, high-quality brand and make sure it is well-chilled.

A few things to remember when shopping for caviar: paying more doesn't guarantee good quality, don't be afraid to start from the low end, buy enough and most importantly, eat it fast. Drink with cold vodka, champagne or dry white wines.



Oysters are another one of the world's ultimate "luxury" foods. There is no more intimate encounter with the sea than eating a raw oyster. Just as soil gives wine its own unique flavor, subtle differences in waters and farming techniques give oysters a "memoir" of their own. What holiday party would be complete without a huge platter of these briny delicacies on the half-shell, along with lemon wedges and tiny bowls of mignonette? Wines that are brisk and refreshing are typically great with oysters. I suggest Muscadet, Fino sherry, chablis, Sancerre, dry Tokaji or champagne.

Contrary to what you might think, the best way to get fresh, high-quality oysters is to order them directly from the growers. They'll FedEx them to you overnight or second-day delivery. This way you'll know they'll be fresh and a maximum of three days out of the water.

Oyster connoisseurs have their own lingo. Here's a quick cheat sheet to brush up on and use the next time you visit the raw bar:

Brine: simply put, an oyster's saltiness.

Creaminess: Oysters gain a more buttery or creamy taste as they approach spawning in the summer.

Crispness: Cold waters slow down an oyster's metabolism, leading to crispier, sweeter bivalves. As waters warm down the coast, oysters become meatier and brinier.

Finish: Kumamoto oysters from California and Washington, for example, leave a faint taste of honeydew melon on the tongue. Olympia oysters on the West Coast are slightly smoky, metallic or coppery.

Liquor: This refers to the delicious natural juices inside the shell, the essence of the sea. A true oyster connoisseur always slurps the liquor with the animal itself.

Memoir (*pronounced "more-wih"*): This refers to the flavors found in an oyster due to the particular waters and conditions in which it grew.

Naked: Some may need to dip their oysters in cocktail or mignonette sauce, but the purists will either use a squeeze of lemon, or prefer it "naked," with nothing accompanying it at all.

The oyster world may seem overwhelming, but there are only five species of oysters in the world, and it's easy to tell one from another. Here's how:

1. ATLANTIC

Smooth shell ridges, uniform in color and tear-drop in shape. Generally crisper, brinier and more savory (not sweet) finish.

2. PACIFIC

Fluted, pointed shells that are usually rough and jagged. They're creamy and finish with fruit or vegetal flavors.

3. KUMAMOTO

Small and deep, like a little cup. Everyone loves them.

4. OLYMPIAS

Tiny ... even smaller than Kumamotos, and more shallow. They have a bit of a coppery flavor.

5. BELONS

Sharp, intense, metallic flavor reminiscent of anchovies that some people don't like, and like most things that are weird and rare, they are costly. This oyster's flavor tends to linger.

Jamón Ibérico is the jewel in the crown of Spanish cuisine. It is the ultimate cured ham, with a decadently rich, nutty flavor that evokes the countryside of Spain. Ibérico ham comes from an ancient breed of pig found only on the Iberian Peninsula and are known as Cerdo Ibérico, or "Pata Negra." This exceptional ham is cured for up to four years, resulting in an intense flavor with a unique note of sweetness. For the highest quality jamón, look for the black label: this signifies the ham is 100% "Ibérico de Bellota," which means the meat comes from a pure-bred, Iberian pig fed only with acorns.

This ham pairs best with wines that have a touch of sweetness, plenty of acidity and bold fruit notes, such as riesling, moscato, chenin blanc, rosé, Lambrusco, grenache and zinfandel. However, if you are serving jamón dishes that are hot and spicy, choosing a light clear beer like lager would be best.

Wagyu beef is best known for being the world's priciest and most exclusive cut of beef. What matters most is the breed of Japanese cow, its diet and the unique environment in which it's raised. The clean mountain air, fresh spring water and peaceful environment of the Japanese countryside is what makes Wagyu special. The cows are stress-free and happy, eating only a rich and carefully monitored diet.

The difference between Wagyu, Kobe and Ohmi beef is all a matter of land, with a bit of brand marketing thrown in. Wagyu is the breed, and Kobe and Ohmi are the areas where the cows are raised. Kobe beef exemplifies everything that makes Wagyu superior: it is considered the most abundantly marbled in the world, brimming with the creamiest, most decadent, most flavorful streaks of fat a steak can have. It is the fat within the muscle that gives the meat its signature melt-in-the-mouth texture and powerful flavor. For the best quality Wagyu beef, rely on big-name, independent butchers.

Like any red meat, red wine makes for the perfect pairing. Choose a bold red, such as Barolo or Napa cabernet sauvignon.

Tescher chocolate is what you want if you are looking for something special for the holidays. In 2012 *National Geographic* ranked this chocolate as the best chocolate in the world. The secret of this incredible chocolate brand is 70 years of experience that started in a small town in the Swiss Alps using original recipes, which have been handed down from father to son.

Tescher chocolate is made by mixing the most expensive natural ingredients, including the finest nuts, marzipan, fruits and cocoa, without preservatives, chemicals or additives. The house specialty is a champagne truffle, a blend of fresh cream, butter and chocolate with a champagne cream center, dusted with confectioner's sugar. Chocolates are flown to Tescher stores worldwide on a weekly basis. Serve with champagne, vintage port or Chateau d'Yquem.

