

NEW YORK

GRUB STREET

BOOK EXCERPT | OCT. 15, 2020

How to Pair (Great) Wine With McDonald's

By Vanessa Price and Adam Laukhuf



The following is an excerpt from sommelier Vanessa Price's new book, Big Macs & Burgundy: Wine Pairings for the Real World, which got its start as a column right here on Grub Street.

I spent the better part of seventh grade eating defrosted McDonald's Happy Meals. I do not recommend this for the optimal enjoyment of Happy Meals.

But it was a sacrifice I was more than willing to make for the object of my obsession in 1997. Like so many other kids — and an even weirder amount of adults at the time — I was fully in thrall to the sack of plastic pellets and synthetic plush known as Beanie Babies.

More specifically, I was hell bent on acquiring the complete collection of Mini Beanie Babies that came with McDonald's Happy Meals that year, a seemingly modest ambition that was, in fact, more like an epic grail quest, if Indiana Jones was played by Snooki (and the grail was a Red Bull-branded Mazda). Getting the full set was a volume game that involved my mother driving my brother Forrest and me to what may have been every McDonald's in the state of Kentucky. And as my parents discovered, we would not stop until we achieved satisfaction.

Naturally, both siblings had to have their own sets. Sharing was not an option. And as our father failed to fully appreciate, despite the many times we explained it to him in detail, they all needed to be in mint condition in their original plastic packaging, so they could be sold for unfathomable, life-changing fortunes at a later date. By my projections, the potential value of these Mini Beanie Babies on the collectibles resale market was plainly obvious. It was actually *insane not to buy all of them*.

Of course, McDonald's being the geniuses they are, you couldn't just roll through any old drive-thru and request a Happy Meal with the Mini Beanie Baby you required. You had to cross your fingers, open the box, and take what you got — gratefully, I might add — because you were lucky if that particular location even had any of those chubby little uncut diamonds left.

For months, my mom would pick us up after school and we'd light out for various McDonald's far

and wide, in suburbs we'd never heard of, hunting down the elusive Minis that would complete our sets. We'd hear rumors about a rare cache of Pinchers the Lobster that had landed downtown on Third Street. Or that an Inch the Inchworm, the nearly impossible-to-find Sasquatch of Mini Beanie Babies, had been sighted at a location in East Louisville.

Each and every time, my mother would load us into Big Bertha, our purple Ford minivan, and perform what I only realized later were selfless acts of love. And she wasn't just going through the motions — her commitment to our mission was full and unwavering. You should have seen her at the drive-thru intercom, displaying an aptitude for maternal skullduggery that was a joy to

behold, as she tried to finagle confidential information out of often amused and endlessly patient drive-thru employees about which Beanies may or may not be on premises — and what exactly could be done to perhaps get one of those specific Beanies to fall into her bag?

We had quotas for each day, right up until the moment my father realized that some. Thing insane and sinister had overtaken his family and tried to put limits on our right to pursue happiness. This, of course, amounted to treason and did not last, because no man could stand between us and what was obviously the very future of our family's fortunes.

It turns out he was actually more concerned about the stockpile of ice-cold Happy Meals that was taking over our house. We were buying them faster than we could eat them, and we were absofrickenlutely not the kind of family that wasted food. So all those extra hamburgers and fries went straight into the freezer. We were defrosting and eating them for months. (About a minute in the microwave does the trick.)

Thanks to the heroic actions of my mother, we did eventually get all of our complete sets. And I couldn't tell you where they are today. My father says he thinks he found a garbage bag full of them when he was cleaning out the basement once, and may or may not have tossed them, completely unaware of their immense value.

Despite the squandered millions, I wouldn't trade that trash bag full of memories for anything. (And as it happens, "No amount of money in the world" is pretty much exactly what they're worth now.) Besides, they don't have a section on eBay for moms willing to go to extremes just to make their crazy children happy. Who can put a value on that?

For most Americans, there's at least one item on the OG McDonald's menu that brings them back to a simpler time, a bite that's inextricably linked to their childhood or to a pure moment of satisfaction — a very specific flavor combination that sets off, however briefly, the sensation of olfactory nostalgia. And as hard as it is to ever get that feeling back as an adult, that doesn't stop us from chasing the golden dragon. It's a primal kind of craving. The Hamburglar gets his mitts on you young, and even now, try as I might, I find it impossible to shake him. The good news is that you can turn that weakness into a strength, or at least a pretty good excuse, by dressing it up as a sophisticated wine-tasting experiment.

“It’s a primal kind of craving. The Hamburglar gets his mitts on you young, and even now, try as I might, I find it impossible to shake him.”



Illustration: courtesy of Abrams Books

Big Mac & Red Burgundy

When it comes to its list of ingredients, the most iconic burger of all time has the Pledge of Allegiance beat for sheer staying power in our collective memory. Those two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, and onions on a sesame-seed bun have had us in their clutches for more than 50 years — and to this day still sell at a clip of 550 million a year in the United States alone. We’re powerless to resist those beefy twins drizzled in tangy sauce, swaddled by a crucial center bun that remains one of the great innovations in burger history, originally added because the double-stack was too messy without it.

There have been plenty of attempts over the years to deconstruct the special sauce. While McDonald’s guards the recipe like the Maharaja’s necklace, there’s general agreement that it consists of varying proportions of mayo, sweet pickle relish, yellow mustard, white wine vinegar, paprika, garlic, and onion. Altogether, it’s creamy and just a little bit mouth puckering with a hint

of sweet. Add that to the beef fat and the mild nuttiness of the sesame-seed bun, and the Big Mac's power ballad of flavor calls for a soloist with higher acidity and a touch of tannin.

The lusty Frenchman that fits the bill is Bourgogne Rouge, or red Burgundy, probably my favorite wine on planet Earth. While Burgundy is the name of the region southeast of Paris where the grapes are grown, the actual grapes that make red Burgundy are Pinot Noir. (There's also white Burgundy, made mainly from Chardonnay grapes grown in the same place.) Because of its nearly perfect ratio of soil, sun, and slopes, the Burgundy region has proven over centuries of winemaking that the vines grown in its earthly bosom provide the most complex expressions of Pinot Noir. This is the storied land where some of the most expensive wines in the world were born: One bottle of 1945 Romanée Conti recently sold at auction for \$558,000. But you don't have to mortgage your house to get in on most of the exceptional wines on offer here.

In Burgundy there are no duds — there are quality designations across the price spectrum — but the entry point for most people will be the wines known as regional Burgundies (for more on these quality levels, see page 70). Light, fresh, and delicious regionals can be had for less than \$25 a bottle.

One of the hallmarks of red Burgundy is its earthy, mushroomy flavor, which is slightly subtler in regional bottlings, where the wine's fruitier elements tend to take the main stage. Red Burgundies hit you first with a very distinct salvo of red cherry, followed by red hibiscus and raspberry. That very specific tang hitches a loud and proud ride on the Big Mac's special sauce, while the Burgundy's low hum of mushroom forms a backbeat with the sesame seed bun. Its gentle tannic kick clears away the fat of the beef and cheese, and the pickles enhance the Burgundy's fruity autotune.

\$ Domaine Thévenet et Fils Bourgogne Rouge "Bussières Les Clos"

\$\$ Domaine Méo-Camuzet Bourgogne Rouge

\$\$\$ Maison Leroy Bourgogne Rouge



Illustration: courtesy of Abrams Books

Filet-O-Fish & Austrian Blaufränkisch

McDonald's first blessed its menu with the Filet-O-Fish back in the 1960s as an option for Catholics on Good Friday. And though its appeal may remain niche, fans of its seaward charms are devoted. There's something about that first bite, when the squishy steamed bun gives way to the crisp Alaskan pollock and a warm ooze of creamy tartar sneaks through. It's a simple pleasure known only to those unfairly maligned mavericks who choose the Filet-O-Fish. And it is for these intrepid souls that I proffer a red wine — not a white — to pair with their O-favorite. The assumption that white is only for fish and red is only for meat is outdated cockypot, and it's time for that rule to be broken.

For fried fish, you'll want a lighter red, chilled in the fridge as if it were white. And for the Filet-O-Fish in particular, a tarty little number from Austria called Blaufränkisch cannot be bested. Blaufränkisch is an older grape, but it's become so popular in recent years that some are now calling it the Pinot Noir of the East. One of the many things that make wine so confusing is that sometimes the same grape has a different name depending on where it's planted. That's the case with the Blaufränkisch grape, which is grown in countries across Eastern Europe.

Called Blaufränkisch in Austria, the very same grape is known as Blauer Limberger in Germany, Frankovka in the Czech Republic and Serbia, Frankovka modrá in Slovakia, Kékfrankos in Hungary, and Franconia in Italy. The grape itself produces a wide range of wine styles, but for our purposes it's the lighter and fresher medium-bodied iterations that work best, where the tannins aren't so intense as to overpower our crispy fish, yet sturdy enough to echo the rich tartar sauce. And one of the hallmarks of Blaufränkisch is the spiciness it exhibits in spades, which is just the kind of kick that lands so beautifully in a pillowy steamed bun. The tastiest appellations seem to come from the places with the craziest names, like Mittelburgenland, which makes a hot-pepper spicy style with a fruit density that ranges from red licorice to fruit roll-up.

\$ Markus Altenburger "vom Kalk" Blaufränkisch, Burgenland

\$\$ Weingut Moric Blaufränkisch Reserve, Burgenland

\$\$\$ Christian Tschida "Felsen I" Blaufränkisch, Burgenland

Quarter Pounder & Red Super Tuscan

The primary difference between a Quarter Pounder and a Big Mac? Ketchup and mustard instead of special sauce, one additional slice of American cheese, more meat, and no middle bun. That bun-to-meat ratio turns out to be a key factor when it comes to picking the right wine for this McDonald's mainstay. With more cheese and meat, you need a bigger wine, but you don't want to sacrifice that great synergy of acidity and fat you get with the Big Mac and Burgundy pairing. What you need is more cowbell, in the form of tannin, and for this we head to Italy, specifically coastal Tuscany, the land of the oft-misunderstood Super Tuscan.

Confoundingly enough, the term "Super Tuscan" is a made-up coinage with no technical or legal definition. All it means is that the wine comes from one or more grapes — like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or Syrah — that are physically grown in Tuscany but not originally native to Italy. (Or in some cases when native grapes like Sangiovese or Montepulciano are used outside of the specific parameters of a producer's appellation.)

Super Tuscan styles can vary, but what they all share is a unique broadside of freshness and power, and a juiciness that snaps to attention with ketchup, mustard, and pickles. The wine's guaranteed acidic streak supersedes that pucker, and the beefy tannins from all the thick-skinned grapes work overtime on the quarter-pound patty and extra cheese.

\$ Tenuta Prima Pietra “Dainero” Toscana

\$\$ Uccelliera “Rapace” Toscana

\$\$\$ Tenuta San Guido “Sassicaia,” Bolgheri Sassicaia

Hot Caramel Sundae & 20-year Tawny

Even among the relatively few people who are familiar with it, Port is often dismissed as too sweet or cheap to be good. But as one of the three oldest appellations in the world, these dessert wines deserve so much more respect. Fortified wines are spiked with distilled grape spirits, usually a type of brandy, and the added booze strengthens their ability to fight spoilage for decades — and sometimes even centuries. So they’re fortified on multiple levels.

Traditionally, Port was shipped out of the port town Oporto on the northwest coast of Portugal. But the grapes are actually grown, harvested, and fermented in Portugal’s Douro Valley, which is farther inland. With a few exceptions, all the wines are then sent to Oporto for aging and eventual export to the world. (For many centuries, the bulk of it went to England, where Port remains popular to this day.)

Ports are mostly lumped into ruby or tawny varieties, based on their color and aging processes. Ruby Ports are blood red and fresh and fruity, with just a touch of bitter. Tawnies are browner because they’re exposed to oxygen as they age, and the older they get, the better they get, developing more deeply in complexity, richness, and unctuousness. The darker the color, the more profoundly luscious they are. The designations of quality ascend by age from entry to reserve, followed by ten, 20, 30, and, if you’re really lucky, 40-year tawny. Entry tawnies come to the market young and simple (but still plenty tasty), and they’re what most people are exposed to. As you move up the age ladder, the characteristics go from dried fruits and almonds to baked fruit and balsamic aromas, and by the time you get to the rarefied 30- and 40-year tawnies, the scarcity is as pronounced as the price.

It’s a very normal thing to walk into a winery in Oporto and see barrels dating back centuries. Because tawny Ports don’t come from a single vintage — they’re always a blend of several — the age designation is an average of what’s in the bottle. That means at the 20-year mark, which is where we’re hanging, there might be wines that are anywhere from five to 50 years old. Something happens at that 20-year level that makes Port the ideal first mate for McDonald’s Hot Caramel Sundae. They both share that creamy-soft, toasted butter-and-sugar luxuriousness, and the 20-year’s layered dried fruit and sweet baking spices melt so seamlessly into the hot caramel, you’ll have

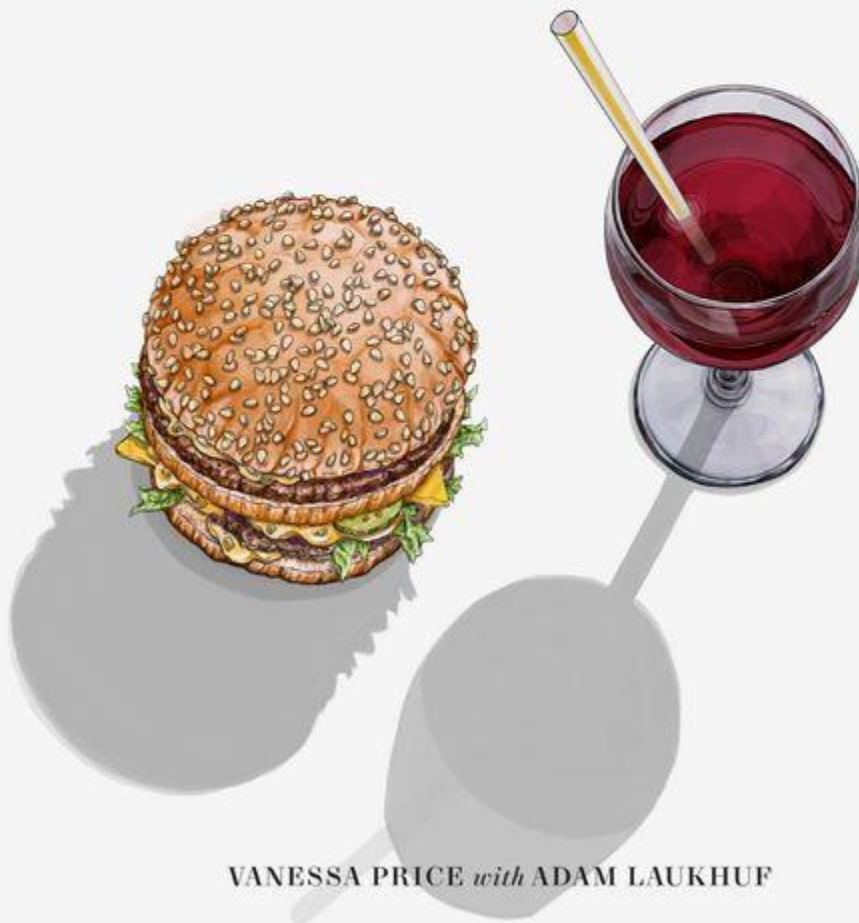
trouble discerning which is which. I suggest you only try this pairing if you're ready to embark on a lifelong obsession with Port.

\$\$ Ramos Pinto "Quinta do Bom Retiro" 20 Year Tawny Port

\$\$\$ Quinta do Noval 20 Year Tawny Port

Big Macs & Burgundy

WINE PAIRINGS *for the* REAL WORLD



VANESSA PRICE *with* ADAM LAUKHUF

Illustration: courtesy of Abrams Books