



Chef Daniel Bruce

## WINE FIRST, FOOD SECOND

What's in the glass takes center stage at these wine-centric eateries.

The formula is usually straightforward: chefs plan the menu, and sommeliers select wines complementing it. But a handful of innovative restaurants are flipping that equation, putting wine first and then planning the meal around the vino.

At Chicago's **TRU**, ([trurestaurant.com](http://trurestaurant.com)), guests can experiment with a "the Sommelier's Collection," a 10-course menu in which only the wines are listed. Servers bring out food based on what wines the diner has ordered. "What this has offered us," explains Wine Director Chad Ellegood, "is it has singled out the diner who is interested in the wine portion of the wine and food pairing, and is an adventurous diner."

The experiment started in 2007, when Ellegood realized he had a surplus of several wines. He explains the creative process: "Tim, the pastry chef, and I tasted the wines in order, brainstormed various flavors, and the flavors translated into dishes." Before long, "it just steamrolled into its own tasting menu," Ellegood recalls.

On one recent evening, guests choosing Cabernet Sauvignon received a bison with blackberry compote, parsnips and paprika as its match, while a buttery Chardonnay poured at the end of the meal was paired

with popcorn sorbet with a corn beignet and warm butterscotch.

"The pairing should be something that you wouldn't have chosen on your own, there should be something new. I never pair foie gras and Sauternes," Ellegood says.

Similarly, at **Meritage** in the Boston Harbor Hotel, ([meritagetherestaurant.com](http://meritagetherestaurant.com)) Chef Daniel Bruce has divided the menu into six wine-based categories. This should be a natural approach for Bruce, who previously spent 19 years as chef for the **Boston Wine Festival**. Although the wine list focuses primarily on California Cabernets and Meritage blends from California (of course), the list also features French, Italian and southern hemisphere wines.

At **Il Vino d'Enrico Bernardo** ([ilvinobyenricobernardo.com](http://ilvinobyenricobernardo.com)) in Paris, Milan-born Bernardo picks the wine, and then the chef decides what food to send out based on that selection. The inspiration: Bernardo's belief that no wine is hard to pair, while food dishes present the greater pairing challenge.

However, the wine-centric approach begs one question: doesn't putting wine before food annoy the chef? Absolutely not, Ellegood insists. —KARA NEWMAN