



It's crunch time

Which crisp pairs perfectly with Pinot Noir? What should you open to go with the Champagne? Can a cocktail really bring out the best in a bag of Monster Munch?

Susan Low learns how to match drinks and crisps at Berry Bros & Rudd

Illustrations by Kateryna Kyslitska

WITHIN cork-popping distance of St James's Palace, Berry Bros & Rudd has been in business since 1698, which makes it Britain's oldest wine and spirit merchant. The 327-year-old establishment has supplied the Royal Household since 1760 and has held a Royal Warrant since 1903. It also hosts events, the majority of which, as you would expect, celebrate world-class wines. Tonight, however, the focus is on something rather more readily available—crisps.

It's fair to call them a national obsession: one recent survey had us buying an average of two packets of them each week. Some crisps and a pint is Britain's down-to-earth answer to Italy's *aperitivo* or Spanish tapas: no office leaving do or pub get-together would be complete without a couple of bags torn open for communal consumption. As a top-tier party snack, however, crisps have historically been shunned in favour of more refined morsels.

Until now, that is. It began with Torres, the Barcelona brand with chic (and loftily priced) crisps that have quickly become a shorthand for luxury and discernment, and Bonilla a la Vista, producing jaunty blue-and-white sharing tins of *patatas fritas* that fly off the shelves in the Fortnum & Mason food hall and have been spotted at smart weddings. Then restaurants started getting in on the act: London hotspots such as

Michelin-starred Oma in Borough Market and Toklas added bowls of freshly fried, hand-sliced crisps to their menus, designed to be enjoyed alongside a sharpener before dinner proper.

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Therein lies the secret to giving crisps the Cinderella treatment: pairing them with the right drink. There's an art to it, it turns out, and on hand at Berry Bros to guide us through this crunchy, salty and enjoyably bibulous business is Neil Ridley, author of *The Crisp Sommelier*, the definitive text on the topic. Mr Ridley clearly nurtures a passion for the deep-fried spud—he tasted no fewer than 150 varieties when researching his book. ‘Crisps are meant for everybody,’ he tells us. ‘They’re a tapestry of taste and you can travel around the world simply by opening a few packets.’

With those thoughts in mind, we're encouraged to make our way around the six tasting stations set up on the shop floor, where

California Pinot Noir + Torres black-truffle crisps

Why it works

Pair these modern classics with a supple Pinot, such as the Californian Au Bon Climat 2021 from Berry Bros, and the ‘umami flavours in the wine bring a savoury presence like no other’.



Party mix: perfect pairs

Gibson gin cocktail + Monster Munch pickled onion

Why it works

‘Gin is a savoury spirit and the botanicals are lifted by anything with a pungent or pickled flavour,’ notes Mr Ridley. Guaranteed to bring on waves of wistful reminiscence.



aproned Berry Bros staff proffer trays of crisps and matching drinks to ponder and savour. Here, there's an unusual Sangiovese-based rosé spumante from Tuscany served with a classic: Tyrrells prawn cocktail crisps. Over there, a supple California Pinot Noir is paired with Torres black-truffle numbers, making an appealingly earthy combination. It isn't all about wine, however. The most surprising pairing (for this taster) is an aromatic *junmai daiginjo* sake coupled with ridge-cut Kettle Asian chilli-beef crisps—an umami-fest given further oomph from those furrows, which turn up the dial on the crunch factor.

This, it turns out, really matters when it comes to matchmaking. ‘Texture is one of the



Here's to savoury snacks: we can all raise a toast to a bag of Torres or a Twiglet or two

biggest considerations: the crunch of a crisp can properly set off the flavours in a complex wine or cocktail,' explains Mr Ridley. 'I found that ridged crisps tend to carry more intensity of flavour, where the coating is bolder in the grooves.' He has plenty of other pairing tips. 'You don't want to overpower your wine with something too bold, especially if it's a lighter red or a white,' he continues, adding that this theory also works in reverse: if you want to show off a big, spicy wine, then you'll need to choose a crisp that's up to the challenge (he recommends Lay's barbecue crisps with a Californian Zinfandel). There's no getting →

Snowball + chocolate-covered pretzels

Why it works

The egg-based Dutch liqueur Warninks advocaat mixed with ginger ale (for a bit of fire) and a dash of lime is a Christmas classic. 'The mixture of custard-like flavours and the salty-sweetness of these pretzels is superb.' Choose white-chocolate ones if you can find them.

Ruby Port + smoky-bacon crisps

Why it works

The mix of sweet and savoury is key and, according to Mr Ridley, 'works wonders on the palate'. Want something even more festive? 'You can find some limited editions at this time of year, such as pigs-in-blankets flavour, which are an even better match of sweet, fruit, smoke and meatiness.'



around the fact that crunchy snacks are going to be oily, so he advises party hosts to plump for wines with a flash of acidity. There's no need to shy away from sparkling ones, either—those bubbles can cut through like a hot knife through butter and they throw a spotlight on the flavour of the crisps, too.

Fittingly, the idea for *The Crisp Sommelier* came to Mr Ridley in a pub. 'We all know how well a classic roast-beef crisp goes with a pint of ale and it got me thinking that there must be a multitude of similar pairings out there to discover.' The research took him several months, but 'it quickly became apparent how well the concept worked. In essence, you're matching the crisp to the drink, so I often took classic food and drink pairings as a starting point and refined the process'. The same considerations apply: a well-matched crisp will complement, rather than clash with, the tannins, sweetness and 'body' of a drink.

The research brought on something unexpected: a bout of nostalgia. For Proust, it was the madeleine; for Mr Ridley, it was a remembrance of pickled-onion Monster Munch past. 'Crisps are often the encapsulation of the culinary tastes we carry over from childhood into adulthood, but we're supposed to abandon them in favour of more sophisticated choices,' he elaborates. He feels passionately that, when it comes to party planning, there's no need to go gourmet: bring out the Twiglets and your guests will thank you, not least for the trip down memory lane.



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It wasn't only his own history into which Mr Ridley delved: he investigated the origins of the crisp itself, which the British can credibly lay claim to inventing. In 1817, Royal Society member and celebrated cook William Kitchiner published *The Cook's Oracle*. His recipe for 'potatoes fried in slices or shavings', which instructed cooks

to fry potato parings in lard or dripping 'and keep moving them till they are crisp' then drain them and 'send them up with a very little salt sprinkled over them' is considered the first of its kind.

Proto-crisps such as these were mostly restaurant food (the wheel turns full circle), until they went mainstream in the early 20th century. 'The early 1920s saw the development of the mass market with Smiths Salt 'n' Shake, followed later by the growth of Leicester's Walkers, Ireland's Tayto, Tudor in Sunderland and Golden Wonder in Edinburgh,' Mr Ridley explains. 'Crisps represented a cheap, affordable snack between meals or a quick working lunch. The transition into "luxury" snacking didn't really happen until the 1990s, with the likes of Kettle Chips pioneering unusual flavours.' Launched in Norfolk in 1988, the brand introduced a thicker, more 'artisan' crisp to the British market, together with then-unusual flavours such as sea salt and cracked black pepper. Recently, it launched a limited-edition truffled crisp that also promises a hint of sparkling wine in the flavour itself.

Whatever your views on drinks in them, there's no denying that, for harried hosts, crisps are the ultimate boon: unlike fiddly canapés, they yield guaranteed pleasure with almost no effort. Season that with a bit of nostalgia, serve with a well-chosen bottle or two and you have a recipe for Christmas-party success. 🍷

Champagne + ready-salted crisps

Why it works

Mr Ridley describes the texture, saltiness and slight oiliness of a plain crisp as a 'trio of perfection that will bring out hidden depths in the Champagne'. Make your fizz a good one: he recommends Taittinger Brut.

