



thewinethiefnews
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*"Changing the World of Wine, One Bottle at a Time"
Food & Wine Pairings – September 2007*



This month the newsletter is taking a wholly unexpected turn. The original recipes are still here, as are a handful of excellent, tasty wine recommendations, to be sure. The difference comes in the theme of the food, and where the inspiration for this theme came from.

A few weeks ago I had the distinct pleasure of meeting a young couple who are in a rather unusual line of work. In their ripe old late twenties, these two are importing family-farmed, fair trade vanilla beans from Madagascar. The quality of these Bourbon vanilla beans is beautiful, the aroma absolutely intoxicating, and the price is incredibly low. To this end, by importing directly from the farmers and the farming cooperatives they cut out the fees that, by their accounts, can be incurred by the vanilla passing through up to nine middlemen before leaving the country!

Sarah and Nat Delafield happened into our shop one night two weeks ago, and I have been totally taken ever since. I was very interested in the development of their business and the work they're still doing to help increase the farmers' awareness of their crop's value. Not to mention my reaction to the wave of intensely perfumed air that wafted my way when Sarah opened up a one-pound bag of fresh, sticky, gorgeous, dark brown beans. The aromas were of vanilla, for sure, but reached deeper to cocoa, spices, and a heady breath of brandy. After an excited rush of words and emotions about these beans, they let me sample a few for myself. I tried it in some desserts, where the more pronounced and defined vanilla flavor in these fresh beans blew away any thought of going back to store-bought extracts. Even if, for some reason, I ever find myself without these magic beans, a

potent extract can be stashed away at home by dropping two or three beans into a small bottle of high quality vodka. I also experimented with some savory dishes, using the vanilla's flavor not to sweeten things, but rather to bring a superb perfume to the party. The Bordelaise sauce recipe was a conscious effort to meld vanilla and cream in a savory sauce, while the eggplant recipe was a bit more spontaneous, as you'll find out.

Now, don't be intimidated by fresh beans, as they're very easy to use. Simply lay a bean on your cutting board, and using the tip of a small knife, split the bean in half lengthwise. Now take each half and open it up a bit with your fingertips. Then just scrape your knife gently down the length of the bean, and a small clump of the vanilla seeds will build up on the blade. The seeds that you scrape out from just one bean will be enough for a whole recipe. If you have any doubts, stop into the shop to ask me any questions, or check out the last page of this newsletter for a step by step tutorial in pictures.

The wines this month are meant to echo these exotic fragrances and flavors, while at the same time retaining their own identity and not getting lost in the face of such complexity in the dishes. They are unique wines, and hopefully will introduce you to a few new grapes and regions you haven't tried.

For more information on this ambitious project and budding business, check out Sarah and Nat's informative website at www.ffftrading.com. There you can find out more about the farmers, the vanilla plants themselves, and how to easily purchase some of these delicious beans.

Bon Appétit,

Alex

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Fragrant Stuffed Baby Eggplants

The eggplants in our front yard are getting a little bit out of control. If you've ever grown eggplants you'll know what I mean. Until about two weeks ago, they looked quite docile, with a few bursts of bright pink and purple hiding under the broad, vivid green leaves. Then, a few days ago and with no warning, they started sprouting with reckless abandon. As of this moment, there are no fewer than thirty Japanese eggplants, long and slender and purple-black, and fifteen Sicilian pinks, growing from just two plants! How can these plants possibly expect us to eat all their beautiful fruits? Well, I hope you're with me when I say, I'll certainly try.

As I mentioned earlier, the vanilla portion of this recipe came to me quite by accident. I was preparing this for dinner as a straightforward stuffed eggplant dish, when a whiff of the simmering ingredients evoked something sweet, something gorgeously perfumed, and my brain (already working in vanilla mode) told me to open that kitchen drawer and scrape some seeds into the mix. What resulted was a dish that lends its unique and captivating aroma to that magical Madagascar orchid. Don't expect vanilla ice cream here; you'd hardly want that, would you? Just delight in the even more-complex-than-normal aromas that drift up to your nose. If you're serving this to guests, don't even tell them what the secret ingredient is, but rather watch their faces as their hearts melt just a little bit.

Despite the beef in this recipe (which, by the way, can easily be substituted with ground turkey, or even tofu), this dish is not heavy at all. Your wine needn't be either. The **2003 Trelen & Fils Saint Amour (\$17)** is a great example of high quality Cru Beaujolais that delivers layer upon layer of gently spiced juicy cherry fruit without a so much as a hint of overbearing tannin or weight. Just under medium body, this red is almost ethereal in its body, matching the food just perfectly. If a little more weight is desired, try the **2005 Cino (\$14)**, an unlikely blend of the three red grapes of Piedmont: Nebbiolo, Barbera, and Dolcetto. What a wonderful combination it is, taking the best from all its players – some nice weight, earth, and soft tannins from the Nebbiolo, a core of beautiful red fruit from the Barbera, and bright acidity and freshness from Dolcetto. Just about any dry rosé would work wonders here, but if white is what you're after, it's hard

to ignore the **2005 Abando (\$17)**, a white Rioja that brings together elegance and purity of texture with ripe, tropical fruit and just the right amount of oak to frame everything nicely.

Serve these as a hearty first course or a satisfying main course with a nice, big green salad. *Serves 4*



2 6"-7" baby eggplants
1 (¼" thick) slice pancetta, diced
½ medium onion, chopped
4 garlic cloves, chopped
½ green pepper, finely diced
small pinch red pepper flakes
¾ pound ground beef
½ cup dry white wine
seeds from 1 vanilla bean
1 tablespoon tomato paste
16-20 tiny tomatoes
½ sprig fresh rosemary
small handful fresh parsley
2 sprigs fresh marjoram (or oregano)
¼ cup toasted pine nuts, *see note*
¼ cup breadcrumbs
salt and freshly ground pepper
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Heat your oven to 400°. Prepare the eggplants: Slice in half lengthwise, and use a spoon to hollow out the eggplant, scooping out the meat, leaving only about ¼" of meat inside the skin. Discard any meat that is too heavily seeded, and set aside the rest of the meat and the hollowed out eggplants.

In a large skillet over medium heat, add the olive oil and pancetta, and cook until the pancetta becomes crisp and browned. Remove the pancetta and set aside, leaving the oil and rendered fat in the pan. Add the onions, garlic, green peppers, and chillies, and cook, stirring, until softened and very fragrant. Add the ground beef and the reserved eggplant meat (roughly chopped), and cook until brown. Add the wine, tomato paste, and vanilla seeds and cook until slightly thickened.

Add the tomatoes, herbs, pine nuts, crisped pancetta, and breadcrumbs, and stir until just combined. Season with salt and pepper.

Set the eggplant halves on a baking sheet and divide the filling evenly among them, pressing lightly to fit all of the filling. Drizzle each eggplant with a little bit of extra virgin olive oil.

Bake for 25 minutes, until the top turns golden brown, and serve immediately. Drizzle with a bit of extra virgin olive oil before serving.

A note on toasting nuts: In a dry pan over low heat, add the nuts and cook, stirring constantly, until they are very lightly browned and very fragrant. Take care not to burn them!

Seared Strip Steak with Vanilla Bean Bordelaise

Once again, the vanilla bean makes itself known in a way that highlights its aroma and its softly exotic taste without any perceivable sweetness, save for the addition of a bit of cream. I like to use strip steak here because it is not the most flavorful cut of beef on its own, and its texture is just right for a little boost of richness from a flavorful sauce. A fattier piece of meat like rib eye would almost overwhelm the sauce, but a filet mignon would benefit greatly from such a pairing. Though I love a nicely grilled strip steak as much as the next guy, I feel that searing the meat in this dish will let the vanilla speak a little more clearly. That is, the subtleness of the vanilla flavor might get outshined by the smokiness of the grill.

Vanilla and cream are very good friends, as we find in countless desserts. What we see here is the cream's ability to frame to vanilla's fragrant characteristics without any sugar, so the subtle shift in flavors in the sauce may seem a little unusual at first. Trust me, once you get past the first bite, any uncertainty will be forgotten.

We drank some great Syrah with this dinner, and you could do the same. Syrah's gamey, earthy, robust, and yet still fruity demeanor has all the stuffing to stand up to the meat, but versions that are not overly oaky will still allow you to taste the novelty of the dish. One wine that comes to mind is the **2004 Chateau de Valcombe Prestige (\$15)**. Predominantly Syrah with a touch of Grenache to boost the fruit, this southern Rhone Valley red has seen a great development over the last year or so, from being stubbornly tannic to showing beautiful dark fruit, a nice touch of that southern French earthy side, and while the tannins are still there, they have become much

finer and softer. This is a pleasure to drink. Some Bordeaux for the Bordelaise sauce, perhaps? How about the **2003 Tour des Agasseaux (\$18)**, a red from St. Emilion that, once again, balances its fruit with its tannins. The Merlot in the blend does its job of providing a sturdy fruit and herb component, while the Cabernet and Cab Franc show up to provide chewy tannins and a bit of nice dusty earth. *Serves 4*

2 12-ounce New York Strip steaks, cut in half
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
2 tablespoons butter
1 shallot, finely minced
½ cup red wine
½ cup chicken stock
seeds from 1 vanilla bean
1/3 cup heavy cream
salt and freshly ground pepper

Heat your oven to 400°. Season the steaks well with salt and pepper and rub each side with a small amount of oil. Heat a large cast iron or heavy stainless steel skillet over medium-high heat until it is quite hot. Place the steaks into the pan and cook, without turning or moving them, for three to four minutes. When they have formed a nice crust, flip them over, and place the whole pan into the hot oven. Roast for six to eight minutes, depending on the thickness of your steaks, until they are medium rare. Allow them to rest for five minutes before serving.

While the steaks are in the oven, melt the butter in a small saucepan over medium heat. Add the shallot and cook until softened, about a minute. Turn up the heat and add the red wine, simmer for a minute or two until it reduces by about half, then add the chicken stock and simmer until reduced by about half. Add the vanilla, cream, salt, and pepper, and stir, reducing the heat to low to avoid burning the cream. Keep the sauce warm while the steaks finish cooking.

Spoon the warm sauce over the steaks before serving, and garnish with minced parsley.

Stone Fruit Clafoutis

This slightly sweet dessert recalls several things from my childhood. For one thing, my parents shied away from anything that was too sweet, meaning very few desserts, and certainly no sugary snacks around the house. I don't recall my brother and I seconding those sentiments, but then, we didn't buy the food.

Second, my mom's card-carrying status in the world of Francophiles put many things on the table that I probably wouldn't have seen otherwise until I was much older. A big favorite was crême caramel, that Gallic cousin of flan that always turned out wonderfully for us, albeit with decidedly less sugar. Another dessert that appeared periodically was clafoutis (kla-foo-TEE), a French country dessert based on a flour-enriched egg custard, and usually found studded with fresh sour cherries. If you really wanted to be French you wouldn't even take out the pits, though for ease of consumption I don't recommend this route.

Ever since ripe cherries started hitting the farmers markets earlier this summer I've made about a clafoutis a week. I use whatever stone fruit is perfectly ripe, which is to say any fruit with a sizeable pit in it, though as we head into the fall I can't wait to find some great pears and figs for the job. We've tried clafoutis with cherries, plums, and nectarines, and this weekend I think I'm going to try some peaches. Raspberries must be great right about now, too. One trick when I use cherries is to throw a handful of toasted almonds into the mix. The recipe here calls for nectarines, but feel free to substitute whatever fruit is freshest and tastiest.

With dessert, we usually just finish up whatever wine happens to be in our glasses, but a dessert wine or after dinner drink would not be out of the question here. Try the **2005 Silvano Garcia Moscatel (\$28)**, a strong, sweet Moscatel from southeast Spain. Brimming with apricots and a little extra kick, this will handle the creaminess very well. Or, if you'd like to dine like my good friend Giuseppe, consider a small dash of grappa. The **Nardini Bianco (\$26/half bottle)** will last you quite a while, and though it provides zero sweetness, it accomplishes its unlikely task of settling your stomach after a heavy meal unusually well. *Serves 8-10*

4 eggs
½ cup heavy cream
½ cup 1% milk
2 tablespoons butter, melted and cooled, *plus extra for greasing*
½ cup flour
½ cup sugar, plus 1 tablespoon
seeds from 1 vanilla bean
a healthy pinch of salt (about ½ teaspoon)
2 tablespoons crême de cassis or other fruit liqueur
about 1 pound of nectarines, cut into chunks

Heat your oven to 400°. Butter the bottom and sides of a deep, 9" pie dish or a 9" square baking dish. Toss the nectarines with 1 tablespoon of sugar in a bowl, then place the chunks of fruit in the pie dish. Place the remaining ingredients in a food processor and process until smooth. Pour the batter over the fruit, and bake for 40-45 minutes, until a toothpick or thin knife inserted into the middle of the dish comes out clean. Cool on a rack, and serve either warm or at room temperature.

A Brief Tutorial on Using Vanilla Beans

I'm sure there are lots of you out there reading this newsletter and saying to yourself, what's all this talk of vanilla beans, anyway? I mean, until I worked as a pastry chef, the only way I had ever seen vanilla was as an extract. Since vanilla beans are usually prohibitively expensive (though Nat & Sarah's are totally reasonable, and no, I don't have a stake in their business!), few of us ever have the opportunity to work with them. Below is a series of photographs showing how to extract the seeds from inside a vanilla bean.



1. Split the bean lengthwise with the tip of a small, sharp knife.



2. Scrape the inside of both halves of the bean with the blade of your knife.



3. The tiny, fragrant flecks of seeds are ready to use!

Check out the Wine Travels section of our website for more recipes and wine. Also visit pinestreetkitchen.blogspot.com for more of Alex's food and wine writing!

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