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The Grapevine

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR VINESSE WINE CLUB MEMBERS



MARTIN'S JOURNAL

If you're planning a wine-focused trip to Italy in the near future, I have one word for you: Siena.

Most folks probably think of Florence when planning an excursion under the Tuscan sun (hey, that sounds like a great title for a movie!), but I prefer Siena because it's much less crowded. Check out this issue's "Wine Touring Tips" feature for ideas on where to stay, where to eat and what to see in this beautiful city that's easy to traverse on foot.

Also in this issue, we have features on the king of olives, an acclaimed Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon maker, and the importance of letting white wines breathe. And in her always informative "Cellar Notes" column, wine steward Katie Montgomery asks the question: *How much is too much alcohol in wine?*

That's just a small sampling of the information you'll find in this issue of *The Grapevine*. As always, I hope you enjoy your newsletter... and I know you'll enjoy your wines.

Cheers!

Martin Stewart Jr.

Are You Ready for a Super Tuscan from Staten Island?

By Robert Johnson

We don't typically think of islands as centers of winegrowing.

Yet in Italy, the ancient island of Sicily boasts one of that country's most progressive wine regions — having replaced the ultra-sweet bottlings of the past with lighter, fresher wines.

Meanwhile, on the isle of Sardinia, the local growers have swapped quantity for quality.

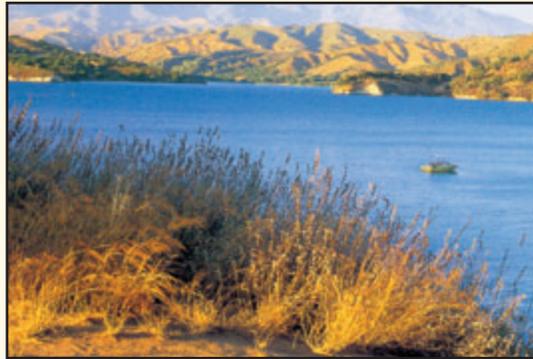
Here in the States, two new island winegrowing ventures — on opposite ends of the country — are moving forward.

"Twenty-six miles across the sea" from the Southern California coast, Catalina Island now is home to a seven-acre vineyard planted to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Zinfandel. It's a project of Geoff Rusack and Alison Wrigley Rusack of Santa Barbara County's Rusack winery.

If the Wrigley name rings a bell, you know your Catalina history.

William Wrigley, the chewing gum magnate, was a principal in the company that used to own Catalina, and Alison is his great-granddaughter.

The vineyard is located in the middle of the island, where the Rusacks believe the right combination of soil and climate will yield high-quality grapes and tasty wines beginning in 2010.



Meanwhile, on New York's Staten Island — long known for its massive landfill — plans call for a two-acre "educational" vineyard to

be planted at the island's botanical garden next spring.

After much research, including a fact-finding mission to Italy, it was decided to plant Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Sangiovese. The main goal is to spike tourism on the much-maligned island by showing adults and children how grapes are grown and wine is made.

Still, one can't help but wonder what a Staten Island Super Tuscan would taste like.

Check out "Editor's Journal" every Monday on VinesseTODAY.com.



OUR MISSION:

To uncover and bring you wine gems from around the world, which you're not likely to discover on your own, and which enhance your wine enjoyment.

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Martin Stewart

Chief Operating Officer (aka "The Buck Stops Here"):

Lawrence D. Dutra

Editor:

Robert Johnson

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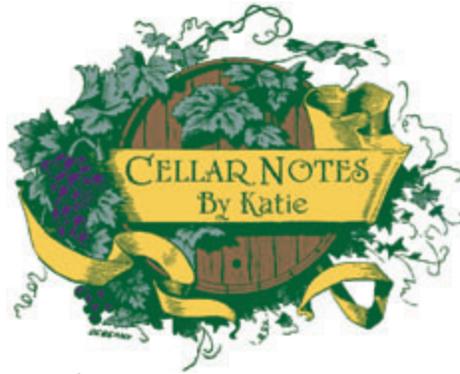
Katie Montgomery

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Playing the Percentages: How Much Is Too Much Alcohol?

There's a big debate fermenting in America's wine cellars and in cellars around the world.

The heated discussions focus on the level of alcohol present in wine.

For many years, the alcohol level in most wines hovered around 12 to 13 percent. Part of the equation was stylistic, and part was economic. When a wine hits the 14 percent alcohol level, a higher tax is levied upon it.

Late in the 20th century, the alcohol levels began creeping up, and many believe the trend was fueled by a few critics possessing palates that preferred big, bold, in-your-face fruit flavors.

"The more ripe the grapes are, the more natural sugar they will contain and the higher the alcohol content will be," notes Karen MacNeil in her very informative book, *The Wine Bible*. "Alcohol affects the body of the wine as well as the texture. High-alcohol wines are full, round and supple; sometimes they can seem almost thick and chewy — think about ripe, rich, red Zinfandel."

But high alcohol doesn't necessarily equate with an enjoyable wine.

"Alcohol in the wine doesn't exist in a vacuum," MacNeil adds. "So a high

level of alcohol with a corresponding sweetness allows a wine to support a high level of acidity and still taste balanced. Balance is critical. A high-alcohol wine without a good measure of acidity tastes flaccid and amorphous, and is as unsatisfying as tasteless bread or weak coffee."

Randy Dunn is far less diplomatic about the topic of alcohol in wine, and even issued an open letter to wine critics and fellow winemakers on the subject. "I just hate high-alcohol

wines," says the acclaimed Napa Valley vintner.

Dunn defines the "right amount" of alcohol as when two people drink a bottle of wine together and then "wish there was a little bit more." With a 15.5 or 16 percent alcohol wine, "you don't do that," he notes. "You'd be lying

on the floor."

Technology now exists that enables vintners to lower the alcohol level in a wine. But another Napa winemaker, Doug Shafer, doesn't see the 14.9 percent alcohol level that some of his bottlings reach to be a problem.

"We like our wines," he says. "We like the fruit. We like the richness.

"I'm not forcing anyone to buy our wines," he adds. "We're selling everything."

And the debate rages on...

"Alcohol in the wine doesn't exist in a vacuum. Balance is critical."



WINE A_{TO}Z

Finesse. Used to describe a wine with elegance and balance, implying that it's polished and sophisticated. Rhymes with Vinesse.

Graft. Process of splicing one grape variety onto another. Also used to splice a variety onto a disease-resistant variety of rootstock — helpful when vines have been affected by phylloxera.

Hybrid. A new grape variety developed by breeding two or more varieties from a different species or subgenera. Examples of French-American hybrids: Baco Noir and Seyval Blanc.

Iron Horse. A Sonoma County winery that made its name on sparkling wines, and now is producing table wines as well. Its Russian Cuvee was originally crafted to be served at the historic Reagan-Gorbachev summit meetings that led to the end of the Cold War.

Jammy. Description of a wine with thick, concentrated aroma or flavor of berry jam.

APPELLATION SHOWCASE

SALTA PROVINCE, ARGENTINA

It is home to the highest-altitude vineyards in the world. It is the Salta Province of Argentina, high in the Andes Mountains northwest of Buenos Aires.

Pioneering vintners have been growing grapes in vineyards more than 9,000 feet above sea level for several years now. Some of those bottlings have been featured by the wine clubs of Vinesse, particularly The World of Wine club.

Growers and winemakers believe that the relative closeness to the sun helps grapes ripen more fully, and

may even alter them physiologically. The jury remains out on why high-altitude wines are good, but there's no question that the public has accepted the wines with open arms.

Later this year, Caspar Eugster of Altura Maxima plans to plant vines even farther up the mountain — specifically, at the 10,206-foot level.

At present, wine tourism in the region is limited because of its remoteness. Most visitors end up staying in the small town of Cafayete, then heading out — and up — in four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Nobody can predict the future of high-altitude winegrowing, but more and more vintners believe that the sky's the limit.



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VINESSE STYLE

THE KING OF OLIVES

Perhaps because they both flourish in the same climates... perhaps because they both are necessities of the good life... winegrapes and olives have an undeniable connection.

In Italy, a vast majority of winemakers also grow olives and make olive oil. The same is true in Spain. There, the *aceituna negra de Aragon* — the black Aragon — is considered the king of all olives.

This smooth, black-brown fruit from eastern Spain has a slightly sweet tang which makes it stand out in the rarified world of olives. Indeed, the black Aragon olive is generally regarded as among the sweetest of the many hundred different varieties of olives.

The Aragon is smaller and almond-shaped, in contrast to the average green variety found in southern Spain

and other parts of the world. It contains less liquid and thus is not ideal for making olive oil. This is an olive to be eaten.

The Aragons are harvested by hand in December or January, traditionally collected by shaking them off the trees with nets underneath. In some cases, they are gathered from the ground once they have ripened and fallen from the trees. And sometimes they are beaten off the trees with sticks.

Olive farmers have to rid the fruit of phenolic and other compounds that cause bitterness, using a process that adds lactic acid and preserves the fruit.

According to acclaimed Barcelona chef Carles Abellan, because of its natural saltiness, the Aragon typically is eaten before a meal or with a cocktail or glass of wine.

“Olives on the whole are an essential part of Mediterranean cuisine, but the black Aragon is actually a more popular olive for

aperitifs and tends not to be used for cooking, save in some select dishes,” Abellan says.

For olive connoisseurs, the black Aragon is the gold standard.



BEING GREEN

If you've been a club member for any length of time, you've read about biodynamic practices and water-saving vineyard techniques in this space. But reading is one thing; seeing is believing. And there's now a company running a “Sustainable Vine Wine Tour” in Santa Barbara County. The route of the six-hour excursion is variable, but typically includes visits to three wineries and/or vineyards that embrace the “green” concept. The cost is \$125, and includes lunch. *Info: 805-698-3911.*



White Wines Need Air, Too

A club member recently wrote in to tell us about an experience she had with a bottle of Napa Valley Chardonnay.

“We pulled the cork when we sat down to have our salad,” she wrote, “and just let the wine sit in the bottle. Our second course was a small bowl of pasta with a garlic cream sauce, and that’s when we poured the wine into our glasses. About 20 minutes later, we had our main course — nice halibut filets — and refilled our glasses.

“What was interesting,” she continued, “is that the wine seemed different with each course. With the pasta, it seemed more fruity and refreshing; with the halibut, it seemed to turn richer and more buttery.

“After thinking about it, we kind of wished that the opposite had been true — rich and buttery with the pasta, fruity and refreshing with the halibut.

“I guess what I’d like to know is: Are we crazy? Can a wine change

that much from just one glass to the next?”

The answer: yes. (To the wine changing part, not the crazy part.)

Like red wines, full-bodied whites benefit from a little air. Simply pulling the cork won’t do much, however, because not much air gets in the bottle. So the first pour will retain virtually all of the wine’s acidity, which accounts for those fruity and fresh impressions.

With about half of the volume removed from the bottle, air begins to play a more prominent role. Then with each passing minute, a little bit of the acidity morphs into impressions of butter and oak spice (assuming the wine underwent malolactic fermentation and was aged in oak barrels).

So, our member’s description of the wine’s progression was absolutely accurate.

The lesson learned: If you’re going to be drinking Chardonnay with pasta or any dish that includes a cream sauce, give the wine some time to breathe. Pour the entire bottle into another container — any glass container will do — and let it sit for at least a half-hour before serving.



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Siena: Tuscany's Best-Kept Secret

In a nation where grapevines seem never to be out of one's sight, Tuscany is recognized as Italy's traditional winemaking home.

The tiny Tuscan hills and valleys between Florence and the Umbria-Latium border are where Sangiovese grapes are grown in abundance, contributing to some of the country's most acclaimed (and expensive) wines.

Most Tuscany tourists flock to Florence, but we much prefer its neighbor to the south: Siena.

While there's no denying the artistic bounty of Florence, it is in Siena where visitors can have a more intimate Tuscan experience — while still being exposed to plenty of art treasures. But be forewarned: The only cars allowed within the city's walls are taxis and those of residents; this is a place for people who like to walk. Fortunately, the city is compact enough that taking in the sights by foot is no problem.

Siena has been described as a Medieval city *par excellence*, yet it embraces 21st-century technology by offering virtual tours via PDAs such as Palm Pilots. You can download files before you go, or at one of the information kiosks once you get there.

Then be prepared to traverse a maze-like system of alleys and narrow streets that will lead you to the various tourist attractions as well as off-the-beaten-path vegetable gardens and *enotecas* (wine bars). You could plan an entire trip in advance with the PDA software, as it includes more than 5,000 listings for restaurants, shops and lodging.

No-frills rooms can be found for as little as \$57 per night during the off-season. Luxury accommodations can



TOURING TIPS

command nearly \$600 per night. Among the best mid-range lodgings are Antica Torre (\$91-121) and Palazzo Ravizza (\$113-306). Antica Torre is set in a Medieval tower, and its top-floor rooms offer views of the Sieneese hills. Palazzo Ravizza has terra-cotta floors and frescoed ceilings, and has been owned and operated by the same family since the 1920s.

The sloping, semicircular Piazza del Campo is the heart of the city, where



the Palio horse race is run twice per year (in July and August). It's a competition among the 17 *contrade* (districts) that make up the city. This is where the locals come to sip cappuccino (in the morning) or espresso (in the evening) and partake in their favorite non-contact sport: gossiping. Because of Siena's circular grid, no matter where you are around town, you're never far from the

Campo.

As one of Italy's richest cities, Siena has an abundance of restaurants. Expect to be treated to fine silverware, exotic meats, perfectly aged cheeses and, of course, locally crafted wines.

Dining is another favored "sport" among the Sieneese, and a great place to experience an authentic, memorable lunch is Antica Trattoria Botteganova. For about \$50 per person, you can fill up on cheeses, meats and wine. Better still, the owners of this cozy *osteria* are more than happy to answer questions — particularly about their lengthy, well-selected wine list.

Don't worry about overindulging. For one thing, you're on vacation. For another, many of Siena's "sidewalks" are more like elongated staircases; you'll have ample opportunity to walk off those calories as you roam the neighborhoods and soak in the scenery.

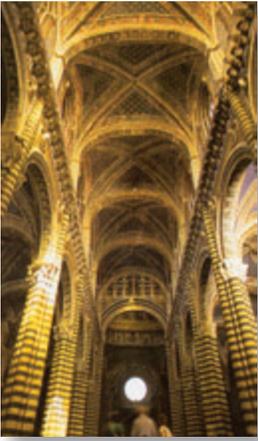
A quintessentially Sieneese street is Via di Citta, a narrow passageway lined with homes boasting thick oak doors, colorful shutters and flower-splashed window sills. Some streets are made for brisk walks; Via di Citta is made for strolling.

For Siena photo-ops — and a real good workout — climb the 503 steps leading to Torre del Mangia, which is open daily (hours vary by season) and charges an admission fee. True, buying postcards would be more cost-effective, but where's the sense of accomplishment in that?

Two worthwhile side trips while on a Siena vacation will take you seven miles north of the city and 30 minutes south.

To the north is Monteriggioni, a hilltop village surrounded by perfectly preserved 13th-century walls. It's as close as you can get to an authentic Medieval experience.

To the south, in the heart of



Montalcino, is the Enotica Osteria Osticcio. This *osteria* may well be heaven on Earth for a wine lover, as owners Signor and Signora Tullio and

Francesca Scrivani are experts on the locally produced wines. And they take great pride in pairing the bottlings they stock with generous platters of bruschetta, prosciutto, sausage spread and aged Parmigiano Reggiano.

Don't tell the proprietors, but they don't charge nearly enough. One could spend a couple of hours munching and sipping, yet spend only about \$15...

... which should leave you plenty of Euro (sadly, the Lira is no longer) for shopping back in Siena — Tuscany's best-kept secret.

For Further Information

Virtual Tour Files

commune.siena.it/turismo

Antica Torre

0577-222-255

Palazzo Ravizza

0577-280-462

Antica Trattoria

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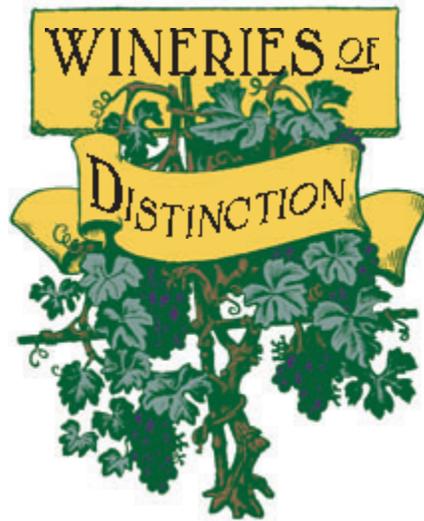
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Acclaimed Merus Winery Poised to Take Next Step

Those who view the wine business as a legal way to “print money” have no understanding of how costly making wine can be.

Take, for example, the case of Merus Winery in California's world-famous Napa Valley.

Ever since its debut 1998 vintage was released, the Cabernet Sauvignon bottlings of Merus have received outstanding reviews. The 2004 vintage garnered an almost-unheard-of 96-point rating from *Wine Spectator* magazine. That kind of media exposure virtually eliminates the need for marketing.

Oh, and the price tag on that 2004 Cabernet? \$160... *per bottle*.

Yet, even with a sky-high selling price and an inventory that disappears almost as quickly as it's bottled, Erika

Gottl and Mark Herold found it difficult to make a decent living from their venture — despite the fact that they produced all 1,500 cases in their home-turned-winery.

Every situation is a little bit different, but in the case of Merus Winery, the numbers just didn't add up. To get beyond a subsistence lifestyle, Herold had to take a number of consulting jobs with other local wineries.

At the end of last year, Gottl and Herold decided enough was enough, and sold the Merus brand to Foley Wine Group.

The good news is that William Foley, unlike the leaders of some conglomerates, believes in protecting and perpetuating his brands, rather than exploiting them. The wines of Santa Barbara County's Lincourt, for example, have improved since Foley became its parent.

The even better news is that Gottl and Herold will remain with Merus to oversee the winemaking. And with the possibility of moving operations into a real winery, the prospects are that Merus wines could get even better — although it's difficult to imagine improving on a 96-point bottling.

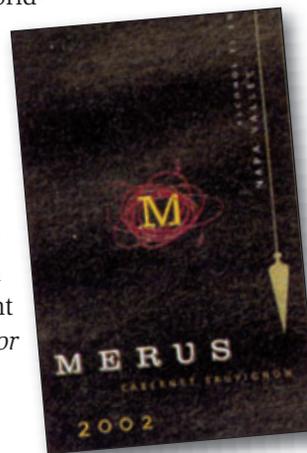
What makes Merus Cabernet so

good? Gottl and Herold purchase wine from a very small group of quality-focused Napa producers — just one or two barrels at a time. They also secure a few barrels of top-notch Merlot and Petit Verdot for blending purposes.

Then the experimentation begins. Gottl and Herold try any number of

combinations until they arrive at the aroma and flavor mix they seek.

Merus is Latin for pure, and the expertly crafted Merus Cabernet Sauvignon provides pure drinking pleasure.



Quotes Du Jour

■ *French actor Gerard Depardieu, on how great wine is made:*

“To make very good wine is to dream it. It is not necessary to be next to the vats and say, ‘I want to make wine, I want to make wine.’ I know the wine; I feel it.”

■ *17th century English naturalist John Ray, on the three “lives” of fish:*

“Fish must swim thrice — once in the water, a second time in the sauce, and a third time in wine in the stomach.”

■ *Jazz pianist and radio host Ramsey Lewis, on wine’s place in a meal:*

“A good meal is wholeness, when everything gels. I like it when everything complements each other, including the wine. That’s the way we look at performance — it’s a contribution to the whole.”

■ *The pithy Pliny (A.D. 23-79):*
“In vino veritas.”

Q AND A

Would our bottle of 2005 Sparrow Creek Zinfandel work with grilled steelhead trout? I’m thinking it would.

— **Shirley Kmett**

We’re thinking it would, too. For one thing, steelhead meat is pink — similar in hue to salmon. And Salmon with Pinot Noir is the combination that sparked the whole “red wine with fish” revolution. For another, some steelhead trout — particularly those that have been “farmed” — have a distinctive earthy flavor, which usually balances nicely with the fruitfulness of Zinfandel.

Shirley didn’t mention what type of grilling she planned to do, but if she grills it backyard-barbecue-style, the wine pairing would be absolutely perfect. Zin and that “charred” flavor — whether it accompanies meat or fish — represent a match made in heaven. So, our advice is: Give it a try.

And that leads us to a few general comments about food-and-wine

pairing...

Few people knew (or believed) that a dark chocolate dessert could match beautifully with certain red wines. But once somebody tried it, it was a revelation. Likewise, most people never would have thought to pair salmon and Pinot Noir. But that’s now among the most popular meals served in fine restaurants of the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. Or how about a rich, buttery Chardonnay alongside a thick, juicy steak with just a little bit of fat left untrimmed? That’s a common pairing at steakhouses, especially those that grill their cuts in butter.

The point is this: Most successful food-and-wine pairings aren’t planned; they’re stumbled into. So, if you’re thinking of pairing a particular wine with a particular dish, give it a try. What’s the worst that could happen? If you don’t enjoy the pairing, simply set the wine aside and instead enjoy it as an after-dinner treat, perhaps in lieu of dessert.



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NEW STUDY: RED WINE IS FOOD FOR THE BRAIN

A study recently concluded in Portugal indicates that the consumption of red wine may prevent the brain from suffering damage caused by alcohol. According to *Neuroscience*, rats that were given red wine did not experience memory damage, while those that were given pure alcohol did. In fact, the rats that were given red wine performed identically to those that had been given water. Scientists concluded that the existence of antioxidants in red wine was responsible for the outcome of the testing.

AND THE NOMINEES FOR BEST WINE SERVICE ARE...

Nominees for the 18th James Beard Foundation awards have been announced in categories ranging from Best New Restaurant to Rising-Star Chef. In the category of Wine Service, the 2008 nominees are Aureole, Las Vegas; Bin 36, Chicago; Eleven Madison Park, New York; Blackberry Farm, Walland, Tenn.; and Picasso, Las Vegas.

AND IF YOU'RE HEADING FOR THE NAPA VALLEY...

Two other James Beard Foundation award nominees are Nicole Plue of Redd in Yountville, and Terra restaurant in St. Helena. Plue is nominated for Best Pastry Chef, while Terra is nominated for Best Restaurant Service.

ERNIE BANKS SAYS: 'LET'S DRINK TWO!'

No man played baseball with more

joy than Ernie Banks, who famously was quoted, "Let's play two!" Now, the Chicago sports legend has launched his own wine label, along with two other members of the 500 home run club, Mike Schmidt and Eddie Murray. Ernie Banks 512 Chardonnay, Mike Schmidt 548 Zinfandel and Eddie Murray 504 Cabernet Sauvignon are produced by Eos Estate Winery in Paso Robles, Calif., and all proceeds from the sale of the wines benefit the players' favorite charities. In Banks' case, that would be his Live Above & Beyond Foundation, which works to eliminate prejudice, relieve discrimination among various age groups and races, and enhance neighborhoods.

MICHELIN BESTOWS 191 STARS ON TOKYO EATERIES

It was a daunting task, but publishers of *The Michelin Guide* have finally managed to rate the restaurants in Tokyo. Why daunting? Because there are approximately 160,000 restaurants there, compared to about 23,000 in New York and 20,000 in Paris. Not surprisingly, most of the 191 Tokyo eateries that earned Michelin stars specialize in fish.

A CAB-SHIRAZ BLEND IS BEST NEW WORLD RED

Grover Vineyards is turning heads in the wine world with its "La Reserve" Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz blend. Why? Because the wine was voted "Best New World Red" by *Decanter* magazine, and because Grover Vineyards is located in India.

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The Grapevine COOKBOOK



PORTUGUESE-STYLE ROASTED PORK

Try this tasty dish with a big, bold, flavorful wine — white or red. This recipe makes 6 servings.

Marinade Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons chopped garlic
- 6 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons paprika
- 1 cup fruity white wine
- 3/4 cup olive oil, divided
- 5-lb. boneless pork loin

Marinade Preparation

1. In a food processor, puree garlic and bay leaves with salt and pepper. Add paprika, wine and 1/2 cup olive oil, and blend well. In a deep dish, coat pork loin with marinade. Cover and refrigerate for at least 8 hours.
2. Remove pork from marinade. In an oven-safe pan, brown pork in the remaining 1/4 cup olive oil, and roast in a 350-degree oven for 75 minutes, or until internal temperature is 140 degrees.

Remove from heat and carve.

Sauce Ingredients

- 1 cup orange juice
- 1/4 cup Brandy
- 4 cups dark chicken stock
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1 cup black mission figs
- 3 blood oranges, peeled and sliced
- Salt and pepper

Sauce Preparation

1. In a saucepan over medium heat, reduce orange juice and Brandy by half. Add stock and reduce by half again. Add honey and figs, and gently simmer for 5 minutes. Add orange slices, season with salt and pepper, and simmer for 2 more minutes.

Final Preparation

Fan pork slices on plate, and ladle sauce on top.

CHESTNUT CAKE

You don't have to wait until Christmas to enjoy chestnuts. Try this recipe with Zinfandel or Primitivo for a special dessert. It makes 10 to 12

servings, depending on who's wielding the knife.

Ingredients

- 4 cups chestnut flour
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- Pinch of salt
- 2 cups cold water
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- Sprig of rosemary
- 1/2 cup pine nuts
- 1/2 cup raisins
- 1/4 cup chopped walnuts

Preparation

1. Preheat oven to 390 degrees. Sift chestnut flour into a bowl, and add sugar and salt. Gradually add water, taking care not to form lumps, to make a creamy liquid.
2. Brush a 9-by-13 cake pan with oil, and pour in batter. The pan should be high enough so the mix is about 1/2 inch deep. Sprinkle the surface with rosemary leaves, pine nuts, raisins and walnuts, and drizzle on a touch of olive oil.
3. Bake for about 30 minutes. Serve warm or cold.

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