

The Oregonian

Get to know wine, then food, before pairing them up

Tuesday, December 12, 2006

The Oregonian

The place: At Genoa, timing is everything. Suppers in this hushed dining room typically begin with an aperitif in the parlor, and then waltz through seven Italian courses accompanied by a prime selection of wines. And approximately once per month, when the restaurant hosts a winemaker dinner, the choreography gets even more detailed: On these one-of-a-kind evenings, a meal is matched, course by course, to the wines of a particular producer. (Genoa: 2832 S.E. Belmont St.; 503-238-1464; www.genoarestaurant.com)

The people: The minds behind the menu on such occasions are executive chef Alexandros Bourgidu and wine director Andrew Sprott along with menu chefs Kristian Sadler and Tyler Williams.

The producer profile: Apolloni Vineyards in Forest Grove is the estate of Italian-born Alfredo Apolloni, his wife, Laurine, and their three children. Because of its location in the northern Willamette Valley, the winery focuses primarily on growing and producing pinot noir, but Apolloni has not lost touch with the childhood training he received at his family's winery on Italy's central Adriatic coast. He has recently planted some nebbiolo and sangiovese vines at Apolloni Vineyards and makes his white wines in a fresh Italian style.

Find Apolloni Vineyards wines at the winery (visit www.apolloni.com for more information) or at Curds and Whey; Great Wine Buys; Elephants Delicatessen; Lamb's Wilsonville Thriftway Marketplace; Mt. Tabor Fine Wines; New Seasons markets Concordia, Mountain Park, Raleigh Hills and Seven Corners; Quinn's Prime and Vine; Strohecker's; Vino; and Woodstock Wine & Deli, or by special order through your local wine merchant.

The problem: If you've ever attended a winemaker dinner -- and many high-end restaurants in town host such special meals -- you've probably wondered how the chefs decide what they'll serve.

Let's listen in on the aforementioned team of Genovese (so to speak) as they sit down with manager Stephen Satterfield and Apolloni to brainstorm a menu for an Apolloni winemaker dinner to be held Dec. 11 (that is, last night).

Apolloni kicks things off by pouring six of his Willamette Valley wines for the toques to taste. A 2005 pinot blanc is spritzy, bright and barely sweet, with notes of mandarin orange and pear; a more minerally 2005 pinot gris is austere by comparison; a 2005 chardonnay is oak-free yet still voluptuous, with a streak of apricot. The 2004 pinot noir has a caramel nose and a dark cherry palate; the 2004 reserve pinot is more serious, with notes of stones and dark chocolate. The 2003 pinot noir is more alcoholic and intense.

Now the banter begins. "I want to flop the dinner," Sprott announces. "I want to start with reds and move to whites." Warming up to the idea, Williams suggests serving red wines with antipasto and pasta to start and seafood dishes with white wines to finish the meal.

Apolloni, a self-described traditionalist, blanches. "I'll take some pills later and I'll be fine," he groans.

Satterfield jumps in to smooth things over: "What can we do that will tie into the holidays?" he asks.

"Dec. 11 is just about when you start getting in the first truffles from Oregon and the Olympic Peninsula," Bourgidu says.

Sprott asks Apolloni what his family's favorite culinary traditions are during the holidays. "Cotechino," replies the vintner, referring to an Italian New Year's lentil and sausage dish, "and mushrooms and truffles. Boy, are those traditional."

After approximately an hour of discussion along these lines, Apolloni heads back to wine country and

Satterfield returns to his desk, leaving the chefs and wine director to hash out menu ideas among themselves. With the winemaker gone, they feel freer to discuss which wines they do and don't want to serve. Everyone tastes through the wines again as they talk. The chardonnay, which they weren't so fond of previously, opens up as it warms up a bit, while the pinot gris seems less interesting. The 2003 pinot noir, they decide, isn't a good food match.

Now the ideas start flowing: Williams dreams up a giant whole eel, served at a carving station. Sadler suggests an all-truffle menu. Sprott says the wines would work with an all-seafood meal, which sends the imaginations of the two menu chefs into overdrive: Oysters on the half-shell. Eel in red-wine sauce. Black squid-ink risotto with scallops on top. A mixed seafood grill. Crab. No, lobster. No, crab. Sadler envisions woodsy mussels in white wine, then clams with soppressata. Williams sees a different cooking technique for each course: fresh, braised, steamed, roasted, smoked. Someone grabs some smoked trout from the kitchen so the group can taste it with the pinot noir. They don't work together.

Bourgidu, the calm voice of reason amid the chaos, has started an outline on a sheet of paper. So far, he's written down Sprott's suggestion that they match the chardonnay with crab. Maybe they'll do a crab cannelloni with a light cream sauce. Or maybe it will be a crab sformato (souffle). Regardless, it's time to start preparations for dinner service. Everyone is exhausted and they haven't even discussed suitable dishes for the reds. The meeting is adjourned.

The pairing: A week later and two weeks before the Dec. 11 Apolloni dinner, Bourgidu has assembled a rough menu:

Dungeness crab tossed with fresh bread crumbs and aromatics, rolled in a crepe, topped with a light bechamel and baked. The wine: 2005 Apolloni Vineyards Willamette Valley Chardonnay.

House-made fettuccine tossed in butter, coarse sea salt and fresh Oregon black truffles. The wine: 2004 Apolloni Vineyards Willamette Valley Reserve Pinot Noir.

Apple-wood smoked trout with a caraway creme fraiche served with a salad of grapefruit, cerignola olives and watercress. The wine: 2005 Apolloni Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Blanc.

Muscovy duck breast marinated with bay leaves, garlic and cracked peppercorns, then pan-seared until crispy. Served with a sweet-and-tart cherry sauce of red wine, duck stock, port and green peppercorns, and accompanied by a sweet carrot and parsnip puree. The wine: 2004 Apolloni Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Noir.

With two seafood courses, a truffle course and an unorthodox wine order (white, red, white, red), the menu culls something from every main theme the group originally considered without taking any one idea over the top.

Only two questions remain: truffles and dessert.

"I'm really hoping I can get them. I'm praying," says Bourgidu when I ask him about the truffles. He concedes that he may have to change the menu at the last minute if local truffles aren't available. Or, if he can get a good price on Italian imports, he'll serve those.

As for a sweet course, the chefs have more thinking to do. "Unfortunately, Alfredo doesn't do a sweet wine," Bourgidu laments. "We're going to have to pick one of his dry wines to go with a dessert. It might end up being one of the reds."

(As of press time, these two questions hadn't yet been resolved, so I do hope that the guests at Genoa last night enjoyed a nice truffle pasta and a delicious dessert.)

The take-away: Interestingly, the staff at Genoa didn't spend too much time dwelling on the wine itself. I observed very little swirling, sniffing, note-taking or spitting. Instead, the chefs and wine director simply deliberated with the taste of wine in their mouths.

If you'd like to host your own wine-pairing dinner sometime, try Genoa's process: First, acquaint yourself with the wines you've chosen. Then, flip through cookbooks and let your imagination run wild while you're enjoying small sips of the wines you'd like to serve. Listen to your immediate gut reactions. Consider which ingredients are in season and what sorts of dishes are traditional this time of year. Finally, narrow your list down to a few recipes that work well with one another and that you can actually pull off in one evening.

You may find that once you've settled on a short list of dishes, the wines simply fall into place. Because, as you've been sipping the wines, you've been subconsciously pairing them.

Katherine Cole: 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland, OR 97201

©2006 The Oregonian