

A Taste of Excellence

Wine, food, education and seaside air blend beautifully to create a special event.

By Carl Danbury Jr.

Merely visiting The Cloister at Sea Island, Ga., can seem like an event unto itself, due to its impeccable reputation for service and the amenities and activities it offers guests. When the seaside resort hosts a special event, however, its undeniable charms and attention to detail shine like a lighthouse beacon.

Connoisseurs of food and wine gathered at The Cloister for the XVII Food & Wine Classic, a five-day celebration featuring some of the world's finest vintages and culinary delights. Esteemed chefs and wine professionals harmoniously matched food with wine throughout the week while simultaneously providing attendees a thorough education.

Certainly, many people enjoy wine by itself, but successfully pairing particular vintages with various foods creates the ultimate reward. The first evening of the event displayed the talents of The Cloister's executive chef Todd Rogers and his culinary staff as they joined Rob McNeill, director of winemaking for Mumm Cuvée Napa, in a reception and dinner that celebrated California wines and Sea Island cuisine.

The following day, guests could partake in numerous tastings, beginning with one by Stephan Gardinier, who presented wines from his family's early 10th century Bordeaux château and vineyard, Château Phelan Segur. Later, Steve Pignatiello of P. Comms International, an Asheville, N.C., importer of fine wines from Burgundy, presented a tasting that included Domaine Camus and other fine producers from the region.

Jochen Becker-Kohn of Weingut Robert Weil concluded the afternoon's events with an eight-vintage Grand Cru Kiedrich Grafenberg Auslese vertical, a rare opportunity in the U.S. because the wines aren't readily available here.

A champagne reception highlighted Thursday evening. Marie Caroline Paillard of Bruno Paillard Champagne hosted this event,



after which came a dinner titled "A Taste of France." Executive Chef William A. Koval from The French Room at The Adolphus in Dallas, one of the finest hotels in the Southwest, choreographed the food.

The Food & Winemakers dinner provided Friday evening's signature event. R. Michael Mondavi, president and CEO of the Robert Mondavi Winery, paired wines from around the world with the creations of chef Mauro Canaglia from Trattoria All' Angelo of Italy. Cigars, port, single-malt scotch and coffee followed the meal to put a perfect coda on the evening.

The common thread espoused by the wine professionals at the numerous seminars and tastings was that individuals enjoy different wines because everyone has a unique sense of taste and smell. The reputation of the 1976 Domaine de la Romanee-Conti La Tache Grand Cru as one of the best red Burgundies ever produced doesn't guarantee that everyone will enjoy it.

An event like the Food & Wine Classic provides each guest with the opportunity to explore the world of fine wines, a fact never more evident than during the "International Grand Tasting." More than 700 people attended and sampled approximately 400 selections of imported and domestic wines. Also, Cloister and guest chefs prepared an elegant cornucopia of food to accompany the extensive selection of wines. Dishes included sautéed scallops served over risotto, cannelloni topped with



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With the numerous receptions, seminars, luncheons, tastings and fabulous dinners offered during the Classic, choosing one to call the most enjoyable proves difficult. One of the most educational, however, was the vertical tasting of Mondavi Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, which gave an excellent example of individual taste preference. Hosted by Michael Mondavi and his son, Rob, this exclusive tasting offered samples of 15 vintages that spanned three decades. Dr. Henry Bohlman of Cleveland, Ohio, supplied the '74, '78, '79, '86 and '87 vintages from his private collection for the tasting.

After tasting all 15 vintages, I found that I preferred the '78, '84 and '92 vintages, while others seemed drawn toward the '74, '79, '86, '94 and '97 vintages. Those vintages were described as being "fruit-forward," and I enjoyed them less. At the conclusion of the tasting, I talked about my preferences with Rob Mondavi and asked him if the characteristics of the vintages I chose as my favorites could offer hints about what style of wine I would enjoy.

From those vintages, Rob derived that I prefer subtle wines and have a highly developed palate, which simply means that wines described as "fruit-forward" and "robust" likely would not to appeal to me. Those described as "silky" or those with "finesse" I probably would enjoy.

I discussed the details of my conversation with Steve Pignatiello, whose preferences resemble mine. He explained the characteristics of the wines I enjoyed typified those produced in Burgundy. I later had the opportunity to sample a few vintages from his collection during the International Grand Tasting.

Steve was on target. I particularly enjoyed the Jean Luc Joillot pinot noir and the Cave des Papes' Châteauneuf du Pape that I sampled during the grand tasting.

shrimp, sushi, and my favorite, duck quesadilla laced with black beans and topped with a luscious watermelon salsa.

With so many wines to choose from during the three-hour soirée, the best strategies were either to select a favorite type of wine and sample offerings from several vintners or to sample wines not tasted before.

I chose the first route and sampled numerous vintages of pinot noir, including Morgan, Acacia Carneros, Rodney Strong Reserve, Ramspeck, Tria Carneros, Saintsbury and Jean Luc Joillot. I preferred the Joillot from Burgundy, however, the Saintsbury and Tria proved elegant as well and are available locally at an attractive price.

Also, a separate room of waistline doom presented a scrumptious array of pastries where guests sampled sweet treats from all over the globe. Too numerous and sinful to describe, the

pastries looked and tasted exquisite – particularly the French and German selections – and the piping hot espresso provided by Royal Cup Coffee complemented them perfectly.

As the Classic came to a close the following morning, guests took one last chance to celebrate during the farewell champagne brunch. Two lucky individuals received the "Best of the Fest," a fine collection of vintages from the festival. Finally, a tour of The Cloister's wine cellar with Chef Sommelier John Capobianco concluded the fabulous five-day event.

The Classic typically takes place in January. Because demand for tickets to the grand tasting has made them scarce, advance planning and reservations are suggested. ■

For more information on next year's Food & Wine Classic, please call 800-732-4752 or 912-638-3611, or visit www.seaisland.com.