

Food and wine pairings served up northern lower Michigan style

BY JIM BARNES

It may not be listed among the world's great cuisines, but what we eat here in Northern Michigan includes many unique and wonderful things. Morels, asparagus, tart cherries, and smoked trout are some of the items that give this region its food identity. A newly burgeoning wine industry adds credence to the Traverse area's culinary scene, as local chefs and winemakers experiment with food and wine pairings and flavorful trends begin to emerge.

Local chef and cooking teacher Nancy Allen says the area's cuisine is a combination of local heritage and outside influences. "Indigenous ingredients such as wild mushrooms and leeks are what people know the area for, but there are influences from around the world that affect our cooking styles," says Allen, who has worked and studied all over the world, including an extended stay in Asia.

"Today you're seeing a big international influence on local cooking. Especially during our summertime, the Asian cooking style makes a lot of sense, with its use of fresh, quality ingredients, with strong individual flavors. Locally made Gewurztraminer, with its spiciness and floral aromas, is an excellent match for these flavorful, spicy dishes. Mediterranean cooking is also having a big impact right now, and local white wines like Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay go very well with the earthiness of Greek and Italian dishes."

Traverse-area sparkling wines are becoming more renowned, as a recent Wine Spectator magazine rating found "bubbly" from Leelanau County's Bel Lago and L. Mawby wineries in the 85-89 range ("very good wine with special qualities"). Allen says these wines are perfect for appetizer courses and as palette cleansers, as they cut through the buttery, strong flavors of ingredients like cheeses, avocado and olives.

Local restaurateurs seem to agree about the multiplicity of styles and influences of the area's cuisine.

"It's an exciting time for us, with lots of room for new ideas," says Michael Richmond, general manager at Bower's Harbor Inn, flagship restaurant of the Schelde chain and long-time icon of Traverse-area culinary excellence. "We've been doing weekly prix fixe menus with food and wine pairings, so we've tried a lot of fun

combinations. One recent match was an Ahi Tuna, cooked rare and served with Chateau Chantal's Trio (a medium bodied Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon blend)."

"You don't normally pair fish and fowl with red wines, but grilling, smoking and barbeque sauces change that completely," says Richmond. "The tang of the smoke and the sauce are very compatible with red wines. We recommend and serve reds like Pinot Noir with our ribs at The Bowery all the time."

Richmond says the area's white wines are perfect with fresh fish. "A semi-dry Riesling brings out citrus notes of basic fish dishes prepared with lemon. Local Chardonnays are great with cream sauces, blending with the wines' vanilla and oak flavors. Of course there are no set rules. But I do recommend that when making a wine sauce, use the wine you're going to drink. Don't prepare a sauce with cheap wine you wouldn't serve to your guests."

"When we match food and wine, we're looking for one of two things. First, there's harmony, when the flavors match completely, or else, dissonance, when the flavors are distinct opposites. The key is to keep it simple, and not read too much into it. It's all about enjoyment and discovering what you like."

Keil Moshier, executive chef at

Bower's Harbor Inn, echoes Richmond's philosophy with some recent creations and pairings. The Unwooded Chardonnay from Bower's Harbor Vineyard matched well with a simple herbed salmon and cream sauce. Peninsula Cellars' Mélange cherry port wine is often served with rich chocolate desserts to rave reviews.

"A local Riesling such as Chateau Grand Traverse's Semidry Johannesburg Riesling can be paired with a chicken dish much as you'd often see it served with Chardonnay. I did it myself at home the other day."

Moshier enjoys getting out to local wineries and tasting new vintages. "Area winemakers are thinking more and more about food, and local chefs are thinking more and more about local wines. As more restaurants and wineries get serious about good wine and food pairings, the area's cuisine will continue to develop an identity."

Where is la cuisine Northern Michigan headed?

"That's a tough question, because we utilize so many different regional styles, from Asian to Southwest American," says Mosier. "I don't know where it's going, but I do know it's going strong."

Jim Barnes is a local writer, wine enthusiast, and editor of the online magazine Independent Publisher (www.independentpublisher.com)



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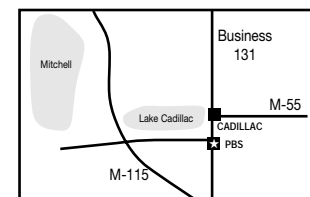
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