

Dolcetto • Nor-Cal Antipasto

Dolcetto (pronounced dole-CHET-toh) is an Italian grape from the Piedmont region. So, what's it doing in Lodi? Several decades ago, Anthony Celle brought some Dolcetto cuttings over from Italy in his suitcase and planted 3-1/2 acres on his farm in Linden. Steve Felten (owner of Klinker Brick Winery and Felten Mehlhaff Farms) wanted to farm the Celle's four acres of Petite sirah grapes, and the Dolcetto grapes were part of the deal. Not a problem for Klinker Brick winemaker Joseph Smith, who quickly turned the thick-skinned grape into an award-winning wine. Only a couple of other wineries (Pondl in Lodi and Andretti in Napa) make a Dolcetto wine from the Celle's vineyard, so it's hard to find--unless you're in Lodi.

Origin: Dolcetto is a black Italian wine grape varietal widely grown in the Piedmont region of northwest Italy. The Italian word "dolcetto" means "little sweet one," but that doesn't refer to the grape's sugar levels. Historians think the name came from the hills where the grape grew. They believe the grape originated in France, but the earliest records of Dolcetto go back to the 15th century in Piedmont. The grapes produce wines that can be very tannic with low to moderate acidity. Dolcetto's dark purple skins have high amounts of anthocyanins (the compounds that give wine its color), so the trick to making a drinkable wine is to limit the time that the skins are in contact with the juice ("maceration" time) to just long enough to ferment the wine to dryness.

Tasting and serving: Dolcetto is inky red, almost black. For all its color and tannins, Dolcetto wine is surprisingly light. It has aromas of plum, dark cherry, and licorice with tobacco and a hint of leather. The big tannins tamed by the winemaker dry out your mouth and linger for 10 to 15 seconds with a characteristic bitter aftertaste reminiscent of almonds. Serve Dolcetto at 55 to 60 degrees (15 to 20 minutes in a refrigerator).

Pairing: Like most Italian dry red wines, Dolcetto pairs well with pasta dishes and pizza. It pairs best with antipasto (cured meats, cheese, olives, pickled vegetables and smoked fish). I chose Klinker Brick 2015 Dolcetto to pair with my Nor-Cal (Northern California) Antipasto. The wine obviously goes with the ingredients in the platter, which are mostly pizza toppings, but the wine's astringency and bitter almond-like aftertaste make it a great choice before a meal. Klinker Brick Dolcetto wine is a by-product of sourcing grapes from other peoples' vineyards. The grapes coming as a part of a packaged deal takes us back to the origins of the winery. When Steve Felten married Lori Mehlhaff, he went into business farming with his father-in-law, Kenneth, forming Felten Mehlhaff Farms, Inc. In 1995, Gallo canceled their contract, leaving them with no buyer for their grapes. They borrowed a lot of money and quickly found a winery that turned their grapes into wine that they sold on the bulk market. That led them to experiment with their own wines and their first bottle of old vine Zinfandel. A couple of years later, Gallo came back asking to renew their contract, but it was too late. Klinker Brick wines were off and running. Today, Steve not only has a built-in market for his own grapes but also buys grapes from several Lodi growers.

Nor-Cal Antipasto

Ciao Bella! I'm talking to the wine, of course. When you get your hands on a great Lodi Italian varietal wine, you want an equally great Italian dish to go with it. Sure, you probably have a favorite Italian restaurant nearby where you can order take-out ravioli or eggplant parmesan, but why not greet



guests at your next party with your own spectacular Italian appetizer served with a great Lodi wine? Antipasto is the traditional first course of a formal Italian meal. There are as many variations as there are Italian ingredients, but the most common are cured meats, olives, pepperoncini, mushrooms, anchovies, cheese, and artichoke hearts. My antipasto is loaded with California ingredients that reflect our local flavor preferences. Be sure to marinate the olives and make the True Ranch Dressing the day before you want to serve the dish. If I'm not serving this appetizer at home, I make it in a Pyrex Portables dish that I can take with me.

Ingredients

- 1 cup green large pitted Castelvetrano olives
- 1/2 cup Kalamata olives
- 2 TBS Lodi Olive Oil-Ascolano
- 1 tsp lemon zest
- 2 sprigs of rosemary, leaves only (chopped 2 to 3 times)
- 3 cloves garlic, sliced thin
- 1/4 tsp red chile flakes
- 1/2 cantaloupe
- 10 slices prosciutto, ultra-thin, about 2 inches wide by 6 inches long
- 1 pound Molinari and Sons assorted dry cured salamis (3 different types), sliced very thin
- 1/2 cup celery, cut into 3-inch by 3/8-inch strips (about 2 stalks)
- 1/2 cup carrots, cut into 3-inch by 3/8-inch strips (about 2 carrots)
- 1/2 pound fresh mozzarella cheese, cut into 3/8-inch thick slices
- 1/4 cup traditional basil pesto
- 2 TBS Lodi olive oil
- 1 cup Compari tomatoes, sliced into 3/8-inch thick pieces
- 1 cup marinated artichoke hearts, cut into quarters
- 1/4 cup Bruno's Mild Wax Peppers
- 1 cup True Ranch Dressing (page 217)

Preparing the Olives

The day before you plan to serve your antipasto platter, thoroughly drain the Kalamata olives to prevent the dark juice from staining the lighter colored olives. Put them in a stainless steel fine mesh strainer over a bowl for about 10 minutes. Do the same for the Castelvetrano olives. Put all the olives in a small serving bowl. Drizzle 2 tablespoons of olive oil over the olives. I recommend Lodi Olive Oil Company's Ascolano to add a floral flavor component to the tanginess of the Kalamata and the tartness of the Castelvetrano. Using a microplane zester or fine grater, sprinkle the zest of a lemon (yellow part of the skin) over the olives. Sprinkle the rosemary leaves, garlic slices, and red chili flakes over the olives. Mix thoroughly with a spoon. Cover or wrap and allow the mix to sit overnight in the refrigerator. Remove from the refrigerator at least an hour before serving. The olive oil will harden and become white when cooled in the refrigerator but will turn back to clear oil at room temperature. This marinated olive recipe came from Dave Lieberman.

Preparing the Meats

A good antipasto platter should have three or four different types of meats. Molinari and Sons (in San Francisco) makes several types of dry cured salamis. A good trio for this dish is Molinari and Sons Italian Dry Salami, Calabrese, and Sopresatta. Genoa salami is also a good choice. Slice them ultra-thin--as thin as you can with a chef's knife--so that you can fold them in half. If you get the meat at a deli, have them slice it for you. Some packaged meats, like Columbus Craft Meats, come already sliced.



Preparing the Prosciutto-Wrapped Melon

To cut the cantaloupe, first slice the ends off. Set it upright. The flat bottom provides a stable platform for cutting vertically. Starting at the top and working toward the bottom, slice a 2-inch wide piece of skin off. Rotate the melon and slice another 2-inch wide piece off. Continue until all the skin is removed. Slice it in half and remove all the seeds and soft pulp and discard. Slice one of the halves lengthwise into four pieces. Slice the pieces into 1/2-inch strips. This should give you several 2 to 3-inch by 1/2-inch strips. Roll one slice of prosciutto around each cantaloupe piece and use a toothpick to secure the prosciutto around the cantaloupe.



Preparing the Pesto Oil

Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil to the pesto and mix. If you know how to make your own fresh pesto, that's great, but a pre-made pesto in a jar works just fine for this recipe.

Assembling the Platter

If you serve this at home, you can use a rectangular or oval plate, about 10 inches by 15 inches. If you take it somewhere else, use a 9 x 13 inch, 3-quart baking dish. I recommend the Pyrex Portables set with dish, insulated bag, lid, and hot/cold pack (page 73). Start with the cured meat slices. Fold them in half and fan them out on one end of the plate in three rows, one for each meat type. Shove each folded slice about half way under the previous slice and stack the next row about half way on the previous row to add height to the meat area. Line the prosciutto-wrapped cantaloupe pieces up against the third row of meats. Lay a few prosciutto rolls on top of the first row to add height. Fan out the sliced mozzarella lengthwise, parallel to the long edge of the plate next to the prosciutto. The cheese should extend to the end of the plate. Fan out the tomatoes next to the mozzarella in the center of the empty end of the plate. Pile the artichoke hearts in the remaining corner of the plate. Sprinkle Bruno's peppers around the platter.



Presentation

Just before serving, drizzle the pesto oil over the mozzarella cheese. Lay two tongs next to the platter for people to transfer the pieces into their own plate without having to touch the platter. Lay the stacks of celery strips and carrot sticks on their own serving plate. Put the bowl with marinated olives between the celery and carrots. Put the True Ranch Dressing in two bowls on either side of the carrot/celery plate.

The California Ingredient

Nebraska native Steve Henson married his high school sweetheart, Gayle, and moved her to Alaska to start a plumbing business. A few times a week, he would make a big salad for his crew and top it with his own dressing recipe: buttermilk, mayonnaise, sour cream, dried parsley, dried onion, dried garlic, salt and pepper. Everyone loved it. Their plumbing business was so successful that they retired at 35 and moved to California. In 1954, they bought the 120-acre Sweetwater Ranch near San Marcos Pass in Santa Barbara County. They didn't like the name, "Sweetwater," so they changed it to "Hidden Valley." It became a dude ranch. During the day, guests would enjoy the outdoors, and for dinner they would get a salad with Steve's special Hidden Valley Ranch dressing. The guests demanded that he put some in jars for them to take home. Their friends started mail-ordering the flavoring packets for 75 cents. At some point, Clorox bought the entire Hidden Valley Ranch dressing business for eight million dollars. Today, Ranch is the most popular dressing in America, and it actually came from a ranch! The Hidden Valley Ranch Dressing you buy in a bottle may taste much like the original, but it is soybean oil based and loaded with chemicals and preservatives. Even their dry mix has thickening agents and preservatives. On page 217, I have included a nearly junk-free blend that is very similar to Steve's original recipe.

Tips and Tricks

When working with fresh rosemary, hold the sprig at the uncut end. Starting just below where you are holding the sprig, lightly clamp the sprig with two fingers and run your fingers down the stem of the sprig. The needle-like leaves will slide right off the stem. Discard the stem (see photo on page 135).

Carrots sticks can be a little tricky to cut with a sharp chef's knife if you're not used to it. The carrots are round, and the knife can easily slip off to one side. First, wash the carrots. I run them under cold water and "scrub" the skin with my hand. I use a Titan Peeler to shave the skin off. The ends will have some skin left, so chop them off. The peeled carrot should be about 6 to 8 inches long. Cut it into two 3-inch pieces. The first cut is tricky. Roll the carrot around until you find an orientation that is most stable. Holding the carrot with your thumb and forefinger on either side, slide the knife blade between your thumb and forefinger over the center of the carrot (see photo below). Press the knife edge near the tip down on the far end of the carrot and rock the heel of the blade toward the cutting board as you push the knife through the carrot. Do this slowly and maintain control. Once the carrot is cut in half, you can set the flat side on the cutting board and have a stable piece to cut. Slice off about 1/8 inch from each side of the half carrot and discard (or eat). Cut the carrot into two or three pieces, depending on the width of the piece, to get approximately 3/8-inch sticks.



Find the most stable orientation, hold firmly and slice down the middle



Cut approximately 1/8-inch pieces from each side of the half carrot to square the carrot for slicing

To cut celery sticks, first wash the celery stalks. I run them under cold water and "scrub" with my hand. Cut off both ends. Cut the stalk into two or three pieces to get pieces approximately 3 inches long. Rotate the 3-inch celery piece so that the round side is up, giving you a stable piece to cut. Slice each piece lengthwise into two or three sticks, approximately 3/8 inches wide.