

Magazine Archives: Oct. 31, 2010



View the entire table of contents for the Oct. 31, 2010 issue.

Where Italy Meets California

A chef and vintner shares a wine-country menu

Harvey Steiman

Issue: October 31, 2010

◀ 12

◀ 4



Michael Chiarello always loved the kitchen. At the age of 8, a class assignment required him to talk about what he wanted to do when he grew up. While other boys spoke of fighting fires or building homes, he described how he wanted to be a chef.

"My family is from Calabria, in southern Italy, and my mother was a phenomenal cook," he recalls today. "When I was 4 or 5, my dad had a stroke. He was paralyzed. I spent a lot of time with my mom, hanging out in the kitchen, because that's where she was."

It rubbed off. Today the boy from the farming town of Turlock, in California's Central Valley, has Bottega, a hot restaurant in Napa Valley, a cookware and food shop called NapaStyle, television programs and eight cookbooks. His winery, Chiarello Family Vineyards, specializes in Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon and a white wine made from Ribolla Gialla, a northern Italian grape.

Chiarello still loves to discourse on food and wine. Preparations for dinner at his home, adjacent to his Napa Valley vineyard on the outskirts of St. Helena, find him in a loquacious mood. A boyish 48 years old, the chef exudes an easy charm, and years of cooking on television have primed him to comment as he works. Frying garlic and basil for a garnish, he can't help but mention that he always cooks with extra-virgin olive oil, even though experts say it's a waste because its flavor diminishes. "If I'm going to lose half the flavor, I would rather have half of something when I'm done," he argues.

He admits that he feels most at home the closer he gets to food. "A therapist would say the kitchen is where I had the most joy when I was growing up," he allows. "I learned about the family by listening to my mom as I knocked open walnuts with a hammer. Every activity I loved to do ended with eating.

"And I thought, wow, if you could get paid to make people this happy"

His cooking style favors creative combinations that find complex flavors and textures with relatively simple-looking, fairly traditional, elements. He often adds a personal twist. "I try to sprinkle in something that makes 'em wake up," he smiles. Green Egg and Ham, for example, plays asparagus against a soft-boiled egg with pecorino cheese pudding and a scattering of crisply fried prosciutto. Bottega serves polenta under glass, cheekily elevating a traditionally rustic dish to the status of a classic. He might top a whole fish roasted in the wood oven with a romesco, a Spanish sauce, or use a traditional northern Italian mostarda (pickled fruit) on duck confit, a French cooking method.

After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in 1982 and Florida International University in 1984, Chiarello pursued a career in French cuisine. But everything changed for him when he applied for a job with Cindy Pawlcyn at Mustards Grill in Napa in 1986. He didn't get the job ("She said I was too headstrong to be in her kitchen," he laughs), but she sent him up the road to talk to her partners, who were opening a new Italian place in St. Helena called Tra Vigne.

"That was the first time I ever cooked Italian food professionally," he recalls. The test menu he created combined his Calabrian roots with some French techniques. "I made two pastas, a squid ink cannelloni filled with a shrimp farce with bouillabaisse flavors, and from the shells I made sauce like the classic *américaine*. And I did gnocchi with old hen tomato sauce [cooked with a stewing chicken], something I knew how to do. My brother had just given me some salami, which I added to the sauce. I grilled a pear and served it with prosciutto, and I made a lamb loin rollatini with pesto."

Tra Vigne was a hit, and he remained involved with it until 2000. He spun off NapaStyle, and devoted much of the past decade to television and cookbooks. The following he created in these media flocked to Bottega when he opened the Yountville restaurant in May 2009. It has become one of the most popular in Napa Valley.

Chiarello's cooking style is very Italian-and Californian-in that he favors simple combinations of ingredients over complicated techniques or elaborate presentations. He describes his cuisine as inspired by family traditions and seasonal local ingredients. "My family came over from Italy to

work in the logging industry, but Sunday supper was Sunday supper, just like it was in Calabria," he recalls. "Cooking didn't start in the kitchen, or the grocery store, but by going to see the rabbit guy, or the butcher."

And there was always wine. Chiarello's father made three or four barrels a year, for family and friends. "Being in Napa Valley, my life could not be complete without making wine," he says. Thus, the 20 acres of vines outside the kitchen window, including some 95-year-old Zinfandel.

"Sometimes in the restaurant we'll pour Rafanelli Zinfandel alongside ours, because the budwood for our Zin came from their vineyard," Chiarello says. "We ask people if they see a relationship. For me it's kind of like cousins, not really siblings."

Consulting winemaker Thomas Brown makes Chiarello's wines from the organic, sustainably farmed vineyard. The Cabernet, designated Eileen, is named after his wife of seven years; the Zinfandel, Giana, for his oldest daughter from a previous marriage. (A white wine is made from Ribolla Gialla, grown near Calistoga from cuttings taken from Gravner in northern Italy.) The Cabernets and Zinfandels earn outstanding ratings (90 points or higher on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale) for the same kind of rich, natural flavors, delivered with a deft touch, that characterize his food.

For this dinner Chiarello opened two bottles with each course, one from Chiarello Family Vineyards and a comparable wine from Italy. We tasted both wines and agreed on which to serve. With food that interprets Italian ideas through a California sensibility, there was no predicting which region would prevail. The result is a menu that nods to both regions, on the plate as well as in the glass.

The series of courses starts with crudo (raw fish) with rustic embellishments, moving on to a primo of colorful spaghetti cooked in red wine, and a secondo of slow-roasted pork, finishing with a simple semolina-almond torta and fresh fruit. "This is what I would do for harvest meal, on the last day of picking," he says. "Two or three waiters and a couple of cooks join the guys from the ranch to help pick. And I cook."

It's a simpler menu than he might make at Bottega. "When people come to the restaurant they expect me to chef up, make it more complicated, dress it up on the plate," he says. "At home, we're a lot more relaxed."

He did present the ahi tuna crudo, garnished with an "angry" bite from hot peppers, on blocks of Himalayan salt he brought home from the restaurant. It looked spectacular. Well-chilled, the salt blocks keep the fish very fresh and add a subtle flavor of their own (the blocks can be purchased online). On the other hand, Chiarello's garnish of fried basil and garlic slices has enough flavor that serving the fish on plates would have little adverse effect on the flavor. "Just season the fish with a good sea salt," the chef advises.

It certainly would not bother the wine match. Chiarello poured Schramsberg Blanc de Blancs North Coast 2006 (88, \$36). The crisp balance and vibrant citrus and spice flavors bring a zingy contrast to the richness of the tuna, and work well with the herb and garlic garnish. "With

Champagne, I always go for contrast," Chiarello says, then adds, "My wife and I have been drinking this a lot lately, not just because they're here in Napa Valley but because we think they've got it licked."

For the pasta dish, Chiarello finished cooking the spaghetti in a red-wine reduction, which turned the strands wine-purple, a dramatic visual contrast with the green broccoli rabe (rapini). He got the idea from a chef in the Piedmont region of Italy, who applied to spaghetti a technique similar to one used to make risotto with red wine.

Even though it's meatless, this pasta dish cozies up well with red wine. Chiarello used Zinfandel for the sauce, but Re Manfredi Aglianico Del Vulture 2005 (NR, \$38) surprised us both with its change of personality with the dish. On its own, it felt savory and earthy, a distinctive and compelling wine, but lacking in fruit. The pasta's flavors brought out a ripe fruit character lurking below the surface.

"I like the contrast better. The Aglianico is leaner and quite a bit thinner on the palate, and then it fattens up with the dish," he says. "When I felt the starch from the pasta in my mouth, I knew the glycerines from the Zin would be too much."

All the while he was making these dishes, spicy aromas of the pork roast perfumed the whole house. "A dish like this arrosto, cooking at 275° F since 7 in the morning, gives everybody a hug before they get to the door," he laughs. "And it's easy. You can put it in the oven in the morning, go off to work, and it's ready when you come home."

The dish does need some preparation. The butterflied meat should be seasoned inside and out with a toasted spice rub before being tied into a solid roll. Chiarello recommends making the spice rub and taking it to the butcher to apply after you purchase the meat. "A good butcher will do it for you," he says. "And if he won't do it for you, you're going to the wrong guy."

Chiarello's own Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Eileen 2006 (90, \$65) embraced the spices of the pork perfectly. A supple, richly textured wine, it delivers more chocolate than herbal character, offering cocoa and white pepper notes in the finish profile. We both smiled at the match.

For dessert, Chiarello had baked a simple almond torta, a rustic sort of cake based on almonds and semolina, a hard-wheat flour often used to make pasta. "It really doesn't need much else, just a few pieces of fresh fruit and a spoonful of whipped cream or gelato, if you like."

As with all desserts, all it needs is a wine that's sweeter than the food, such as Vin Santo, a sweet wine made from dried grapes and aged for several years in sealed barrels. Barone Ricasoli Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio 2004 (90, \$52) has an almond tone of its own (in both flavor and color) that matches up seamlessly with the cake. Italians often serve such wines with biscotti, a pastry with a similar flavor profile.

Unlike many chefs, for whom wine is an afterthought, Chiarello gets into it, and not only by making his own wines. He has a feel for what really happens when a glass of wine meets his food. That goes back to his early days in Napa Valley. In the 1980s, among other jobs, he worked with Beaulieu Vineyard to create wine and food pairings.

"We would cook a steak and try some wines with it," he recalls. "If we would add a green peppercorn sauce, everything changed about the wine. With every spice and nuance, the most unexpected surprises would come. I love those moments when you stop long enough to consider what do you like better, the wine you chose or something else.

"I would have lost a \$100 bet on that Aglianico," he laughs. "I thought it would die next to the spaghetti, with all the young Zinfandel in the sauce. But it was better than the young Zinfandel in the dish."

It's not a regional match, either. The Aglianico is from southern Italy, and the dish is based on an idea from the opposite end of the country. In a way, that fits seamlessly with Chiarello's own approach to cooking. If you can reinterpret Italian ideas with California ingredients and a modern American style, why not the wines? In the end, that's what this menu demonstrates.

"ANGRY" AHI TUNA CRUDO

1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

4 garlic cloves, finely sliced

1 tablespoon serrano chile, seeded and finely sliced

1 1/2 cups fresh basil leaves

Sea salt, preferably gray salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon orange zest, julienned

1 pound sashimi-grade big-eye or sushi-grade tuna, cut into 2-inch bricks

1 salt block for serving, or sea salt for sprinkling

For the sauce: In a large sauté pan or skillet, heat the olive oil over high heat and add the garlic. As soon as it begins to color, add the chile and sauté for 10 seconds. Add the basil leaves. They hold water, so they'll pop when you toss them into the hot pan. Sauté until crispy, 1 to 2 minutes, flipping the pan's contents or stirring with a wooden spoon. Season with salt and pepper, remove from heat, and stir in the orange zest.

To serve: Cut the tuna into 1/8-inch-thick slices and fan the slices on a salt block or a chilled plate. If not using a salt block, season the fish lightly with the best salt you have. Top with a little of the "angry" sauce. Serves 6.

SPAGHETTINI COOKED IN RED WINE WITH SPICY BROCCOLI RABE

1 1/2 pounds broccoli rabe (rapini)

1 pound spaghetti or spaghettini

1 bottle (750ml) dry red wine, preferably Zinfandel

1 tablespoon sugar

1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons (about 4 cloves) garlic, peeled and sliced

1 teaspoon Calabrian chile paste or 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1 teaspoon kosher salt or sea salt, preferably gray salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1/2 cup grated pecorino Romano cheese

1. In a large pot of salted boiling water, cook the broccoli rabe for about 3 minutes. Transfer the broccoli rabe to a baking sheet and spread it out to cool.
2. In the same boiling water, cook the spaghettini, stirring occasionally, for 2 minutes if fresh, 3 to 5 minutes if dried; if using spaghetti, cook for 2 minutes if fresh, 6 to 8 minutes if dried. (You'll do the remaining cooking in the Zinfandel.) Reserve 1 cup of the pasta water, then drain the pasta and set it aside. Return the empty pasta pot to the stove.
3. Add the wine and sugar to the pasta pot. Bring to a boil over high heat and cook to reduce by half, 8 to 10 minutes. Add the pasta to the pot and gently stir with tongs to prevent the pasta from sticking. Boil over high heat, stirring occasionally, until most of the liquid is absorbed and the pasta is al dente, about 3 minutes for spaghettini and 4 or 5 minutes for spaghetti. Tasting tells you when your pasta is ready better than the clock can.
4. While the pasta cooks in the wine, heat a large, deep sauté pan or skillet over high heat. Add the oil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and sauté the garlic until pale golden, about 3 minutes. Add the chile paste or red pepper flakes, blanched broccoli rabe, and salt and pepper.
5. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in 1/2 cup of the reserved pasta water. Add the broccoli rabe mixture to the pasta, toss gently, and transfer to individual pasta bowls or one large platter. Sprinkle with the cheese. *Serves 8 as a first course.*

ALL-DAY ARROSTO OF PORK

8-pound boneless pork butt or pork shoulder, butterflied

Sea salt, preferably gray salt

Freshly ground black pepper

4 tablespoons toasted spice rub (recipe follows)

Zinfandel mosto cotto (optional)

Note: Mosto cotto is a sweetened mixture of wine, verjus, vinegar and spice used as a condiment.

1. Preheat the oven to 275° F. Unroll the butterflied pork and season the top with the salt, pepper, and 2 tablespoons of the toasted spice rub, or bring the spice rub to the butcher to do it for you.
2. Roll up the meat and secure with kitchen twine every 2 inches. (Don't make the twine too tight, because after 8 hours of cooking, it'll be a challenge to cut it away; just secure it tightly enough so the pork doesn't come unrolled.) Season the outside of the meat with salt and the remaining 2 tablespoons of spice rub, being sure to season the ends of the roll too. Using a sheet of aluminum foil, cover the thin end where there is no fat.
3. Put the pork in a roasting pan and bake for 8 hours, removing the foil after 4 hours of cooking. Remove from the oven and let rest in the pan for 30 minutes.

To serve: Cut the pork into slices as best you can. The meat will be so tender it will fall apart. If you want more precise slices, use an electric carving knife. Serve with a simple vegetable, such as herb-roasted potatoes. Drizzle the plate with pan juices and mosto cotto, if desired. *Serves a crowd (16 to 20).*

TOASTED SPICE RUB

1/4 cup fennel seeds
1 tablespoon coriander seeds
1 tablespoon black peppercorns
1 1/4 teaspoons red pepper flakes
1/4 cup pure California (or other mild) chile powder
2 tablespoons kosher salt
2 tablespoons ground cinnamon

1. In a small skillet, toast the fennel, coriander and peppercorns over medium heat, tossing frequently, until the fennel seeds turn light brown.
2. Turn your exhaust fan to high, add the red pepper flakes, and toss the spices three times. Immediately remove the pan from the heat and empty the spices onto a plate to cool completely.
3. In a blender, combine the cooled spices with chile powder, salt and cinnamon. (Don't try to grind the spices before they're at room temperature, or they will gum up your blender's blades.) Blend until finely and evenly ground. (Alternately, use a small spice mill or a coffee grinder dedicated to spices to finely grind the fennel, coriander, peppercorns and red pepper flakes. Empty the ground spices into a bowl and stir in the chile powder, salt and cinnamon.)
4. Store in an airtight container in a cool, dark place for up to 4 months, or freeze for up to 1 year.
Makes about 1 cup.

SEMOLINA-ALMOND TORTA

8 ounces almond paste, broken into pieces
1 1/4 cups granulated sugar, plus 1/4 cup for coating pan
1 cup (2 sticks) plus 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla or almond extract
6 large eggs, at room temperature
1/4 cup fine-ground semolina
1/4 cup almond flour
2/3 cup all-purpose flour
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F. Spray a 10-inch round cake pan or a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan with vegetable-oil spray, then line with parchment paper. Spray the parchment paper. Pour the 1/4 cup sugar into the pan and tilt to coat the bottom and sides. Knock out the excess sugar.
2. In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine the almond paste and the 1 1/4 cups sugar. Beat on medium-low speed until the paste is pulverized and completely mixed with the sugar, about 5 minutes. Don't skimp on this mixing time, or the almond paste will sink to the bottom of the cake during baking.
3. Add the butter, and cream until light and fluffy, 2 to 3 minutes, stopping once or twice to scrape down the bowl. Reduce the mixer speed to low, and add the vanilla extract. Add the eggs one at a time, stopping to scrape down the bowl after every addition. Beat for 2 minutes after the last egg is added.

4. In a separate bowl, combine the semolina, almond and all-purpose flours, baking powder and salt. Stir with a whisk to blend. With the mixer on low speed, add all the dry ingredients at once and beat until blended.

5. Remove the bowl from the stand mixer and with a spatula give it a few turns, scraping the bowl to make sure no dry ingredients are hiding at the bottom. Pour the batter into the prepared pan, scraping out the bowl. Spread the batter evenly in the pan and give the pan a light tap on the counter to coax any air bubbles from the batter.

6. Bake for 40 minutes, rotating the pan after 25 minutes, or until the cake is golden-brown and has pulled away slightly from the sides of the pan. Remove from the oven and let cool on a wire rack for 1 hour. Serve with fresh fruit if desired. Serves 12.

See Also

[Exploring Italy](#)

[Heart of the Dolomites](#)

[Tuscany Scores Twice](#)

[Tuscany Alphabetical Listing](#)

[The Lion of Bussia](#)
