

San Francisco Chronicle

CHEF'S MULTI-COURSE MEAL WITH WINE PAIRINGS

Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS out of a possible 4 STARS

by Carey Sweet, Special to The Chronicle Sunday, July 25, 2010

"More Pinot Noir?" asked Signorello Estate's John Allen Burtner, as we relished our rabbit salad. Or perhaps we preferred another glass of lightly oaked Chardonnay, as either went well with the smoked allspice-and-blood-orange-cured meat tossed with chorizo, wild mushrooms, pistachios and blackberries.

We were in the middle of a multicourse wine-paired meal in an upgraded tasting option called the Enoteca Signorello Experience (\$65) that the Napa winery introduced last spring. As more and more wineries join the trend of offering food alongside their samples of wine, few do it better than this Silverado Trail estate. Chef Rodger Babel creates six dishes for an elegant feast ranging from poached tuna flaked with harissa and picholine olives, to Snake River Farms American Wagyu beef over fingerling potatoes and roasted trumpet mushrooms in black currant sauce.



The vibe: The food is highend (slabs of Kurobuta pork, anyone?) yet the mood is refreshingly kickback, with Burtner leading an informative but entirely relaxed immersion into wine appreciation. During our visit, both the chef and the winemaker popped in to say hello; the chef surprised us with some freebie chocolate truffles rolled in ras el hanout, a Moroccan spice blend.

The team: British Columbia businessman Raymond Signorello Sr. purchased what was a former retirement home for racehorses in 1977, transforming it into a winery in 1980. The first vintage was produced in 1985, with a current production of 7,000 cases. When he passed away in 1998, his son, Ray, who lives in Vancouver, took over. Winemaker Pierre Birebent joined Signorello in 1998 after getting his start at his family's winery in France at age 11.

The wines: Of the 100-acre estate, 42 acres are planted with Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot, Semillon and Cabernet Franc, while the winery purchases Pinot Noir and Zinfandel. But Signorello's signature is a lush Cabernet Sauvignon. You sample a full range of current and reserve wines in the Enoteca tasting, including Seta (a Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc blend) and Padrone (a Bordeaux-style red blend).

The experience: Plan on a comfortable two-hour visit, starting with a bonus glass of dry Vin Gris de Pinot Noir to sip during a quick tour of the vineyards. Then, you gather at a long wooden table seating a maximum of 10, set in an airy room bright with natural light from French doors overlooking a poolside patio.

The food and wine and lovely setting could be good enough on its own. Burtner's obvious enthusiasm made the time remarkable. Too many guided tastings across Napa Valley can feel stiff or pretentious, or are hosted by inexperienced staff. But my group of three felt like a private party as Burtner showered us with insight from his decades working in the wine industry and made us laugh with his breezy insider observations.

The extras: On weekends in April through October, guests can enjoy wood-oven pizza on the patio, paired with wines from the standard tasting room lineup (\$35). Two organic gardens on the property supply some ingredients.

If you go: Signorello Estate, 4500 Silverado Trail (at Oak Knoll Ave.), Napa. (707) 255-5990. signorelloestate.com. Enoteca Signorello Experience: 11 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. daily, by appointment only (\$65). Pizza Pairing: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sat. and Sun. (\$35) Tasting room: Mon.-Thurs. by appointment only, 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Fri.-Sun., (\$15)

This article appeared on page M - 6 of the San Francisco Chronicle

(The San Francisco Chronicle has rated over 600 wineries and only 10 have received 3 ½ stars or above)



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