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Toast and Taste

A Culinary Guide to the Perfect Spring Menu

Plus

Swinging Hawaii, Party Time, L.A.'s Green Team, Blind Faith & More

All the Right Moves

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As the weather warms,
the palate yearns for
fine food and good wine.

But how to pick the
perfect pairs?

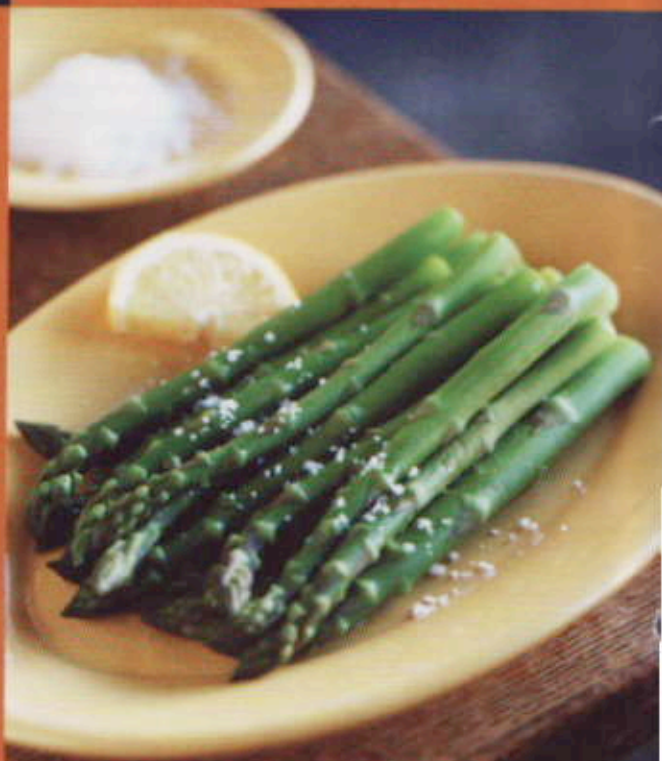
Two Bruin culinary
experts share their favorites
for perfect meals during
nights on the town
or quiet dining at home.

By Mark Davis

Photos by Lisa Thompson

Wining & Dining

A Bruin Guide
to Spring Dining





BUSINESS LUNCHES, ROMANTIC DINNERS, quiet meals at home, picnics at the Bowl — food and drink are rarely just about eating. Partnerships, both personal and professional, can get the perfect boost from a well-chosen menu.

Interesting, surprising and delicious are the goals, but where to start? Romanian wine? Acorn-fed boar? What wine pairs well with fries?

Here are two who know the answers. Evan Kleiman '76, M.B.A. '80 is the acclaimed chef-owner of Los Angeles institution Angeli Caffè, cookbook author and host of KCRW's *Good Food*. Courtney Cochran '01, M.B.A. '05 is founder of Your Personal Sommelier, a wine consulting business, author of *Hip Tastes: The Fresh Guide to Wine*, and publisher of a blog at www.HipTastes.com.

Recently, Kleiman and Cochran sat around the virtual kitchen table and took on that tasteful task, while *UCLA Magazine* took notes.

SPRING FOR A PICNIC

Kleiman: Spring is about reveling in the simply seasonal and fresh. And what eating experience is more natural than eating with your fingers? A picnic is the perfect place to revert to our childlike selves.

Giant green asparagus spears that have been drizzled with olive oil and lightly roasted are delicious with a bit of lemon-infused fleur de sel (a specialty French sea salt). And despite the adage that asparagus doesn't pair with wine, try a light red, like a rose or dolcetto.

Cochran: Spring is all about effervescence, and prosecco from northeastern Italy's Veneto region is

the perfect bubbly for the season. The easy drinking sparkler packs lively acidity and often a hint of sweetness, which makes it perfect for salty picnic foods, since sweetness is the ultimate foil to salt. A simple prosciutto and melon appetizer is heaven with an off-dry (slightly sweet) prosecco. It will also pair beautifully with sandwiches made with cured meats, salads and even potato chips.

Kleiman: And how about a bite of a luscious, perfectly ripe farmer's market apricot? Take a few ripe apricots along with a small container of crème fraîche and a couple of amaretti cookies. Pull the apricots apart, remove the pit. You can toss them into the surroundings; maybe a tree will grow. Spoon the crème fraîche into the apricot halves and crush the cookies over. Enjoy the sweet, luscious creaminess of it all.

Cochran: And where would we be on a picnic without really good cheese? Goopy, salty-tasting cheese is actually best paired with sweet wines with a strong backbone of acidity. Acid cuts through the copious fat in the cheese, a welcome thing when you're tucking into the likes of a triple cream brie! French sweeties like those from Sauternes in southern Bordeaux or the Loire Valley's Vouvray and Quarts de Chaume regions rarely disappoint with cheese.

Kleiman: I love the idea of cheese in any form. The ascetic asparagus will pair beautifully with the extreme creaminess of an Explorateur slathered on oat crackers.

THE CULINARY ART OF ROMANCE

Cochran: When it comes to romance and wine, there are two things that spring to mind: Champagne

(Opposite, top) Evan Kleiman (left) and Courtney Cochran dish on food and wine at Kleiman's famed Angeli Caffè.

(Bottom) What's a picnic without giant green asparagus spears drizzled in olive oil and lightly roasted? And by all means, do try it with a good rose.

(This page, above) Whites like this pinot blanco originated in the Loire region of France, famous for its own white, Vouvray, as well as its flowers and chateaus — surely an image to whet the appetite of anyone.

(Below) Grate some roasted beets into a ricotta mixture and get your taste buds ready for an elegant and economical gnocchi dish colored fuchsia and flavored to die for.

and silky and seductive reds. Champagne signals “special” like no other wine, and popping the cork is pretty dramatic, too. Champagne’s texture, epitomized in its lively, elegant bubbles, is itself exciting and awakens the senses.

Silky reds — fruity, easy-drinking reds with soft tannins (plant compounds responsible for the chalky sensation you may feel on your teeth and gums after drinking a particularly full-bodied wine) — are also home runs for romance. Pinot noir boasts all of the

“silky red” characteristics you want in a romance wine. It’s never been easier to find a good bottle of pinot. Terrific alternatives include aged Bordeaux and mature Brunello di Montalcino from Italy’s sunny Tuscany. And while these Italian charmers start off with fairly hefty tannins, they’re softened over years in a cellar (yours or your favorite wine merchant’s) into elegant things bursting with layered flavors sure to draw sighs of delight from your sweetie.

Kleiman: Don’t you think the most romantic meals are those that are spontaneous and fun? Sometimes it’s best to just head to your favorite mid-priced restaurant, then order one favorite menu item and one you’ve always wondered about but never ordered. For the wine? Order from the top end that you normally would never let yourself taste. So maybe your meal is pizza or roast chicken and a fine Barolo or Super Tuscan.

If you choose to eat at home, choose recipes which you’ve made before and which you love, but don’t make often. If you’ve been denying yourself pasta, make your favorite pasta dish. Splurge for a bottle of wine that you’ve always wanted to taste but were afraid you didn’t have the palate to appreciate.

Cochran: The only way to top a regular bottle of Champagne when it comes to romance is to spring for a prestige cuvée, something very rare and very expensive like Louis Roederer’s Cristal and Moët & Chandon’s Dom Pérignon. Or sample a delicious rose Champagne.

For a wild card romantic notion, choose a red, fizzing, sweet Brachetto d’Acqui from Italy’s northwestern Piedmont. It drinks like a grown-up Shirley Temple and is the perfect wine for quaffing with berry-laced chocolate desserts.

Kleiman: Indulge yourself. If you’ve been eating low-fat, have a lovely cheese or rich dessert. The key is to make sure you deliver on your expectations. Relax, laugh and enjoy.

INDULGE IN SEASONAL BOUNTY

Kleiman: Few foods are as fun to eat as a whole artichoke with a dip.

Cochran: When it comes to an artichoke, let the dipping sauce that accompanies the delicacy lead your wine selection; be sure to choose a wine that’s



Sparkling wine is awesome with burgers and fries. Argentinian reds rock with a spicy chili, and pulled pork is terrific with zinfandel.

high in acidity in order to stand up to this rather ascetic vegetable.

I'm a fan of a simple lemon butter for dipping artichoke leaves, which seems tailor-made for one of my all-time favorite wines, Chablis. Chardonnay from the Chablis region in northeastern France conveniently boasts both citrus and butter notes and backs it all up with an impressive backbone of acidity, thanks to the cool growing climate. Other good bets for artichokes include sauvignon blanc and Chinon, a light-bodied red made from herbal-tasting cabernet franc in France's Loire Valley.

Kleiman: A rack of lamb is perfect for spring and is simple to cook. One easy recipe is to salt and pepper the meat, then sear it in a pan. Let it cool enough to handle, then slather with good Dijon mustard. Mix your favorite unseasoned bread crumbs with a generous amount of pesto sauce, then pile the pesto bread crumbs onto the rack of lamb. Roast at 400 degrees until the meat reaches an internal temperature of 130-140 degrees for medium rare and 140-150 for medium. Don't forget to let the rack rest about eight minutes before you cut it into chops. Resting allows the juices to flow back into the meat and not out onto

your cutting board. Drizzle the cut chops with a bit of pesto sauce.

Cochran: Herbed-Dijon lamb is a shoe-in for cabernet sauvignon-based blends from Bordeaux, where a good amount of herbal-tasting cabernet franc is included in the blend. For a fun alternative, try a varietal cabernet franc from California. There are some terrific ones made in the Santa Cruz Mountains; I recommend Burrell School Vineyards' award-winning version.

Besides these, Italian reds are known for their subtle herbal notes as well as their high acidity, which will work well with Dijon mustard, also quite ascetic. Try a Chianti Classico, a Super Tuscan or a Nero d'Avola from newly hip Sicily in the south.

ELEGANCE CAN BE ECONOMICAL

Cochran: People don't think a lot about pairing wine with more common foods, but making more hip pairings can create a standout experience. Sparkling wine, for example, is awesome with the super fatty and salty taste of burgers and fries. Argentinian reds rock with a spicy chili, and pulled pork is terrific with zinfandel.

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Tips on Tasting

THE EXPERT WINE instructors in UCLA Extension's Vintage program have the answers to all your wine questions. Connoisseur and retail expert James Yobski teaches in the Sequential Program in Vintage, a course series for those with a serious interest in wine. Scott Torrence, a vice president with Christie's wine department, teaches "Introduction to Wine" and "The Art of Pairing Wine with Food."

Hopefully, you won't find yourself sitting in a restaurant, your eyes glazing over as you try to decipher the wine list. You'll have done some homework beforehand, tasting wine and discovering what you like. There are several ways to go about this.

Try tasting flights — samples of three or

four paired wines — at a wine bar or accommodating wine shop, or share a few bottles, and your impressions of each, with friends. You'll be able to focus on the wine and compare similar bottles — the best way to taste wine, says Yobski.

How to choose the bottles? Go to a good wine shop and ask. As you taste more wines and develop your palate, you and your wine merchant both will become better able to choose wines that fit your taste. You might also look for the wine importer's information on the bottles you like.

But don't be afraid to be adventurous, adds Torrence. There's a world of wine out there. Dry rose is Yobski's pick; it pairs well with

Mediterranean food and Los Angeles' climate. Torrence mentions syrah, which offers the weight of a merlot, but with more depth.

A good restaurant wine buyer will tailor the restaurant's wines to the chef's food, Torrence says, and a good wine steward will know the wine list. And don't be afraid to specify a price range, Torrence says. "A lot of times wine stewards can be most creative around \$40, because there are so many wines available in that range."

And when in doubt, says Torrence, "order a pinot noir."

For more information on Extension's wine courses, visit www.extension.ucla.edu.

— John Ferrari



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WINING AND DINING

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There are some terrific "budget versions" of wines that have similar qualities to higher-end counterparts for a lot less money. Cava is the Spanish version of Champagne and great offerings start at a budget-friendly \$6 a bottle. Australia offers tons of value in sweet wine. Port-style wines in particular abound down under, often for a fraction of the cost of their Portuguese counterparts.

For whites, Chile turns out dynamite sauvignon blanc at reasonable prices; cool northwestern Spain is a hotbed for mineral-rich, food-friendly whites for a lot less than you'll pay for similar, more famous French whites; southeastern Australia makes some excellent, well-priced chardonnay, although many are over-oaked so you have to choose wisely.

Argentina continues to be a dynamite spot for complex value-priced reds; Spain is also a wonderful source of red value. Lesser-

Cochran: There are a lot of complex flavors there, so I'm going esoteric: Reach for a Greco di Tufo from southern Italy when tucking into Evan's beet-ricotta gnocchi. This newly popular, full-bodied white boasts lots of food-friendly acidity alongside a rich mouth-feel that's perfectly suited to hearty gnocchi with butter sauce. A great alternative with similar style characteristics is Greek asyrtiko, another newly popular, full-bodied white with lots of complexity.

EXTRAVAGANT, LUXURIOUS, DECADENT: THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Kleiman: Remember that my decadent may not be your decadent, but there is one food that is the epitome of the word. Although it's currently out of favor with the food police, few foods are as sublime, ephemeral and satisfying as beautiful foie gras served with toasted brioche. It's like eating meat butter. Soft, yielding, rich and slightly

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known appellations in California are great spots, too: Mendocino, Lodi, Livermore and Lake County are some of my favorites. And southern Italy (think Sicily, Puglia) is another region that's putting out fantastic wines that over-deliver for the money.

Kleiman: When I think elegant and economic, I think ricotta gnocchi. They are soft, pillow-like clouds of yum and very low in carbs. You can make them simple, just the ricotta with a touch of nutmeg laying in a pool of tomato sauce or a bit fancier, by grating some roasted beets into the ricotta mixture. The resulting fuchsia color is gorgeous, the earthy sweetness of the beet plays with the sweet milkiness of the ricotta. Beet-ricotta gnocchi are best served with a little melted butter and sage.

Also, composed rather than tossed salads add a touch of elegance to a meal without any higher expenditure. Why not try arranging the ingredients on the plate to create a beautiful and appetizing dish, drizzled with a simple, delicious dressing?

sweet foie gras has been an epicure's treat for centuries.

Cochran: I'm with Evan: I think the classic combinations still stand up. Pair that foie gras with Sauternes (sweet, Bordeaux).

Or try more budget-oriented wines from nearby Barsac or from Australia or California. Those from outside of France usually include the name "botrytis" on the label, which is the scientific name for a fungus known as "the noble rot" that shrivels the grapes used for these decadent sweet wines into super-concentrated nuggets of sugar. German Riesling of the Spatlese or Auslese categories are also terrific with foie gras.

And there are some other classic combinations: oysters, caviar and Champagne; lobster and opulent chardonnay, especially French Burgundy (Puligny Montrachet, Meursault, grand cru Chablis) and high-end California chards; truffles and Piedmontese nebbiolo (labeled Barolo & Barbaresco); and mature Bordeaux and lamb dishes. ■