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WINE ENTHUSIAST[®]

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HOLIDAY AT THE WINERY

Help make wine the centerpiece of your Christmas dinner party by creating a winery-style feast—one that captures the comforts, ease and simple charm of that enviable world among the vineyards. Here's how to bring that good life home for the holidays.

By Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jenssen ■ Photos by Helen Norman



Upon visiting a winery, you've no doubt had the "what if" pang—that delicious daydream of a new life on your own wine estate. And who can blame you: It's the romance of the vine rows; a farm life that's rooted in sophistication; and an existence centered around creating an elixir whose sole purpose is to add joy and color to people's lives. And while you may never be able to trade in your commuter car for a pickup, you can create that same world with your holiday meal. Here are three simple rules to throwing your own winery-inspired fete, an eclectic wine list and a few recipes to get you started.

Step 1: Fall In Love Again

To create your motif, begin with the winery that wooed you. Was it in the hills of Piedmont, sea-breezy Salt Fork or dusty, dry Carneros? Wherever it was, flip through your photos, or just call up those precious images you'll never forget, and dial in on a few basic style indicators.

We decided to base ours on a mash-up of small family-run wineries in Napa and Sonoma and the Prosecco houses of Valdobbiadene. There's a rustic-but-sophisticated foundation in the distressed, recycled table, but an urban sensibility in the mix of chairs and touches of easy, pretentious-free opulence in the sparkling centerpieces, flatware and glassware. We also stuck with metallic and soft blue hues, giving tasteful nods to Christmas and Hanukkah.

Step 2: Go By The Book

If you have a favorite, oft-requested dish your guests and family expect, do your duty. But don't fall into the trap of dinner party reruns. The big holiday hoorah is the perfect time to pick through the crop of new cookbooks that are hitting the shelves in time for gift-giving.

You know your theme, see what jumps out at you. Recipe curating is like building your guest list: Don't play matchmaker; instead pick unique dishes that will play well together and perhaps even push the envelope.

We developed our menu (recipes to follow) from four books. Two are Italian based—Gennaro Contaldo's *Family Italian* and Domenica Marchetti's *The Glorious Vegetables of Italy*. Two are modern American—*Own Your Kitchen: Recipes to Inspire & Empower* by Anne Burrell and *Michael Symon's 5 in 5*. These latter two are packed with easy, gourmet comfort foods akin to the menus found in the cute restaurants of found in Healdsburg and St. Helena.

Step 3: Give Your Wine A Story

If you can't score the bottles from the wineries that won your heart, hit the regions hard, and as you pour out, recount how you first came to love the area. It not only adds dimension



to each sip, it provides the narrative for your entire dinner party.

At our table, we're recounting our tales and travels saying *saluti* by popping bottles of Italian Prosecco. Some brands to keep an eye out for include Caposaldo, Lunetta and Mionetto. With dinner, we're heading to California for voluptuous Chardonnays from Kistler, Mark Aubert or Three Sticks, along with big but elegantly structured Cabernet Sauvignon from Corison, Knights Bridge or Monticello.

The Menu

Gorgonzola Polenta
Risotto with Zucchini, Peas
Crostini with Taleggio
Shaved Cauliflower Salad
Mussels in White Wine
Rack of Lamb with Tomatoes
Christmas Lobster
Mascarpone-Cherry Crepes



The Recipes

about 20 minutes until the rice's exterior is soft but interior is al dente. Remove risotto from heat and stir in 2 tablespoons butter and 1½ ounces of grated Parmesan cheese. Allow to rest 1 minute.

Crostini With Taleggio

Heat 2 tablespoons each of unsalted butter and olive oil in a large, deep skillet over medium heat. When the butter is melted and begins to sizzle, add 2 pounds of thinly sliced onions and stir to coat them with the butter and oil. Sprinkle in a teaspoon of thyme and ½ teaspoon of salt, reduce the heat to medium-low and cover. Let the onions cook for 15–20 minutes. Reduce the heat to low, uncover and continue to cook, stirring from time to time, for about 1 hour, or until the onions are soft and silky and deep gold in color. Next, stir in 2 tablespoons of dry Marsala. Cook for 1 or 2 minutes, until the wine has been absorbed. Remove from heat. Spread ½ pound of Taleggio cheese and a spoonful of onions on thin slices of baguette. Arrange the slices on a baking sheet and broil for 1–2 minutes, or until bubbly and browned. Serves 6–8.

Shaved Cauliflower Salad

In a food processor, purée ½ cup white vinegar, ¼ cup golden raisins, ½ cup capers and 1 garlic clove until smooth. While the machine is still running, drizzle in ¼ cup olive oil. Taste and season the mixture with salt, being careful not to over salt. Shave 1 head cauliflower into ¼-inch-thick slices on a mandolin and toss in a large bowl with the puréed mixture and ½ cup of additional golden raisins. Let the cauliflower sit for 2 hours, stirring occasionally. When ready to serve, toss in 1 small julienned red onion and 1 chiffonade bunch of Italian parsley. Salt and pepper to taste. Serve at room temperature. Serves 6–8.

Mussels in White Wine

Preheat a grill or grill pan to medium-high heat. Lay out 4 large pieces of aluminum foil. In the center of each piece, put ½ pound of cleaned mussels, 1 cup of cherry tomatoes, 2 tablespoons parsley, a minced clove of garlic, and 2 tablespoons olive oil. Season each pile with ¼ tablespoon of red pepper flakes and a heavy pinch of salt and black pepper. Bring up all 4 corners of the foil and form a pouch. Before



Gorgonzola Polenta

In a medium saucepan bring 4 cups of water and a pinch of salt to a boil. Add 7 ounces of quick-cook polenta, stirring constantly. Cook the polenta according to the package instructions, about 5 minutes. Reduce the heat and when lumps form, whisk the polenta until they dissolve. Add 4 tablespoons butter, 2¾ ounces grated Parmesan and 3½ ounces cubed Fontina cheese and mix until well combined. Place the polenta on four plates, topping each serving with 2 ounces of sliced Gorgonzola. Serve immediately. Serves 6–8.

Risotto with Zucchini, Peas

Pour 5 cups of vegetable stock in a saucepan and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to a simmer. In another saucepan, heat 4 tablespoons of olive oil and sweat 1 small, finely chopped onion until softened. Stir in 1¾ cups Arborio rice, coating each grain with the oil. Add ½ cup dry white wine, stirring the rice until the wine evaporates. Stir in 1 cubed zucchini, 8 finely chopped asparagus stems and 3½ ounces fresh or frozen peas. Add 2 ladles of hot stock into the mixture, stirring until absorbed. Continue ladling stock, cooking and stirring for

The Recipes

sealing, add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup white wine to each packet. Tightly seal each one. Put the packets on the grill and close the lid (or cover, if using a grill pan). Cook until the mussels open, about 4 minutes. Remove from the grill, open and serve immediately. *Serves 6–8.*

Rack of Lamb With Tomatoes

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Separate the white sections of 4 large scallion stalks, and save; thinly slice the green sections. Rub a $\frac{2}{4}$ -pound rack of lamb with salt and pepper. Place about 3 ounces of prosciutto and green scallions between the bones. Place in a roasting pan and cover with 4 tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil, rubbing it in well. Roast in the oven for 30–40 minutes, or until cooked to desired doneness. Meanwhile, heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a small pan and sweat the sliced white parts of the scallions. Add the leaves of two sprigs of thyme, 9 ounces of artichokes and 9 ounces of sun-blushed tomatoes and cook for 2 minutes. Ten minutes before the lamb is ready, add the vegetables to the roasting pan. *Serves 6–8.*

Christmas Lobster

In a large bowl, toss 1 pound of clean and deveined 16–20 count shrimp with 2 finely chopped garlic cloves, 2 tablespoons olive oil and a generous sprinkle of salt. Allow the shrimp to sit at room temperature for 30 minutes while you bring a large, well-salted pot of water to boil. Squeeze the juice of 1 lemon into the water and drop both halves into the pot. Plunge 4 $1\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ pound lobsters into the water, cover and cook for 4 minutes. Remove the lobsters and allow them to cool. Preheat a grill to medium, covering half the grill with aluminum foil. Place the shrimp in a single layer on the foil, grilling the shrimp on both sides until pink, 2–3 minutes per side. Remove shrimp to a large bowl. Using the other half of the grill, cook 4 shucked ears of corn until charred on all sides. Cut corn off the cob into the bowl with the shrimp. Toss 1 pint of halved cherry tomatoes and $\frac{1}{2}$ red onion (thinly sliced) with the shrimp mixture, adding red wine vinegar, salt and olive oil to taste. Next, declaw the lobsters. Run a very sharp knife down the lobster carapace in half-lengthwise, remove the tomalley and coral. Place the lobsters, cut-side down, on the grill alongside the claws, cooking them for 10 and 15 minutes, respectively. To



plate, transfer 2 halves lobster, cut side up, to plates with 2 claws. Cut 1 bunch basil into a chiffonade, combine with the shrimp and spoon into each lobster cavity. *Serves 6–8.*

Mascarpone-Cherry Crepes

In a saucepan, combine 1 pound pitted and halved cherries with $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar, the grated zest and juice of 1 lemon and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water. Bring to a boil then reduce to a simmer, cooking

the mixture until it becomes a syrup. Remove from heat. To make the crepe filling, combine 2 cups mascarpone, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of chocolate chips, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cinnamon and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar in a medium bowl. Stir and reserve. Cook 12 traditional crepes, then place on parchment paper. Cover half of each crepe with a couple spoonfuls of the filling, then roll and seal. Spoon the warm cherry compote over each crepe then dust with powdered sugar. *Serves 6–8.*

