

Behind the scenes at a big-ticket wine dinner

Chef shares secret for the perfect wine & food pairing

By Michele Parente (</staff/michele-parente/>) 6 a.m. Aug. 20, 2014



Executive Chef Eugenio Martignago preparing the first course of branzino crudo, strawberries and yuzu lime, which was paired with a Blanc de Blanc sparkling wine, at the recent Frank Family wine dinner held at *Bistro West*. *Hayne Palmour IV*

It seems like every week a restaurant somewhere in San Diego County holds a wine dinner, a big-ticket, multicourse feast with carefully selected pairings, the requisite sommelier speeches and concluding applause for the chef.

Their increasing popularity isn't hard to figure out: Wineries get to showcase their special bottlings, chefs can flex their creativity, while diners enjoy a professional marrying of food and wine flavor profiles and textures.

But as any home cook who has ever struggled to pair the right wines with dinner party dishes knows, some matches are genius; others simply fall flat.

For insight into what it takes to bring a wine dinner together, we recently went behind the scenes at Carlsbad's [Bistro West](http://www.bistrowest.com/) (<http://www.bistrowest.com/>), where [West Steak and Seafood](http://www.weststeakandseafood.com/) (<http://www.weststeakandseafood.com/>) executive chef Eugenio Martignago created a six-course menu to match wines from Napa's [Frank Family Vineyards](http://www.frankfamilyvineyards.com/) (<http://www.frankfamilyvineyards.com/>). Here's what we learned.

Settle on the wines first.

Unless you have a must-make dish, it's easier and cheaper to tweak ingredients — proteins, sauces or accompaniments — to suit a wine, rather than trying multiple wines until you find the perfect match.

Martignago said Frank Family sent a bottle of each of the six wines to taste. As he sipped, he noted the basics — acidity, mouth feel, aromas and flavors.

He and his team analyzed such things as whether a wine was fruity and, if so, what kind — citrus, tropical or stone? Was the wine delicate or bold? Crisp or creamy? Light and bright or smooth and plush?

Identify how you can complement both the food and wine.

A natural pairing came in the very first course: delicate branzino crudo with an elegant blanc de blanc (chardonnay) sparkling wine. A hint of lemon in the glass was matched by a yuzu lime gel on the plate. Bubbles in the wine were complemented by little pops of red caviar in the mouth. Strawberries, classic sidekicks to sparkling, dotted the dish.

Integrating doesn't have to be complicated.

Perhaps the best way to harmonize the wine and food is to use the wine in the preparation of the dish. Hibiscus-infused duck breast accented by a pinot marjoram sauce was served with the 2012 Carneros pinot noir. Going full circle, the hibiscus was among the pinot's floral notes.

If it's a special event, have a test run.

Martignago said his first attempt at multicolored pappardelle with calamari, octopus and monk fish "was close but not quite right." So he played off the pineapple he detected in the 2012 reserve chardonnay. "So I added pineapple cream." And, though buttery, the chard had just enough lively acidity to cut through the cream.

Then, when grilled romaine proved too bitter with the fifth course, New York steak paired with the 2011 reserve cabernet sauvignon, crispy Brussels sprout leaves were a late substitute.

Don't carve your menu in stone.

Staying flexible allows for last-minute changes or additions. While Martignago is fortunate enough to have access to the 3-plus-acre West private farm, with dozens of heirloom fruits and vegetables to choose from, home cooks can scour the farmers market or grocery store for the freshest ingredients to add at the last minute.

"Almost every dish was changed a little," said the Italian-born chef, who grew up on a farm. Ethereal cucumber blossoms were sprinkled on the crudo. On the fourth course — veal two ways paired with a fruity 2011 zinfandel showing hints of sage — juicy blueberries were added to the sage sauce. Sweet baby corn and creamy purple potato mash were added because, well, they were delicious.

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