

A perfect pair

By Lauren Muench

Coursed, chef-selected meals bring experimentation, as well as entertainment, to the table

Wine pairing events such as chef's tables or chef tasting menus, once reserved only for VIP guests, have become all the rage among diners in the Fox Cities who are searching for something beyond the average restaurant experience.

Instead of simply choosing an entrée from a restaurant's menu, chefs pre-plan an exquisite multi-course meal and personally select a wine pairing for each. Guests not only are able to experiment with a variety of high-end food and wine, but these events also provide an educational dining experience where even the well-trained wine enthusiast or seasoned foodie can learn a thing or two.

Five-Star Experience

Diners have been blown away by the high-end appearance of chef's table events and the elaborate menus. However, these events are especially enjoyable because guests are receiving a five-star dinner at an affordable price — around \$35 per person.

Chef Dion Block of Flanagan's Wine Review in Appleton wanted to bring his experience of working in fine dining restaurants in Chicago and San Francisco back to Wisconsin by introducing a more unique way of doing things.

"I was looking for an avenue to still be creative, while not being too far outside the box for some of the more traditional diners," he says. "Our diners that come in for the chef tasting menu tell us they love the variety."

Having the dinners divided into five or six courses allows guests to try a variety of items in smaller portion sizes so they are not stuffed by meal's end. This way, each course can be highlighted and the different flavors won't get lost within the meal.

Most restaurants that feature coursed chef's menus offer at least one to two events each month, some in private dining areas. These popular events book quickly so diners are encouraged to make reservations early to guarantee a seat. Attendance is usually limited due to space and in attempts to maintain intimacy.

Passionate chefs who create amazing food want nothing more than to share it with others. These events allow diners to gain a new appreciation for something they might not have tried before.

"It's all about relaxing the apprehension and risk found in trying new and exciting things," explains Scott Roekle, director of operations for Fratellos in Appleton. "We love to celebrate those that want to try something different, because we like to drink and eat something different ourselves."

Nothing is more important to the chefs than the seasonality and quality of the ingredients when planning these extensive menus, not to mention using local ingredients whenever



Chef Dion Block of Flanagan's Wine Review


possible. During the warmer months of the year, Chef Block heads to the Farmer's Market in the Festival Foods parking lot and creates his upcoming week's tasting menu based on which produce items are at the peak of freshness.

Importance of Pairing

When food and wine are paired correctly, there is harmony among the flavors. Wine has the ability to pull different flavors out of food items, causing different ingredients to shine.




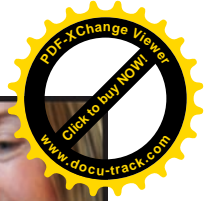
Sue Bogenschutz, owner of Atlas Coffee Mill



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“Food and wine is one of the most natural matches we have,” Chef Block says. “The flavor profiles of both play off each other and enhance them, leaving the diners reaping the benefits of the pairing.”

To a novice wine drinker, pairing seafood with white wine or steak with red wine might sound appropriate, but these chefs go the extra mile when developing their specialty menus to create the perfect combination of food and wine.

“It’s a lot more intricate than most would think due to having to balance it over all six courses,” Chef Block explains. “But when you take the time to know how to layer the flavors, the result is a dining experience that you won’t soon forget.”

Chef Block creates his menu first by selecting the food items and then pairing each course with an appropriate wine, but every chef has their own method and style of doing things.

Chef and owner Peter Kuenzi of Zuppas in Neenah does a wine tasting each month prior to his chef’s table to ensure the best pairings possible. After he chooses the wines he wants to highlight in the upcoming event, he plans his menu around the different flavors.



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Pictured above: Fred Noe host of a recent Jim Beam tasting event at Fratellos.

Right: Scott Roekle, director of operations for Fratellos in Appleton.



Being a certified wine specialist, Roekle knows the importance of having a successful food and wine pairing.

"The significance is found in presenting items that when separated are wonderful, yet together can become magical," he explains.

Sue Bogenschutz, owner of Atlas Coffee Mill in Appleton, brought in local wine expert Tom Jensen of Badger Liquor to educate and entertain 42 guests during their holiday wine and dine event. While the diners enjoyed live music and amazing food, they also were given a crash-course on wine origins and other fun facts regarding tannins and the viscosity of different types of wine.

For non-wine drinkers, Fratellos has created events where each food course has a liquor pairing instead. Their recent Jim Beam tasting event with host Fred Noe, grandson of Jim Beam himself, provided diners with different liquors for each of the six courses, as well as "insight and knowledge into the world of bourbon."

Slow Down & Savor

Whether the dinner is for two or 42, the experience can be intimate as well as a social gathering, bringing friends or even perfect strangers together over a great meal.

"There are few greater treats in this world than to sit down with those close to you and enjoy the perfect marriage of food and wine while indulging in conversation," says Chef Block.

Knowing that the guests thoroughly enjoyed the meal makes these events worth the time and effort that each chef and owner put into making their special.

"We want them to smile a little more than they did before they sat down at one of our events," says Roekle.

These chef's tables and tasting menus are definitely unlike your typical dining experience. This is not a meal to rush through. Savor each sip of wine and try each item of food. You may just find a new favorite dish.

"In a society where the focus is on the now and how fast things can be done, it's nice to slow down our hectic lives and truly enjoy something," Chef Block says. "What better way than with friends and family over great food and wine?"

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Chef Fortino Solano of IL Angolo in Appleton discusses his acclaimed, customizable course selections at foxcitiesmagazine.com. Also view a Fratellos wine dinner sample menu. Just click on Dining.

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