Educated Palates

Cabrillo culinary program instructor Mike Wille turns a midterm exam into a wine dinner with high marks

BY CHRISTINA WATERS

UTTERLY calm and collected, chef Mike Wille introduced a series of winemakers to assembled diners out on the back lawn of the Sesnon House a few weeks ago. Gathered at long tables draped in white linen, the guests were about to embark on a five-course culinary journey accompanied by wines from the viticulturists of Surf City Vintners. And every bite was the handiwork of student chefs.

Dinner hit its stride, accompanied by some very smooth live jazz music, as poised young students served, cleared, poured and grinned proudly at the impressive effect their beautifully produced plates had on their gourmet audience.

From open-face ravioli of braised rabbit paired with a Quinta Cruz Touriga to beef carpanico and MJA Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon, through an ambitious fish course, a grilled chicken and Silver Mountain pinot noir entrée and finally into a multilayered creamy dessert matched with an unusual late-harvest zinfandel by Michael Sones, the meal showcased the handiwork of 17 advanced students in this celebrated food service program.

“After the success of last year’s ‘Dare to Pair’ wine and food match,” recalls Wille, “we knew we wanted to do something again with Surf City Vintners.” But in a departure from the program’s usual timetable, in which students taste a selection of wines beforehand and then create a harmonizing menu, Wille changed the plan.

“We came up with the Italian theme and the menu a week beforehand, and then tried to arrange for wines that would work,” he explains. The six winemakers, it turns out, all wanted to supply red wines.

“We had to do quite a bit of shuffling,” Wille laughs. “Another challenge was that the gewürztraminer supplied by Pelican Ranch was crisp and dry, not fruity, and hence it wouldn’t go with the dish originally proposed.”

More changes were required in the menu and in the sauces—all of which contained juices of the matching wine grapes. “The students have to be ready for sudden changes, just as they would in the restaurant world,” Wille says. “On game day we may have to make sudden switches.”

The single-seating, banquet-style wine dinner marked a departure from the program’s evening dinner service at Pino Alto Restaurant. Here the public can make reservations come in and order a la carte items just as in any professional dining room. “With this event it was all plates served at one time, get them all out at one time and make sure that dessert was ready to serve before 8:30,” the culinary instructor explains.

The wine dinner was essentially a hands-on midterm exam that Wille has resolved to fine-tune until it’s perfect. Trained at the Culinary Institute of America, Wille admits that being an instructor at a community college wasn’t his original plan. And it isn’t easy.

“This is my third year in the program, and what we do—making these courses accessible for everyone—we do on a very small budget,” he says. Culinary schools can cost upward of $30,000 a year. Cabrillo’s program costs $26 a unit. Yet Wille admits that “working here has huge rewards. When students light up over some wonderful cooking success—it’s phenomenal.” Last week’s dinner provided plenty of those glowing reactions.

WHISKED AWAY  Student Kitami Blakely and instructor Mike Wille
hit the sauce in the Pino Alto kitchen at Cabrillo College.

PINO ALTO DINING ROOM
Sesnon House, Cabrillo College
6500 Sequoia Dr., Aptos; 831-479-6524
Tuesday–Thursday, 5:30–8:30pm