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June 05, 2006

With Peaches, Why Not Muscat Canelli?

I'm just back from the weekly luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club of Foothill-Highlands at Lions Gate in McClellan Park, whose members had invited me to talk about pairing wine with food. This isn't one of my favorite topics, largely because I believe diner concern about matching just the right wine with just the right dish accounts for much needless anxiety at the dinner table. Sommeliers, chefs and the like who try to be helpful only add to the anxiety by making the subject sound so darn complicated.

But as another measure of just how popular the topic is, within the past 10 days two new books devoted solely to the pairing of wine with food have landed on my desk. They're big books, running to more than 300 pages each. What's more, a publisher about to release two more books on food and wine sent along a promotional wheel you can spin to a type of wine and be assured that the foods listed under it would make for a splendid match. Spin over to barbera, for example, and get ready to slice some salami, make a creamy pasta or fry some chicken. They're sound suggestions, but the wheel is too big for me to carry into restaurants.

I like to think I'm most relevant and helpful in sessions like the Rotary Club luncheon when we get to the question-and-answer period. But the first question threw me, and I don't think I handled it well. What about peaches and pinot grigio, asked one Rotarian. Yeah, that would work, I said, as long as the pinot grigio was fairly ripe and fairly big bodied, with maybe some residual sugar and viscosity, and provided the peach wasn't glorified with a nutty streusel, a bunch of spices or a lot of sugar. While pinot grigio may have notes of peach that would seem to make it fitting to sip with the fruit, the wine generally is likely to be too lean and dry to go with peaches. Nevertheless, I made a note to give the combination a try as fresh peaches arrive this summer.

Had I thought faster, I'd have recommended an alternative wine that is underappreciated these days but could work a lot better with peaches than pinot grigio, and that would be muscat canelli, a fragrant, floral, medium-bodied white wine generally finished with just enough residual sugar to make it refreshing but not cloying.

Muscat canelli should have been on my mind because I'd tasted two fine examples just this past weekend, the tingly Perry Creek Vineyard 2005 El Dorado Muscat Canelli (\$10) and the lyrically sweet and gently spicy Latcham Vineyards 2004 El Dorado Muscat Canelli (\$12).

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Another impressive interpretation I recently tasted was the perfumeey, peachy and faintly honeyed Ceago Vinegarden 2005 Clear Lake Del Lago Muscat Canelli, an unusually fruity and complex take on the varietal (\$22). With or without peaches, the sweetness and relatively low alcohol of muscat canellis make them ideal sippers out on the patio on the kinds of warm evenings we've been having lately.

Posted by mdunne at June 5, 2006 02:41 PM

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