


FROM THE GRAPEVINE



By [JOEL M. FISHER](#)
& Sara Fisher Chapin

ACF/Chefs de Cuisine Association of California
11664 National Blvd. # 410
Los Angeles, CA 90064
ACFLA: 818-559-5218



Joel M. Fisher, PHD
WINE COLUMNIST
CULINARY CONNECTION

Email: joel@winevineanddine.com Cell: 818-429-6770

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I confess, I'm a diehard fan of murder mysteries. Maybe that's one reason why I love the [Amador County Vintner's](#) 'Behind the Cellar Door' event. It sounds like the perfect wine-county mystery.

There was absolutely nothing sinister about this fourth-annual barrel-tasting event, of course. Amador County lies in the Sierra foothills, in the heart of California's Gold Country. This year, twenty-seven local wineries participated in the big weekend, which also featured wine seminars and food tasting. Overall, I was really impressed with what I sampled.

Among my favorites from the weekend were Bill Easton's **Easton** and **Terre Rouge** labels. The Terre Rouge wines are made from California-friendly Rhône varietals (such as Viognier and Syrah), whereas the Easton label consists of non-Rhône varietals (including Zinfandel, Barbera, and Merlot). The very reasonably priced *2001 Easton Barbera – Shenandoah Valley* (\$10) was rich, ripe and deep – a very good example of what that varietal can produce. I also found the *2004 Terre Rouge Rousanne – Sierra Foothills* (\$22) interesting. It showed a classic golden color, and danced with honey and fruit.

A new discovery for me was **Drytown Cellars**. Owner-winemaker Allen Kreutzer has degrees from both U.C. Davis (in Fermentation Science) and Fresno State (in Agricultural Chemistry), and has worked in the business for years at **Washington Hills Cellars** in Yakima Valley and **Kirigin Cellars** in the Gilroy area. Interestingly, Drytown sells around 4,000 cases from the winery, as well as produces, ships and sells an additional 30,000 cases of wine for other wineries to label. Allan's wife, Suzanne, is the president of the Amador Vintners' Association. I found Drytown's Zinfandels excellent, liked the Cabernets, and thought the Cabernet Franc among the best I've ever tasted from California.

A trip to Amador isn't complete without a visit to **Vino Noceto**. I thoroughly enjoy Suzy and Jim Gullet's outlook on life and wine. Production is now 9,000 cases at this small family-run winery, which features mostly Tuscan varietals.



Vino Noceto Winemaker Rusty Foleno

I tasted the *2004 Noceto Sangiovese* (\$16), which is their 15th flagship vintage. This bottle is rich in berries, and would go very well with any tomato-based Italian dish. The *2004 Reserva Sangiovese* (\$24) had a medium-to-full body, and tempered its cherry notes with moderate spices and a long finish. I was particularly impressed by the deep, elegant *2004 Hillside Sangiovese* (\$26), which showed palatable oak influences. Moving on, the *2004 Linsteadt Barbera* (\$28) proved notable. Spicy and softly tannic, the plush wine rolled nicely over my tongue. Although the event was held in rainy winter weather, I appreciated the summertime feel of Noceto's sweet *2006 Frivolo* (\$13), which is a fun blend of Orange Muscat and Muscato Blanco.

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When most people think of what to drink with Indian food, they think ice cold beer or frothy lassi drinks. But what about wine?

I recently went to a dinner at **Addi's Tandoori** in Redondo Beach, hosted by South African Jeremy Wilkinson. I was warmly greeted by restaurant owner Addi Decosta. The charming Decosta has been in business for 14 years with Chef Gurbachan Singh. The mood of the reception was casual and comfortable, and things kicked off nicely with samosas paired with a **Van Loveren Brut Sparkling Papillon**. The fruity bubbly held its own.

Next up was a mixed tandoori platter, served with a **Lanzerac Chardonnay**. Both were pleasant, but not particularly notable. Of much greater interest was a **Landskroon Shiraz**, served with chicken tikka masala and sag paneer. Now I know why the esteemed St. Regis Hotel pours this by the glass – it's an excellent, mid-bodied and richly fruited wine. It paired well with the dishes. The main course for the evening was lamb rogan josh accompanied by a **Lanzerac Pinotage**. The dry but supple Pinotage showed a beautiful deep mulberry color and rich chocolate notes on the palate. Dessert was something new

for me. Galub Jamun consists of balls of fried dough in rosewater sugar syrup. It wasn't to my taste, but the *Landskroon Cape Vintage Port* served with it certainly was.

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Chef Russell and Crew

Sometimes cuisine events find me, not vice versa. I recently was in Sacramento to attend a state conference that had nothing to do with wine or cuisine. I grabbed a quick lunch at my hotel's dining room, and was so impressed that I asked who the chef was. Turns out it was someone I had a common acquaintance with. Executive Chef Russell Michel's 21-year career has taken him from the Biltmore in L.A. to Churchill's at the Queen Mary and points beyond. Well, one thing led to another, and I asked to prepare a special meal for a group of us. Eighteen hours later we were served an exceptional five-course meal. We started with a superb leek soup. Then came a quail-duck breast press for some of us, and scallops with pancetta, papaya and risotto for others (to be paired with an *Eco Domani Pinot Grigio*). Next up was a poached pear salad (paired with a *Byron Pinot Noir*). The main event was a pan-roasted beef filet with a potato crust and drunken mushroom shitake garnish (served with a *Ferrari-Carano Merlot*). We capped the meal with a unique creation of Chef Michel, warm brie *en crouete* with ginger and raspberry (with a *Schramsberg Blanc de Blanc*).

Chef Michel introduced us to his team that helped him pull together such a memorable meal. My thanks to Executive Sous Chef Johnny Frink, Sous Chef Jose Zaragosa and Senior Server Marco Hernandez..

Michel's goal is to take this hotel to a 5-star rating. He's certainly on the right path.

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The days are longer. The weather is warmer. That means it's time to put away the heavy cabernet sauvignon and ports, and start turning to the lighter options. Don't you just love the changing of the seasons?

As always, happy drinking!



Joel M. Fisher Ph.D a.k.a. The Wine Educator, writes a monthly column for the [Chefs de Cuisine Association of California](#) and was the wine instructor these past six years for the Culinary Arts Department, [Art Institute of California-Los Angeles](#). He is Director of Public Affairs for Avalon Hollywood, and as a partner in [WineVineandDine](#) conducts wine tastings, wine dinners, and wine-and-food pairings throughout Southern California. His email address is joel@winevineanddine.com. Joel is the co-organizer of [LA WINE FEST](#), which is gearing up for its big 2007 event this summer. Sara Fisher Chapin continues to enjoy helping demystify the world of wine for the under- 35 set.