

June, 2016

Tim's Wine Market



It is no secret that I love Italian wines, and they are what I drink most at my home. Contrary to popular belief, they are not just to serve with Italian foods. This month we will examine the versatility of good Italian wines with food, and along the way also clear up one of the most confusing combination of names in the world of wine.

2014 De Luca Montepulciano di Abruzzo "Ritratto di Costa" (\$15)

Even for fans of Italian wines, the selections this month cause some confusion. Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is a red wine, made from the Montepulciano grape grown in the region of Abruzzo. The wine below, Dei Rosso di Montepulciano, is made from a different grape, grown in vineyards that surround the town of Montepulciano in Tuscany. Hopefully, it will make a lot more sense when you read about, and taste, both of the wines.

When I first started selling wine in the late 1980's, the first Montepulciano d'Abruzzo were entering the market. I can still remember hosting an event and selling magnums of Casal Thaulero Montepulciano d'Abruzzo for \$5.99. At the time, it was being marketed to checkerboard tablecloth pizza joints as an inexpensive wine to sell by the decanter. Although prices for Montepulciano have certainly increased in 25 years, there are still many great examples available for very reasonable prices.

This estate was founded in 1970 when brothers Remus and Nunziato De Luca planted seven acres of vines in the hills around the village of Teramo. For two decades, they farmed the vineyards and sold the grapes to the local cooperative. During this period, they also expanded to the present day size of fifty acres planted to vines. In the early 2000's, they handed the property to Nunziato's sons, Luciano and Remus, who run it now.

When they took over, the sons set about converting the estate to an organic farming regime and interplanted the existing vines to lower crop yields. While it may sound counter-intuitive to plant more vines to grow less grapes, it creates more competition for nutrients at the roots. It is a way, of forcing vines to self-regulate the amount of grape clusters they form, and as a result they produce more concentrated wines. This wine is fermented and aged only in stainless steel tanks, which helps preserve the natural fruit aromas and flavors. The Montepulciano grape is related to Sangiovese, the grape of Chianti, but the wines tend to be softer and fleshier than their more famous cousin, making them perfect "cross-over" wines for New World drinkers.

When you open this wine, give it a splash in the decanter to open up the bouquet. Once you do, it gives you a very inviting aroma of cooked blueberry and raspberry, bay leaf, dried lobster mushroom, pipe tobacco and black peppercorns. When you take a sip, you will taste the generous, soft fruit that is buffered late by some soft, integrated tannins. This is a great wine for pizza or pasta and will also work great with Cuban Picadillo or mushroom ragu over polenta.

2014 Dei Rosso di Montepulciano (\$21)

For this wine, we jump west over the Apennine Mountains from Abruzzo to Tuscany. The vineyards for this category lie on the rolling hills around Siena and the smaller town of Montepulciano. Here, a unique clone of Sangiovese is grown, called Prugnolo Gentile. Wines produced from this grape are lighter in color, but have a good sense of structure, which is why *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* was the first DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) created in Italy in 1963. This often surprises fans of Italian wine as most believe Barolo or Brunello di Montalcino would have been adopted first. The Dei family started producing wine with the 1985 vintage and quickly established themselves as one of the quality leaders. Since 1991, the property has been managed by the passionate Caterina Dei, who has pushed her estate, and really the whole region, to new quality highs.

To be honest, I have not typically been very interested in the Rosso di Montalcino category. Most wines labeled as such are the baby siblings to the estate's grand wine, the *Vino Nobile*. Too often, they are light and relatively simple affairs, but typically sell for more than \$20. Ironically, it was my customers who convinced me differently about this wine. Last year, we hosted a wine tasting featuring the estates of importer Marc de Grazia, who represents this wine. I debated showing this wine, but Marc's people convinced me that Caterina would be disappointed, so I acquiesced. To my surprise, it was the top selling wine of the night, and by a good margin. I took a bottle home to drink with dinner, and over a plate of home made short rib ravioli, I saw the light. This bottling transcends the category.

The difference between a *Rosso di Montepulciano* and the big brother, *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, is typically the time aged in oak. In order to qualify as a DOCG *Vino Nobile*, among other things, the wine must be aged for a minimum of 24 months before release, with at least 12 in oak cask. It is most common to use large, 1000 liter casks, called *botti* as well as some smaller, French barriques (225 liter.) *Rosso di Montepulciano* need only be aged for six months, with no required time in oak, to classify for the DOC. For both wines, they must contain at least 70% Prugnolo Gentile, with the balance typically being Canaiolo, Merlot or sometimes Cabernet Sauvignon. This wine is 90% Prugnolo, 5% Canaiolo and 5% Merlot.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for at least half an hour before serving. Once you do, it gives you a high toned nose of fresh red plums, blackberry jam, orange peel and tobacco. In the mouth, it has a nice sense of concentration, a kiss of fresh turned earth and tannins that frame it into a medium long finish. Drink over the next three years with meat stuffed ravioli or the beef kabob recipe below.

Cuban Picadillo

This basic dish, perfect for weeknights, works incredibly well with Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. The combination of slightly sweet, salty and piquant works great with the savory qualities of any red wine, but especially those that are not overripe. Follow the directions closely, the first step is unusual but will ensure the meat is not dry and grainy.

1 pound 85 percent lean ground beef
1 pound ground pork
2 tablespoons water
½ teaspoon baking soda
Salt and pepper
1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into 2-inch pieces
1 onion, halved and cut into 2-inch pieces
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 tablespoon dried oregano
1 tablespoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
6 garlic cloves, minced
1 (14.5-ounce) can whole tomatoes, drained and chopped coarse
¾ cup dry white wine
½ cup beef broth
½ cup raisins
3 bay leaves
½ cup pimento-stuffed green olives, chopped coarse
2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar, plus extra for seasoning

1. Toss beef and pork with water, baking soda, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in bowl until thoroughly combined. Set aside for 20 minutes. Meanwhile, pulse bell pepper and onion in food processor until chopped into ¼-inch pieces, about 12 pulses.

2. Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add chopped vegetables, oregano, cumin, cinnamon, and ¼ teaspoon salt; cook, stirring frequently, until vegetables are softened and beginning to brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add tomatoes and wine and cook, scraping up any browned bits, until pot is almost dry, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in broth, raisins, and bay leaves and bring to simmer.

3. Reduce heat to medium-low, add meat mixture in 2-inch chunks to pot, and bring to gentle simmer. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally with 2 forks to break meat chunks into ¼- to ½-inch pieces, until meat is cooked through, about 10 minutes.

4. Discard bay leaves. Stir in olives and capers. Increase heat to medium-high and cook, stirring occasionally, until sauce is thickened and coats meat, about 5 minutes. Stir in vinegar and season with salt, pepper, and extra vinegar to taste. Serve.

Beef Kabobs

smaller group from Lebanon, particularly around the town of New Castle. When I was very young, in the 1970's, we would drive down on Friday night and buy kabobs from people who operated "pop up" restaurants in their front yards, cooking lamb and beef on their grills. Some of my earliest food memories are of "lamb on the rod" with spicy, pickled pepper and oil dressing. When I was old enough to own my grill I started playing around with recipes, and find the pickled peppers do not play well with wine. This version does, punching the umami button with soy sauce, which works great with Sangiovese based wines like the Dei Rosso di Montepulciano. Make sure you do not refrigerate the meat more than two hours or it will be too salty.

½ cup soy sauce
¾ cup olive oil
4 garlic clove, minced
¾ teaspoon pepper
2 pounds steak tips, poked all over with fork and cut into 1 ½-inch chunks
2 red bell peppers, seeded and cut into 1 ½-inch pieces
1 medium red onion, cut into 1 ½-inch pieces
10 ounces white mushrooms, stemmed

1. Whisk soy sauce, oil, garlic, and pepper in bowl; transfer 1/3 cup soy mixture to large microwave-safe bowl. Place remaining soy mixture and steak tips into gallon-size zipper-lock bag. Press air out of bag, seal, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 2 hours.

2. Add bell peppers, onion, and mushrooms to bowl with reserved soy mixture and toss to coat. Wrap tightly with plastic and let marinate 30 minutes.

3. Microwave vegetables until onions are translucent at edges, 3 to 6 minutes, shaking bowl (without removing plastic) to redistribute vegetables halfway through cooking. Uncover vegetables and set aside until meat is fully marinated.

skewers, starting and ending with meat. Grill kebabs over medium fire, covered and turning frequently, until meat is well browned and vegetables are tender, 14 to 16 minutes. Serve.