Placerville winery transports guests to Italy

By Kathryn Reed

PLACERVILLE – Pam is back in Tuscany. Sue is in heaven. And I don't want to leave.

Wine glasses keep being filled and plates of divine food are continually placed in front of us.

To set the mood even more, our sommelier, Orietta Gianjorio, has an Italian accent. It was only five years ago that she moved to the States from Rome. She educates us about the wines we are drinking and how they are bound to complement the food.

Our chef for the day comes across more of a free spirit who could be at home in Tahoe. After all, he spent some time as a ski bum in Breckenridge. But Damon Barham's cooking pedigree is more prestigious, having attended the California Culinary Academy Le Cordon Bleu. He is now an instructor at the San Francisco school and chef at their Technique Restaurant.



Miraflores Winery allows guests to dine among the vines on summer weekends. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Pam was our tablemate last Saturday afternoon at Miraflores

Winery. She came up from the Bay Area for this four-course lunch and wine pairing.

Sitting outside on the terrace with the vineyards a stone's throw away reminds Pam of her recent trip to Tuscany where the villa she stayed at was on a working winery.

This is the third summer the Placerville winery has put together a chef and sommelier to plan a weekend lunch. The duo does the lunch Saturday and Sunday, with each weekend through October being a different pair.

"It's becoming a bit of a competition," Miraflores General Manager Matricia Haigood says in how she goes about selecting the chefs. "We let them cook anything they want."

With each weekend being a new event, Haigood said it's common for people to attend more than one lunch throughout the summer.

It's up to the sommelier to pick whatever Miraflores wine she wants to go with each course.

"My first and main inspiration is what is in season," Barham tells *Lake Tahoe News*.

He sent Gianjorio his menu and from there she decided what to pour.

"Damon is a young chef and likes to try things. I wanted the attention to last to the last bite," Gianjorio explained. "That is why I try to keep the wines light."

This was the menu on June 22:

• First Course:

2012 Barbera Rosé

Asparagus soup shot with dry jack puff

• Second Course:

2012 Pinot Grigio

Miraflores estate “smoked” trout salad with arugula, brioche, cherries and almonds

• Third Course:

2007 Syrah

Late spring lamb stew with artichokes, polenta fries and caponata

• Fourth Course:

2009 Botricelli

Strawberry-rhubarb and frangipane tartlet with lavender-white chocolate mousse.

Vegetarians are welcome with advance notice. I was served the salad without the trout – which Pam and Sue said was a shame because it was the highlight of the salad.

Pam said the cherry dressing brought out the flavor of the trout.

The chef said he made his own brine to make it taste like it was smoked.

I was still wishing the soup had been more than a shot. A big bowl – not even a cup – would have been more to my liking.

But the presentation made it fun and whimsical. Barham comes out of the kitchen to each table with a pitcher full of the chilled soup that he pours into tall shot glasses that each have two asparagus tips in them. It’s served with a cheese stick that can be used as a spoon or dipping utensil before one throws back the soup like a shot.

One of the things Miraflores owner Victor Alvarez likes about these lunches is the chefs “talk to the people. They don’t hide in the kitchen.”

The caponata with the entrée has the three of us in search of yet another superlative.

The chef tells us he used a pressure cooker for the tomatoes. It is their natural sweetness that makes this relish of sorts that is dominated by eggplant have such a sweet flavor.

The Syrah is a fabulous choice for this dish. Pam and Sue agree – especially with the lamb.

While I’m not one to usually like sweet wines, the Botricelli has me thinking otherwise. Some of the strawberries used in the dessert were soaked in the wine.

There is no rush to eat or drink. We have the table for the afternoon if we want. Miraflores has learned a second seating isn’t possible because some people make the lunch a daylong event.

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Notes:

• More info about the pairings may be found online.

• Lunches go through Oct. 27.

• Cost is $40.

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