



A Dinner to Remember

ON THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING, my wife Pat and I drove to Nashville, Tenn., where we spent the weekend with our close friends, Denice and Milton Johnson. We met in 1999 when I worked for Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) as a consulting partner with Ernst & Young. At that time, Milton was ‘starting down the wine road’. We dined weekly during that year I was in Nashville—all the while focusing on my passion of marrying wine with food. We have continued to share this passion most often in Nashville, but also in New York City (the New York Wine Experience multiple times), Chicago,

and Napa Valley. We will continue this in France, Paris, and the Rhône Valley this summer.

On this occasion, however, we decided to celebrate a memorable dinner. Over the course of Milton’s unwavering career at HCA, he often secured wine from our cellar, sharing liberally on our visits. This night we decided to go for broke. Denice prepared Southern bite-sized BLTs without the lettuce—small toasted bread circles topped with a slice of tomato and crumbled cooked bacon mixed with mayo. These, and a warm artichoke dip, were the appetizers.

Our opening wine was the rarest of the night—

a 2005 Colli Tortonesi Bianco Martin, produced from only 18 hectares in the Piemonte region of Italy. I found this wine only because I am a friend of Elio Altare, one of Italy’s greatest wine producers. One of his good friends is Franco Martinetti, whose company makes this wine. Each time I visited Elio, Franco would bring me one or two bottles. Finally, I arranged to purchase two cases and it was from this supply that our opening wine came. It is very complex, featuring a deep golden hue, and reminiscent somewhat of a Grand Cru Burgundy (perhaps Corton-Charlemagne), crossed with a great Roussanne Marsanne from

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The five outstanding wines served by Denice and Milton Johnson.



PHOTOS: IPAT BRYANT

Milton and Denice Johnson, with Jim Bryant.

years at least, if stored properly, but not all of us will be here to enjoy. I feel inadequate to describe perfection as maybe John Legend did when he dedicated his song to his wife's 'perfect imperfections.' I have always maintained that I want wines that show they are from a certain place, not wines which although have no apparent imperfections, could come from or be made in any place.

The 1986 Mouton Rothschild meets my specs. Its color is still dark with aromas of coffee, black fruits, leather, tobacco, earth, olives, and black pepper. It is probably the most perfectly balanced wine I have ever had, and this perfect balance somewhat mitigates the hugeness of the wine. There were a lot of moans and groans as this wine disappeared. Although a perfect match with the lamb, I think we enjoyed it most of all by itself—although it also went perfectly with Denice's flourless chocolate cake.

Where to go from here?

For those who know me well, or have read my article on French Fantasies, I am a huge fan of Chateau d'Yquem—thought by many to be the world's greatest wine. The world's foremost authority on d'Yquem was an American named Richard Olney. He published the definitive book on Yquem covering all vintages, from 1847 to 1990. He chose one vintage for the book's cover—the 1975. I was fortunate to secure the last three cases of this wine in 1985. It has special significance, because it is from the birth year of our first child. It remains far and away my wife's favorite wine, as well as mine.

Many years ago, a bottle of Chateau d'Yquem found its way into Milton's cellar and he told me he wanted to share it at our dinner. It was as if

the Rhône (perhaps Chapoutier de L' Orée or Les Granits). Although I put this wine in the category of a "meditation wine"—it went well with the Southern BLTs.

The second appetizer was the artichoke dip. The wine to accompany it was the 2011 Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma Coast made by Mark Aubert, one of America's best winemakers. I first knew Mark's genius when he was the winemaker at Peter Michael's in Sonoma. All of his wines compete favorably with those of competitors regardless of their origin. With this excellent wine, the subtle presence of oak added richness without being obtrusive. The pale gold nectar featured banana and pear nuances.

Milton, our dinner host, is known to love lamb. For the main course, he marinated two racks of lamb in black bean sauce, garlic, soy sauce, and Mongolian fire oil, and then grilled them in a Green Egg® until medium-rare. For the first wine, we chose a favorite – the 1986 Chateau Gruaud Larose (St. Julien). This vintage ranks among the best Gruaud Larose wines ever made, as well as one of the top 1986 Bordeaux from any region. This wine was a superb example of what classic Bordeaux can be when properly cellared and aged. It was a great partner to the lamb. It is big in style for such an old St. Julien offering, and had the much-recognized and valued complexity

of Gruaud Larose. This complexity can be attributed to a small amount of *brettanomyces* which is often present in certain Rhône and Bordeaux offerings. The challenge is that it must be controlled, or it overwhelms the smell of the wine. The wine is still powerful, but the tannins are smoothing and now displaying secondary and tertiary flavors and smells. There is mild evidence of oak, and it was in remarkably good form as far as the ruby-purple color. The aromas of cassis, black fruit, roasted herbs, tobacco, mushrooms, and earth all made for a complex wine to enhance the flavorful lamb. I believe it is approaching its zenith, which will be followed by a long, slow decline over several decades—truly a reason to buy and cellar this and other great wines.

After a moment of reflection, we advanced to the 1986 Chateau Mouton Rothschild. We certainly picked the right order to pour. This is one of the greatest wines ever made. It has been rated as perfection by many wine writers over the past 27 years. It takes only one smell and taste to know this truth. I have had this wine at several professional tastings over the past 25 years, and each time it has made me a believer. Although the 1982 Mouton has almost always been rated perfect, I believe the 1986 to be at least as good and if anything, a bigger wine. But it is so balanced, it does seem a shame to drink now. It will last another 50-plus



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the earth stood still. The now nearly caramel-colored wine is unctuous beyond belief. It has the most intense and distinctive nose-aroma of any wine I have known. It is redolent of tropical fruits, peach, vanilla, and coconut. The lushness of the Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc blend is kept in balance by the inherent acid, and even though it has a ripe sweetness to it—it is definitely not cloying. The taste and flavors in the wine now are secondary and tertiary in nature. And this wine will be great through its first full century of life and probably well into its second.

No wonder much of the production of this wine from the 1860s to 1917 went in Baccarat crystal decanters to the Russian Romanov family in St. Petersburg. At the end of this evening we had reached a sensory level rarely achieved through this art form.

I encourage you to plan ahead, so that you can reach this rarefied plateau. À votre santé! 🍷



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C.; contact him at profwino@comcast.net.