

Whitney's Birthday

By Joel M. Fisher with Kay Tornborg

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Who would argue that wineries, special wineries, sexy wineries are attractive sites for concerts and romantic spring /summer weddings? Kunde Winery and BR Cohn offer both. In Cohn's case, many feature the Doobie Brothers, which Bruce Cohn manages. Mondavi has done whole festivals and a concert series every summer. Up in Gold Country, Amador County, Ironstone Winery is full service: 10,000 square feet of indoor meeting space, banquet space, a 400-seat conference room, a deli, a cadre of chefs, wine storage caves, a tasting room, a huge outdoor park terraced for concerts or antique car shows or whatever you can dream up. The Kautz family has done well with their Sierra Foothills operation, and Stephen Kautz makes good wine, too.

So, I wasn't the least bit put out at having to travel north for my niece's 'special year's birthday-cum-engagement party this spring. She settled on Cuvaison Estate Wines, near Calistoga in the Napa Valley. In addition to the sales staff, winery host Brian Miller (a former chef at Massa, Ritz Carlton, the CIA, and elsewhere) monitored the event. The venue, which produces 58,000 cases of wine yearly, can accommodate 120 for educational and business events. They pair their own wines with the menu. Cuvaison does not do weddings. They prefer the opportunity to educate the public about wine through tastings or by their pairings with food.

The 22,000 square foot cave, aka Carneros Dining Room, can seat a good crowd and my niece's 40 guests were comfortable. We began out in the Private Wine Library, location of Cuvaison's vintage collection. I loved the feel of the room. Brian first served their chardonnay, which I was going to skip, but I gave in to his disapproving look and tasted. The new French oak is present, I think, in all the wines tasted that night. The 2002 Chardonnay Carneros (\$22), which started with butterscotch and caramel, was a balanced wine with good acidity and a complicated structure. The 2004 Pinot Noir Carneros (\$30) had good fruit flavors and was smooth on the palate. It will probably age, and I look forward to another taste in a year or so.

We moved to the dining room for dinner. I loved the ambiance of this impressive cave, with its dramatic archways and cool but comfortable temperatures. Our first course was a Butter braised Maine lobster on soft poached eggs in a brioche basket with mache and black truffle jus.

This was the best lobster dish I've had in a very long time! The Cuvaison 2002 Estate Selection Chardonnay Carneros ((\$35), with more Burgundy style than I anticipated, played well with the lobster, which was perfectly cooked with just the right amount of butter. It paired wonderfully with the wine!

The main course was a Grilled Tournedo of Beef, with Spring Vegetables paired with a Cuvaison 2002 Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45), from which I drew cedar, some leather, green tea, fruits, tannins and a nice structure. After tasting the wine opening up, I'd venture it drinks better after some time. This vintage will improve with age.

The cheese course followed, of both domestic and imported, and was paired with a Cuvaison 2002 Merlot, Carneros (\$ 29) Very nice! This is a smooth wine, with blackberries, nuts and a long finish.

Dessert was a wonderful Chocolate Pot de Creme, served with a 1966 Krohn Colheita Port, aged in wood for 7 years, which my niece had selected in Portugal a few years ago with this birthday in mind. She has a good idea: buy a birth-year wine for your kids, for a wedding anniversary or for other meaningful date.

This meal was created by Feast Catering in Santa Rosa and particularly by Executive Chef Jesse McQuarrie. Their selections were an excellent fit for this special evening. Happy Birthday Whitney!!

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