

Plum's Locally Grown Wine Dinner

Written by Mark Shaffer

Wednesday, 07 July 2010 10:05

An intoxicating recollection by Mark Shaffer



"The food speaks for itself, a little bit of salt and pepper and a little bit of love."

-□□ Executive Chef Will McLenagan



Will McLenagan has the look of a man about to slide behind the wheel of his dream car for the very first time. In essence, that's exactly what the Executive Chef for Plum's is about to do. After the restaurant's complete re-fit this past winter, he's got a brand new state of the art kitchen. Tonight he's taking it out for the first major shakedown cruise serving 80 people simultaneously, something he never considered with the old kitchen (see the accompanying interview).

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This is Plum's annual culinary homage to the people who plant, grow, raise and catch the good stuff in the Lowcountry. Nearly everything on the plate tonight is local. The produce was handpicked on St. Helena this morning at Seaside and Dempsey Farms, the shrimp are fresh caught out of local waters. The wine traveled a bit further but the themes of sustainable farming and highlighting the small independent producer still apply. Tonight, all of Chef Will's creations are paired with boutique Italian wines, most from Santi Vineyards, a family run operation since 1843 near the ancient city of Verona. Rick Caudle of Wildeman Imports presents the wines for the evening. He's just returned from a visit to Santi and says winery was a natural choice for the event. "Santi's known for using only sustainable agriculture," he explains. "They literally do everything they can to let the soil work into the wine – no pesticides or chemicals, just the natural vineyards. So eat, drink, enjoy. *Mangia! Mangia!*"

First Course

Blue Crab Gazpacho

Vino: Santi "Infinito" Rose of Bardolino

The *Infinito* is not yet available in the U.S. Caudle packed up a couple of cases and checked them through as luggage for tonight's dinner. "Y'all are very special to have this wine tonight," he says. "It's from the small village of Bardolino, made with big red grapes in a uniquely special style."



Chef Will's taken the same approach to the gazpacho. Traditional gazpacho comes from the

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southern Andalusian region of Spain and is a raw tomato-based soup served cold. At first glance this certainly looks like the usual thing but with big, juicy white lumps of crab swimming around a vivid ruby base. As soon as the bowls hit the tables, the buzz factor in the room jumps a notch. Once again Chef Will's done the unexpected. The menu simply reads "Blue Crab Gazpacho." St. Helena is known for its tomatoes. $1 + 1 = 2$. After a half dozen spoonfuls it's still a puzzle. There's a lot going on here – a culinary fresco of color, texture and flavors. Layers of sweet and savory mingle with a subtle heat at the back of the palate. The rich sweetness of the crab comes shining through. I've never tasted anything quite like it. Then again I've never had a gazpacho made with *watermelon* before. There's something vaguely Asian about it. Chef Will later describes it as a palate cleanser, "a very clean tasting soup." I would simply call it *elegant*.

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The Santi *Infinito* Rose is equally elegant with deep notes of ripe berries and a crisp finish – a perfect summer barbecue and brunch wine. It's neither lost nor overpowered by the complexity of the soup, but rather enhances it. In fact, it's hard to put this glass down and move on. But then I often have this problem.

Second Course

Tempura Fried Zucchini

Palm Sugar Cured Prawns

Yuzu Aoli

Vino: Santi "Vigneti di Monteforte" Soave Classico

Once again Chef Will applies an Asian spin to Lowcountry summer staples and comes up with something unique. The fresh Dempsey Farm zucchini is thinly sliced lengthwise, dipped in tempura batter and flash fried in the kitchen's brand new deep fryer. The tempura crust is nice and crunchy with just enough

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