

# FOOD & WINE

## Chocolate and Wine

*Ray Isle, Senior Wine Editor*

I had the interesting experience over the weekend of being the guest wine speaker for an all-chocolate brunch that the immensely talented Andrew Shotts, of Garrison Confections in Providence, put on at the James Beard House.

Generally speaking, I think chocolate and wine go together miserably. People seem to want to believe that a big intense Cabernet or Zinfandel will go wonderfully with a hunk of high-quality chocolate; in fact, they want to believe it so much that they ignore what's going on in their mouth, which is usually the chocolate obliterating the taste of the wine. Dark chocolate (the chocolate worth eating, I think) is tough: it's intensely flavorful, it's bitter, sweet, fruity, complex, and also fairly alkaline. It can work very nicely with sweet wines—Bual or Malmsey Madeira is the absolute, top-o-the-heap, A+ chocolate-pairing wine, in my experience—but for dry wines the stuff is usually a disaster.

Here's the big ol' honkin' caveat though: except when chocolate is a flavor component of a dish, instead of the only thing in your mouth (other than the wine, that is). For the Beard House brunch, Drew put together the following menu: Poulet Noir Ravioli with Chocolate Carbonara and Prosciutto di Parma, Seared Foie Gras with Cocoa Nibs, Chocolate Brioche and Onion-Fennel Jam, Peppered Beef Tenderloin with Port, Shallots and Chocolate Jus, Baby Spinach with Smoked Lardons, Gorgonzola, Hazelnuts and Cocoa Rouge Vinaigrette...and dessert. I'll get to dessert in a second. Whew.

In any case, the chocolaty-ness (not a word, but whatever) of the dishes varied: the ravioli, in their chocolate carbonara sauce (i.e. liquid decadence) were quite chocolaty; the salad, much less so. Overall it was a bizarre exercise in pairing that worked surprisingly well. The ravioli, for instance (and after discussion with Drew) I paired with a 2005 Sequoia Grove Chardonnay (\$25). Cal Chard? Absolutely. A little oak vanilla didn't hurt at all, and the wine was broad-shouldered enough to handle the richness of the dish, which in fact seemed to balance out the wine and brighten its fruit. The beef tenderloin, on the other hand and as I mentioned to the dinner guests, was basically a no-brainer: Zinfandel. Port, chocolate and peppered beef: 2005 St. Francis Wild Oak Zinfandel (\$30), a wine that is showing far better right now than it was a few months ago when I first tasted it.

It's probably not entirely thrilling to go into every last pairing, but the point is that chocolate as an ingredient in a dish is actually a very effective companion to dry wine—all those complicated notes of fruit, bitterness, sweetness, tanginess and so on work brilliantly in this context. Whereas chocolate on its own is best enjoyed, well, on its own.

Oh, and dessert? A bar of tea-scented chocolate cream with two accompanying gelée domes of pureed bitter orange with lime and mint, sandwiched between two micro-thin sheets of terrific dark chocolate. Paired with Taylor 10 Year Old Tawny Port (\$32). Which was just plain mind-blowing as a combo (yeah, yeah, I know, stop praising yourself already). The light citrus zip of the gelée against the dried citrus notes in the port, silky chocolate cream against the equally silky texture of the port...well. Not a bad way to end a meal, nor to spend a Sunday morning.