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Cure the winter blues with these wine and small bites pairings



Simoncini Vineyards 2014 Bollicini Rosa Sparkling Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley paired with savory pepper jack, garlic, and basil crackers at Simoncini Vineyards in Healdsburg on Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

[DIANE PETERSON](#)

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The holidays have vanished — the platters of luscious cheese, the groaning board buffets, the endless tins of cookies — and yet we still find ourselves in the middle of a long journey through the cold, gray woods of winter.

Home cooks, do not abandon hope! Banish the darkness of the season by inviting a few friends and family over for a small-plates, wine-pairing party. The appetizer celebration satisfies the demands of both the sensual and the sensible, bringing together decadence and portion control within a tantalizing array of small bites and sips.

“It’s the way I like to eat,” said Deirdre Francis, chef at Simoncini Vineyards in Healdsburg’s Dry Creek Valley. “Last Christmas Eve, I made all these little things ... They’re rich, so it feels like a meal.”

At Simoncini, Francis serves a wide array of small bites as part of the winery's wine-and-food pairing program — named after the Venetian, small-plate tradition of “cicheti” (chee-key-tee). The pairings — six bites and sips that change with the seasons — celebrate the tradition of the Italian table while complementing the winery's array of big reds, whites, dessert and sparkling wines made from estate-grown grapes and select vineyards.

The small-production (2,100 case) winery, open by appointment only, is situated on a bucolic stretch of West Dry Creek Road. In the winter, the pairings take place in the elegant wine cave, which opens up to various spaces as it stretches back nearly 650 feet into the hillside. In the summer, family-style picnics are served in a manicured glen next to the winery, carved by a creekbed.

“You taste the wine, but when you taste the wine with the food that accentuates it, it's an experience,” Francis said.



Simoncini Vineyards 2013 El Diablo Chardonnay, Russian River Valley paired with cauliflower and creamy brie soup at Simoncini Vineyards in Healdsburg on Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

The chef grew up in Concord as one of nine children, and her first cooking job was at a convent in Pleasant Hill, where she would make dinner for the nuns. After receiving a degree in home economics and nutrition from San Francisco State, she launched her own company, Deirdre Francis Catering of Concord, then moved to Sonoma County in 2012.

Because it is a small, family-run winery, everything and everyone at Simoncini wears many hats.

The crush pad outside the cave doubles as a summer party area, and the custom tables inside are built for flexibility, coming apart to create different configurations for business meetings or wine club parties, such as a recent holiday dessert soirée.

The cave took six years to complete and includes a waterproof rock tunnel with radiant heating and cooling, chandeliers, a baby grand piano and a picture window built into a section of the natural rock wall — a blend of shale, obsidian and quartz — that glistens under a waterfall.

The temperature is maintained at 58 to 62 degrees, and all the fermentation, barrel aging and bottling take place underground in the cave.

“It’s all about control,” Francis said. “That’s why we have our own bottling line and warehouse.”

The chef plays several different roles, both inside and outside the kitchen.

“I’m the chef, I run the wine club and I do the tours,” said Francis, who is also the “sweetheart for life” of vintner Ken Simoncini, owner of the winery with his father, Bob Simoncini.

Ken Simoncini grew up in San Francisco, and his father ran a liquor store in Daly City.

“That’s how he got his love of wine,” she said. “Ken is detail oriented and a man of vision.”



Simoncini Vineyards 2013 Cleary Ranch Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, paired with a cremini mushroom, Sonoma County goat cheese, fontina and arugula panini at Simoncini Vineyards in Healdsburg on Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

The Simoncini family roots in the region date back to 1907, when “nonno Tony” came from Genoa, Italy, with his two brothers to farm peaches, prunes and wine grapes.

Simoncini Vineyards was established in 2002, and its first harvest was in 2012, when winemaker Dan Cuzzi came on board to oversee the boutique line of chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, viognier, pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon and the prized zinfandel sourced from Dry Creek, Russian River and Alexander valleys as well as Rockpile. The winery also produces an estate zinfandel grown on St. George rootstock that was field-grafted with 100-year-old St. Peter’s Church bud wood sourced from an old-vine vineyard in Cloverdale.

“We grow 8 acres of zin behind the cave,” Francis said. “Last year, we lost some vineyards (as grape sources), so Ken bought land in the Russian River Valley.”



Simoncini Vineyards 2013 El Diablo Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, paired with cauliflower and creamy brie soup, at Simoncini Vineyards in Healdsburg, California, on Tuesday, January 7, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

There are three proprietary blends: the “Serio Bianco” viognier, “Grande Rosso” zinfandel and “Serio Rosso” cabernet sauvignon.

To honor Ken’s parents, the winery also produces two dessert wines: “Glorious” Late Harvest Muscat Canelli and “Robusto” Late Harvest Estate Zinfandel.

In addition, Francis enjoys pairing her small bites with a Simoncini sparkling pinot noir — “Bollicini Rosa” — made in the “méthode champenoise” style by Gerald Ployez of Ployez Consulting in Lower Lake. “It has tiny pink bubbles,” she said. “We go very brut — dry and sparkling.”

Here are her three pairings, with tasting notes for each one:

Simoncini Vineyards 2014 Bollicini Rosa Sparkling Pinot Noir paired with Pepper Jack, Garlic and Basil Crackers:

“The brut sparkling pinot noir is an excellent pairing with buttery, salty and creamy foods,” she said. “The acidity and effervescence of the sparkling wine and the rich, buttery cracker creates a party in your mouth. The crackers, if cut into squares, would go nicely with a soft indulgent cheese like a triple crème Brie. ”

Pepper Jack, Garlic and Basil Crackers

1½ cups grated Pepper Jack Cheese (6 ounces)
4 tablespoons butter, cold
¾ cup all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh basil
1 medium clove of fresh garlic, minced
¼ teaspoon fine sea salt plus a pinch to sprinkle on top
2-3 teaspoons water

In a food processor bowl, combine all ingredients except the water and pulse until the mixture looks like rough crumbs. Slowly add the water 1 teaspoon at a time, pulsing to blend until the mixture comes together into a dough when pressed together.

Turn the dough out onto a large piece of plastic wrap, gather into a ball and knead once or twice to bring the dough together. Flatten the dough into a square and wrap in the plastic. Refrigerate the dough until firm, at least 20 minutes and up to 2 days, or freeze to bake later. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Line baking sheet with parchment paper. Roll dough to ⅛ inch. Cut to desired shapes. Sprinkle with a little sea salt. Bake 10 to 14 minutes or until medium brown. Store in an airtight container for up to 4 days.

Simoncini Vineyards 2014 El Diablo Vineyard Chardonnay paired with Cauliflower Brie Soup:

“This wine’s hint of butter, oak, crisp apple and balanced acidity pairs perfectly with the creamy richness and warmth of the Cauliflower Brie Soup.”

Cauliflower and Brie Soup

Makes 6 to 8 servings
2 heads of cauliflower, cleaned and trimmed
12 tablespoons butter
2 medium onions, peeled and diced
2 garlic cloves, peeled and diced
8 medium stalks of celery, diced
1 cup chardonnay
1½ quarts chicken stock
¼ teaspoon crushed red chile pepper
— Kosher salt and pepper
12 ounces Brie cheese, rind removed, cut into medium dice
½ cup heavy cream

Clean the cauliflower by removing the leaves, coring and cutting into large florets. Melt the butter in a large soup pot. Add the onion, garlic and celery and cook over medium heat to “sweat,” stirring occasionally until tender, about 5 minutes. Add the chardonnay and bring to a boil. Add the cauliflower florets and the chicken stock, cover and bring to a boil again.

Turn down the heat and simmer about 20 minutes or until the cauliflower is tender. Add crushed red chile pepper and kosher salt and black pepper to taste. Puree the soup with an immersion blender until smooth.

Add the Brie, a few pieces at a time, and blend until the cheese has melted into the soup. Add the cream and adjust the seasoning to taste.



Crimini mushroom, Sonoma County goat cheese, fontina and arugula paninis are placed on a grill at Simoncini Vineyards in Healdsburg, California, on Tuesday, January 7, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

Simoncini Vineyards 2013 Cleary Ranch Vineyard Pinot Noir paired with Cremini Mushroom, Soft Sonoma Goat Cheese, Arugula and Fontina Cheese Panini:

“This pinot noir comes from an exceptionally foggy micro-climate in the Russian River Valley,” she said. “The earthy undertones and fruity aromas in the wine pair naturally with the earthy tones in the sautéed mushrooms.”

Cremini Mushroom, Creamy Goat Cheese, Fontina and Arugula Panini

Makes 4 panini

4 tablespoons olive oil

4 cups fresh cremini mushrooms, cleaned and sliced

4 tablespoons pinot noir

— Salt and pepper to taste

8 slices sourdough bread

8 ounces soft goat cheese (preferably from Sonoma County)

8 slices (approximately 8 ounces total) Fontina cheese

— Baby arugula leaves, cleaned and dry

4 tablespoon melted unsalted butter

Warm the olive oil in a frying pan, add the sliced cremini mushrooms and cook on medium high for approximately 4 minutes. Add the pinot noir wine and sauté for 10 minutes.

Season with salt and pepper to taste. Remove from heat and cool.

To build the panini: Spread the soft goat cheese on each of 4 bread slices, top each slice with a quarter of the sautéed cremini mushrooms, arugula leaves and 2 ounces of Fontina cheese.

Top with remaining bread slices. Brush the outside of the panini with melted butter.

Preheat the panini press or large, nonstick skillet to medium heat. Cook 3 minutes on each side or until golden brown.

You can reach Staff Writer Diane Peterson at 707-521-5287 or diane.peterson@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @dianepete56