

THE RIPE TOMATO

By Carl Rana

Fig Garden Village is one of the most comfortable shopping centers that Fresno has to offer with its history of elegance and style. I ventured into The Ripe Tomato and met up with Ray Krause, one of the owners of Westbrook Wine Farm. What better place to pair Westbrook wines with their French heritage than at the restaurant where Rudy Liebl has been turning out fine Parisian-style gastronomy for almost 35 years?

We decided to try several dishes this day and started out with a celebratory glass of Roederer Estate Brut Rose NV, Anderson Valley AVA. This Brut Rose is a cuvee, 100% estate grown, and has a generous amount of Chardonnay in its ratio (40%) to Pinot Noir. A fine wine that one can enjoy throughout an entire meal due to its good acids, round texture, and an effervescence that completely cleanses the palate. A great choice for a Valentine's Day dinner! Our waiter was Kevin and our first selection was the Pan-seared Scallops with an apricot, garlic, and red pepper sauce. They were absolutely perfect, and paired well with the sparkler. The sweet floral nose of the Brut Rose and the aroma of cooked fruit was an instant olfactory delight. The salt in the scallops brought out the fruit component of the Pinot Noir - a wonderful contrast. Ray and I both ordered the Filet with a Bordelaise sauce for wine he brought. Our filets were cooked to a perfect medium rare and the sauce was quite complimentary. It was such a treat to have both vintages 2007 and 2008 of the Fait Accompli to compare. The 2008 is bottled but will not be released until spring, so I was able to taste the differences between the two vintages which reflect the different weather that influenced them.

Ray has produced Estate, field blended wines, with six of the eight Bordeaux varietals currently being grown. He co-fermented Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Carmenere on the same day. The 2007 and 2008 are unfiltered, and aged in a combination of 75% Extra-fine grain American oak and 25% Allier barrels. The Allier Forest in central France has poor soil, making tree growth quite slow, resulting in a very "tight" wood grain. That, plus a Medium toast, results in minimal wood influence for the winemaker.

The 2007 vintage "Renaissance" was aged for 30 months and the 2008 vintage "Cryo" for 32 months. "Cryo" is an interesting name that explains the growth year. In April of 2008, the weather was cold for California, plunging to a chilly 26 degrees. At Westbrook Wine Farm, the new, tender shoots of that vintage froze at the base; hence a cryogenic pruning took place. A second growth of shoots became the 2008 vintage and the shorter growing season required an additional two months on oak. Both these wines are surprisingly consistent, with a noticeable fragrance and taste of Cabernet Franc. These are what I consider "Big" wines of a dense nature with suitable tannins, and so well balanced that the 14%+ alcohol is barely noticed. Ray said his wines plateau and maintain their quality for several years, and I have to agree after what I drank that day. I believe they will be great for the rest of this decade. The rich flavor of the Bordelaise and the blood rareness of the filet brought the fruit forward and balanced the acids, taming some of the tannins for a great pairing. I need to mention that Westbrook Wine Farm is located in Madera County at O'Neals, just 45 minutes away in the Sierra Nevada Foothills, not in France. So it's true - a super quality wine can be Estate produced in our own backyard and that's a Done Deal or as the French say a Fait Accompli! Again, my wish for all who read this column is that you eat and drink healthily, locally, and with friends you love...and that's my opinion.

Carl Rana is the vice president and sales manager of Fresno-based Stefanelli Distributing Company, Inc., a family-owned business since 1951. His experience as a restaurateur, corporate executive chef, and certified specialist of wine has allowed him to further his knowledge of the wine industry.