

Wine and Valentines

A perfect pairing

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Photo by Nigel Roberts

Wine and Valentines— A perfect pairing

by Nigel Roberts

*A*t fine dining restaurants on Valentine's Day, waiters throughout the country will ask couples if they'd like wine with their gourmet meals. What's a romantic dinner without wine? So after receiving a nervous smile and a nod, the server presents a leather-bound wine menu, with page after page of difficult-to-pronounce French and Italian wines. Whether you're a gentleman trying to impress a date on Valentine's Day or an old married couple trying to rekindle the flame, there's no need to panic.

Adam Ghali, general manager and wine director at Villa Christina in Dunwoody, suggests asking the server to make a recommendation. After asking for a recommendation, be prepared to answer a few questions. The server will, of course, ask one's preference, red or white, dry or sweet and usually will also ask which menu items the couple plans to order to figure out which wines would pair well.

Be prepared also to tell her your price range. "The price of the wine is less important than the value you get for your money," said Ghali, who began his journey as a wine expert in 1964, at the age of 14 in France. "The most expensive wine is not necessarily the best wine. A \$7 bottle may be better than a \$30 bottle of wine." He explained that winemakers who spend more in advertising and production often recoup their expenses by charging more.

What follows when the bottle arrives is actually a simple procedure. The server shows the label; that's to make sure he or she brought



Photos by Nigel Roberts



the correct wine. Usually the cork is presented next. Ghali comments that smelling the cork is more ceremonial than practical. "Look at the cork to make sure it isn't dry," he explains. "A dry cork could indicate that air may have seeped into the wine and caused it to oxidize." Smelling and tasting the wine is more revealing. Make sure it doesn't have a vinegary or corky taste or scent. That could indicate that the wine is spoiled.

If, upon further tasting and pairing with the meal, one finds the waiter's recommendation doesn't work for one's palate, don't be afraid to tell the waiter. "Just say I don't like it," Ghali suggested. "It's OK to return the wine if there's a flaw. It's no big deal." He added that it's inappropriate for the waiter to ask for a detailed explanation or to disagree with a customer.

Instead of ordering an entire bottle, Ghali suggested inexperienced wine drinkers try a glass with each course. Villa Christina is offering a special four-course Valentine's Day menu that starts with seared scallops and a spinach risotto. Ghali recommends pairing the antipasto course

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with a sauvignon blanc (sow-veen-yone blahnc), a crisp white wine.

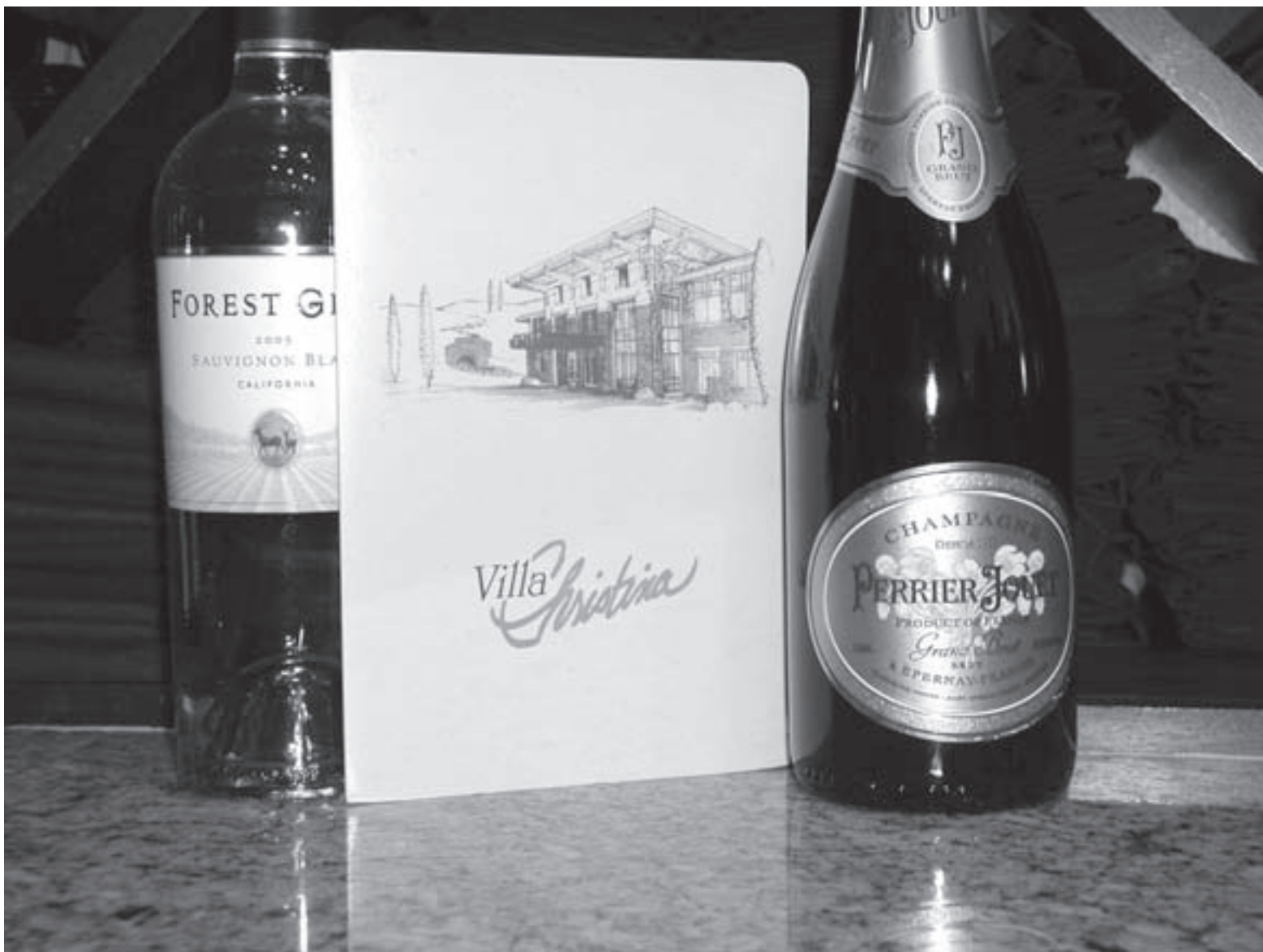
A glass of prosecco (pro-seck-oh), a sparkling white wine, topped with a raspberry follows the antipasto. Prosecco cleanses the palate in preparation for the main course. The entrée will be grilled beef filet over grilled lobster. Ghali recommends a pinot noir (pee-no nwahr) because it pairs well with both beef and seafood.

Dessert wines are sometimes very sweet, and some people enjoy that. But Ghali is recommending a late-harvest sauvignon blanc that balances light fruity flavors with the typical crispness of sauvignon blanc. Chef **Glenn Butler** will create a white chocolate mousse and raspberry napoleon with raspberry sorbet for dessert.

As an alternative to ordering wine, many fine dining restaurants, including Villa Christina, permit customers to bring their own wine. In most cases, the wine must be special—one that has been aging for a number of years or a unique bottle that's not on the restaurant's list. Remember that some restaurants charge a corkage fee, typically \$10 to \$20. So call ahead to find out each restaurant's rules.

It's Valentine's Day, so don't stress about ordering wine for this intimate dinner. Instead, concentrate on enjoying the meal and the company of your loved one. "Forget all the rules and hoopla about white before reds or dry before sweet," Ghali said emphatically. "Wine is just a beverage to be enjoyed."

Villa Christina is offering its four-course Valentine's Day dinner for \$60 per person, starting on Feb. 14 and continuing through Feb. 17. Jazz vocalist and musician **Alex Lattimore** will perform nightly. Visit the restaurant's Web site to learn more about its Valentine's Day special, www.villachristina.com.



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