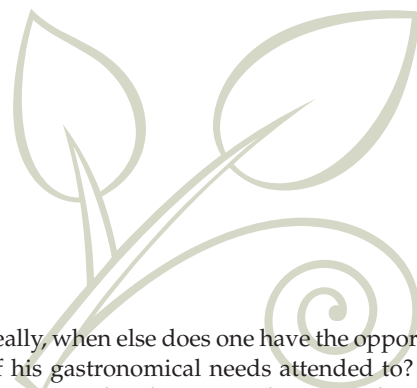


Charbono

By Jeff Becker
Photography by Jesse Ramirez

Apart from the food and wine, what wine dinners offer patrons is a glimpse into the life of winemakers, the life of those involved in the wine industry, and a real taste of what it is like to dedicate one's time and energy to my favorite beverage.



Because, really, when else does one have the opportunity to sit and have all of his gastronomical needs attended to? While half the fun of dining out is the pleasure in choosing what to eat and drink that evening, it is rare that I have the opportunity, the time, or the funds to sit down to a five course meal, paired with five interesting wines. Too many of us eat quickly, and even if we appreciate what is on our plates there is never enough time to savor more than a course or two, more than one wine. A wine dinner is an invitation to sit and dedicate a few hours to the true pleasure of dining. It is sort of like watching a fashion show—beauty is paraded before you and it is very hard to complain.

On special occasions, when a winemaker is in attendance, patrons are offered even more. Not only do they eat and drink, but are allowed a glimpse into the story behind the beverage. Winemaking is a fabled tradition. It starts not in the cask, but in the grapes and the land before them. To truly do it well, attention must be paid to an entire operation (and to think, all too often we just slosh it down our gullets). “Handcrafted” means that there are people behind a wine, dedicating their lives to its ongoing production. A good wine is the result of a year’s work, a lifetime’s mastery, and the specific good things that make up the place where it is grown. In a good wine, one can taste all of that. It’s the love, baby, and when you have it in your hands, when it is there in your nose, when you know you’ve got it, you want very much to drink of it.

On September 25th, Mesa Street Grill in El Paso, Texas hosted Jim Summers of Summers Winery. Summers came to winemaking from the banking industry. His wife, Beth, came from several generations of California winemakers and together they left the banking world for the wine business.

It is perhaps the Summers’ Napa Valley Charbono 2003 that was the highlight of the evening. A low-alcohol offering of 100% Estate Charbono, the wine is a testament to the lesser known varietal. Charbono is found in less than 100 acres of California soil and is produced in limited quantities. Often fruity, the wine has deep color and Summers is one of the few wineries still producing it. One of the benefits of learning about smaller wineries that handcraft their wine is that they can keep lesser known varietals in existence, while giving them the proper attention to let them shine, and with both a Wine Enthusiast 90+ rating and attention from Robert Parker, the Charbono has attracted its share of respect.

We ate. We drank. Jim Summers came to each table, shaking hands, expressing his gratitude. A heavy rain drenched El Paso, made the wheels of the passing cars hiss. It is a certain kind of burden to know that all one is expected to do is sit back and enjoy one’s self. To let go and fully invest in the food, the wine, the company of the present moment.



Top left: Jim Summers (standing) discusses his wines with guests

below: Vanilla braised beef short rib with ancho demi glaze

Right: Mesa Street Grill Owners, Bill and Annette Means



WINE DINNERS



Above: Pork Tenderloin Medallions with Grilled Manchego Polenta



Jim Summers' story is that he had come to the wine world from the banking industry. Back when California wines were but an interesting upstart, he began to track their progress, ultimately buying Knight's Valley Vineyard just outside of Calistoga, California in 1987. With his wife Beth, who came from a long stock of California winegrowers, along for the ride, the two embarked on a journey that involved a lot of "muddy boots and long hours on a tractor." They started producing Cabernet Sauvignon and moved on to other varietals. In 1996, they were able to acquire 22 acres that they named Villa Adrianna, after their daughter. It was there that they started growing Charbono. Now, with a love of bocce ball complementing their love for wine, the Summers' winery is consistently producing interesting wines that honor the age-old handcrafted techniques of winemaking.

As for the food, the queen of the party was the Black and Tan Spicy Bean soup. With both black beans and pinto beans meeting, this rich concoction was paired with the Charbono to make for a pleasant combination. Provided by Mesa Street Grill, dish after dish, of well prepared food arrived, on point, adding to the experience. A pork tenderloin arrived in a spicy tomato chutney with grilled Manchego polenta in addition to the vanilla braised short ribs and chipotle honey-glazed shrimp. In the presence of good food and wine, I feel like a father forced to choose between two sons. There is something biblical about food and wine, and luckily, for me, I do not have to choose. At wine dinners like this—they are brought to me, and all I have to do is enjoy it. ❄️

Mesa Street Grill is located at 2525 N. Mesa St. They frequently host events that showcase certain wines and winemakers. For more information, call (915) 532-1881 or visit www.sumwines.com