

TASTE

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TASTE BUDD



CHEF LARRY JANES

I'm Dreaming of oysters and caviar

With my new healthy eating regimen, I can honestly say there aren't many foods that I have a passion for. As a proponent for the beef industry, there were days when I used to salivate over a Pittsburgh Rare style of tenderloin. Having spent my summer vacation in Maine, I thought lobster plucked from the chilled waters of New England, steamed and served with enough butter to clog Hulk Hogan's arteries would be culinary nirvana but it wasn't.

Lindt chocolate and Godiva truffles were once revered, something to be left on the tongue to slowly melt and entice the senses but now they make my teeth ache. Even momma's famed "alid-ers" (dumplings cooked in homemade chicken broth) that I still enjoy on my birthday every year, leave me comforted but missing the good old days when they were a staple and not a treat.

So what could possibly turn this man's head? What could make me stray?

It would be caviar and oysters, both are true delicacies.

Oysters

Oysters, best known for their reputed aphrodisiac powers, have been a favorite food of lovers throughout the centuries. Roman emperors paid for them by their weight in gold. Pharmacologically, the true aphrodisiac capacity of an oyster really depends on its dopamine content.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps govern brain activity and influence sexual desire. In her book "Oysters, a True Delicacy" (Copyright 1995, Macmillan, \$12.95) Shirley Lino offers oyster lovers definitive information on 12 of the most prized oysters available in the western world.

In addition to recipes, you'll find health and nutrition information, and learn more about the history of oysters. There are 76 calories in 12 oysters and they're loaded with good Omega-Three Fatty Acids. Oysters have been a food source since Neolithic times.

Without a doubt, I will pay anything, drive anywhere, and probably risk life and limb during a horrendous snowstorm to enjoy oysters. Although a rich diet and warm waters dictate that oysters remain female, the female oyster likes to revert back to being male after spawning. The male oyster also gets a chance to go through the process of childbirth, laying as many as one million eggs per year, just like the female oyster. This and many other facts in the book, make it worthwhile. But just as much as the sensation of raw oysters sliding down my throat, I would also consider the sale of my first born Cuisinart in exchange for some real good caviar.

Caviar

I would probably even do the same if the caviar wasn't real good, as long as it was accompanied by a decent champagne, Beluga and Sevruga, Osciete and Sterlet, and, if my American Express card limit was depleted with the purchase of one too many oysters, even salmon eggs. Those of us with a passion for caviar will surely enjoy "Caviar, a True Delicacy" by Susie Boeckmann and Natalie Robles-Nielsen (Copyright 1995, Macmillan, \$12.95).

If your New Year's Eve party needs an elegant boost or you want to start the New Year off right by serving your partner breakfast in bed (blini with caviar and Mimosa, of course), you'll be thankful for the in depth information on everything you wanted to know about caviar.

Ah, but where can we get these passionate delicacies at their best? For oysters, get out the Yellow Pages and start contacting upscale fish stores. Locally, I would shop at Superior Fish in Royal Oak. Also, if time permits, inquire at Vic's in Novi and Beverly Hills, and Papa Joe's in Rochester.

Large supermarket chains might have some. Long Islands but trust me folks, it's worth the added effort to do a little searching.

Moments in Ann Arbor's Kerrytown would also be a good start. Caviar lovers will appreciate the good stock at any Merchant of Vint and again, if cost is no object, have the folks at Caviar & Caviar Fed-Ex some overnight (800) 472-4450. Oh, and don't forget the pearl spoon.

See Larry Janes' family-tested recipes inside. Chef Larry is a free-lance writer for the Observer & Recorder Newspapers. To learn a voice mail message for him dial (313) 653-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1888.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Wine column

■ Great book reviews

BY ELEANOR & RAY HEALD
SPECIAL WRITERS

Celebrations are more festive with a glass of champagne. But it's important to remember that champagne has a French connection. In all courtesy to its origins, the name champagne should be used only in reference to the sparkling product from France's Champagne region. All other bubbles, even if they are French, should be referred to as "sparkling wine."

Holiday celebrating and ringing in the New Year with champagne is a centuries-old tradition. But this is the 90s, in love with putting a new twist on old things. At a small gathering, try pairing a French champagne with its California counterpart. Be in the pink of things and serve only rose (or rosé) champagnes. Design a light menu around sparkling wines using the suggested recipes, garnered from around the world, that follow.

Over the last two decades, California has made a name for itself in the production of sparkling wine. This is due in great measure to the interest of some French champagne houses (Moët & Chandon was the first) who started production of sparkling wine in California. Is there a taste difference between French champagne and California sparkling wine even if it's produced by a French company? Yes, absolutely because the soils and climate are different. There is however a thread of similarity in style.

A good way to taste this for yourself is to compare the product in pairs - French and California. We're suggesting you do this with three French champagne houses, Taittinger, Moët & Chandon and Mumm and their new world counterparts Domaine Carneros, Domaine Chandon and Mumm Napa Valley. Choose the driest of these wines labeled "Brut." The object here is not to judge which you like better, but rather to look at style similarity. Here's what to look for:

• Taittinger Brut La Française \$25 is refined with some toasty elements. It's delicate and elegant



Hostess gift: Champagne and the holidays are perfect matches.

with a lasting finish representing the epitome of finesse in a non-vintage Brut Champagne.

• 1991 Domaine Carneros Brut \$21 showcases expressive California fruit. While bigger and fuller on the palate than its French counterpart, it has an extremely delicate finish that's lengthy with toasty hints.

The above comparison reveals light, delicate styles sensational with Caspian Sea caviar.

• Moët & Chandon Brut Impérial \$33 has remarkably tiny bubbles and lots of toasty aromas. It comes across mature yet lively with good concentration and medium weight. It is uniquely reflective of Champagne terroir.

• Domaine Chandon Reserve \$20 is a show stopper with rich, flavorful, distinguished fruit. It's very lengthy, creamy and rich.

These bottlings are showy and forward making excellent accompaniments to finger appetizers, Norwegian salmon or shellfish soups.

• Mumm Cordon Rouge Brut \$28 with 25 percent pinot meunier and 10 percent reserve wine in the cuvee sums up to depth and richness. This is a big, creamy style wine with a complex, elegant finish.

• 1990 Mumm Cuvée Napa Winery Lake Cuvée \$20 with unique nuances of tropical fruit and mandarin orange, begs for salted almonds as an accompaniment.

For that 90s twist with this generous and rich pairing, serve quality fresh-popped popcorn.

If you like to follow a best-sellers list, then you should know that the hottest-selling brand of French non-vintage champagne in U.S.

restaurants is Veuve Clicquot \$30 followed by Perrier-Jouët \$22 and Moët & Chandon \$33.

For domestic sparklers, the shake-out is Domaine Chandon \$17, Mumm Cuvée Napa \$15 and Roederer Estate \$ 27.

Taking a quick survey of participants at the Red Wagon Wine Shoppe's Champagne and Dessert Wine tasting at Birmingham's Townsend Hotel, the favorites were led by Taittinger Brut La Française \$25 followed by Ruinart Brut \$35 and Veuve Clicquot \$30.

Arlene and Dennis Pinkos attending from West Bloomfield shared their preferences. "Ruinart Brut with its yeasty taste and clean, lingering finish was tops in my book," Dennis said. He also praised the non-vintage Philipponat "Le Réfect" \$34 for its "very distinctive taste."

Arlene's preference was Veuve Clicquot.

Champagne Deutz is not as well known as many French champagnes. The 1990 Champagne Deutz Blanc de Blancs \$43, made 100 percent from chardonnay is stellar. Champagne Pommery is again available after a long absence from this market. We especially like the bright, fresh and creamy non-vintage Pommery Brut Royal \$31.

While champagne may be a French connection, the Spanish are also making serious sparklers properly called "Cavas." The biggest player is Freixenet with its Gloria Ferrer label in California. The Gloria Ferrer Sonoma Brut about \$12 is a winner with the Mushroom in Garlic Sauce recipe.

Rose sparkling wines from California are flattered both by their color and redolent pinot noir character. You can't beat the 1991 Iron Horse Rose \$28.

A California sparkling wine producer without French connection is industry style leader Schramsberg. New bottlings for the holidays include 1990 Schramsberg Blanc de Blancs \$25 and 1991 Brut Rose \$25.

• See recipes inside.

'Great Pretenders' mix up tasty drinks

BY MARY RODRIGUE
STAFF WRITER

Party goers and their hosts are discovering the drinks they quaff or serve at holiday gatherings don't have to be alcoholic to taste great.

With the biggest drinking holiday of the year just days away, what better time to consider innovative concoctions that taste so good, you won't even miss the alcohol?

Beginning each December, AAA Michigan distributes free statewide the "Great Pretenders Party Guide," a booklet listing recipes for tested and tasty alcohol free drinks.

The annual AAA sponsored contest, held this past October in Dearborn, drew 300 entries from which 15 contestants were chosen. "Salute to the Automobile" was the contest theme to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the U.S. auto industry to be celebrated in 1996.

Local finalists mixed their drinks for a panel of judges including Wayne County Sheriff Robert Picano, Jim Lark, owner of the Lark restaurant in West Bloomfield, and Carmen Harlan, anchorwoman at WDIV-TV, channel 4.

Contestants came together in Muskegon and Petoskey to mix their drinks in other regional competitions.

Lynne Loren of West Bloomfield was a finalist with her "Crankshaft Sangria" featuring alcohol-free red wine, undiluted frozen lemonade, fresh citrus and soda water.

"I like the idea of less alcohol at the holidays," said Loren. "You don't have to boost it up."

She enjoys creating new recipes, whether it's soup, cakes, brownies or beverages. "I try out my recipes on a select group of friends who are honest enough to let me know when it's not so good," she said.

She entered the Great Pretenders contest without first testing the recipe on her control group of friends, "but it did make it to me."

Loren and her husband, Eugene Loren, with two grown children in place, enjoy hosting parties all year round.

"This New Year's Eve we're going out," she said. She enjoyed the contest experience and says she would do it again. She was also a contestant a



Raspberry Car-kall: Created by Betsy Thapke of Rothbury, this entry was a first place winner in the AAA competition.

few years back in AAA's great brownies contest. One recent Friday, she spent a few hours in the Birmingham AAA office making her Crankshaft Sangria for patrons.

You can skip the alcohol and the fat with Melody Farms new low-fat egg nog, introduced just in time for the holidays.

The Livonia based company uses only two percent butterfat instead of the six percent used for regular egg nog. As a result, a serving of the low fat egg nog has only 100 calories.

"Egg nog is a centuries old treat that people enjoy drinking during the holidays," said Stephen George, vice president of product development for Melody Farms.

"Because people are concerned about eating too much fat today, we have introduced this delicious low fat egg nog."

Two ways to enjoy it: fill your favorite mug with low fat egg nog. Stir in two pinches of fresh ground nutmeg. Sprinkle a dash of nutmeg on top and serve. For extra zip, add a small pinch of

ground ginger. Or put a small scoop of Melody Farms lite or no-fat vanilla ice cream in a favorite tall glass. Add low fat egg nog and a dash of nutmeg and stir slightly. As the ice cream starts to melt, you'll receive a flavorful double treat.

OK, so not everyone is counting calories; Melody Farms has devised ways to enjoy one of their new ice cream flavors this season, Winter Wonder. Winter Wonder, available through February, is white chocolate flavor ice cream mixed with chewy red and green mint flakes.

"It's been very popular. It will be back next winter, at least for the next two years," said George.

For a Winter Wonder shake, deposit two or three scoops of Winter Wonder ice cream in a blender and add milk. Mix well. The result will be a flurry of color, reminiscent of a snow storm at the North Pole.

• See recipes inside.