

COOKING CONQUESTS

CHEF CAROL HASKIN

Spring for
flavorful
asparagus

Among the many harbingers of spring, asparagus is my favorite. The green garden and European white varieties are especially flavorful. They each have a pleasant bitterness and subtle, earthy flavor similar to that of new potatoes.

The first asparagus was brought to America from Holland in 1789 and was known as "sparrow grass." Unlike the name suggests, asparagus is actually in the same vegetable family as onions and garlic. Green garden is the most common variety and is grown worldwide. In the United States, California produces more than half the total national crop, although Michigan is also a high producing state.

Growing

Growing white asparagus -- a practice developed in France in the mid-1800s -- requires much attention. Long rows of crowns are covered with opaque plastic to keep out the sunlight. This is to prevent production of chlorophyll which gives vegetables and plants their green color.

Asparagus can grow several inches in just one day and therefore must be checked daily. Just after their tips break through the soil, they must be harvested by hand. The stalks are cut while still under the soil. Freshness is maintained by covering the ends with damp cloths.

While some believe the German grown variety of asparagus to be the best, very little is exported. A similar white asparagus is grown in Holland and France in April and May, and is available at many specialty markets. In addition to their European counterparts, a variety of white asparagus is grown in California and South America.

All white asparagus (and only the thick-stalked green asparagus) must be peeled because of their tough, bitter outer skin. Use a swivel-type vegetable peeler and start just below the tip to peel in one stroke to the base. Repeat until done and then cut off about 1/2- to 3/4-inch from the end. Asparagus can be steamed or boiled. Cooking time will vary depending on thickness.

Preparation

The preferred European way is to boil asparagus. Place approximately one gallon of water, two teaspoons of salt, four teaspoons of fresh lemon juice and three teaspoons of butter in a large pot. Bring to a simmer and add one to two pounds of asparagus that has been tied loosely into bundles with kitchen twine. Cook on high simmer until done. Drain well. If not eating immediately, plunge the bundles into ice water to stop the cooking process.

Poached asparagus is wonderful on salads with spring greens served with thinly sliced prosciutto and herbed vinaigrette, homemade mayonnaise or a lemon or lime aioli. Nothing beats a simple presentation of melted butter or hollandaise sauce. Try making a nice salad with asparagus and new spring potatoes for a special treat.

NOT QUITE SUSHI

- 1/4 cup white vinegar
 - 1/4 cup plus 2 teaspoons sugar
 - 1/4 cup warm cooked rice
 - 6 pieces (2-by-4 inches) smoked salmon
 - 6 asparagus cooked spears, 4-inches long
 - 3 teaspoons Flying Fish Caviar
 - Soy Sauce
 - Wesabi paste (available at Japanese markets)
- Combine vinegar and sugar in a pot over low heat and bring to a boil, stirring constantly. When sugar is dissolved...

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LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Beef on the grill
- Recipes to share

Dining
for
Dollars

Food and wine
extravaganzas
raise big bucks
for charities

BY JOE HADMAN
STAFF WRITER

In an effort to find new ways to raise badly needed funds, local charities and nonprofit organizations increasingly are turning to the food and beverage industry for help.

Combining fine food and drink with a worthy cause is proving to be a formula for success in raising cash, and is beneficial for both the sponsoring organization and participants alike. And, based on the amount of money being raised each year, events such as Cranbrook's Le Gala de Cuisine, St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center's Garden Party and a host of smaller events are more popular than ever with the public.

Low-key spaghetti dinners, fish fries and St. Patrick's Day meals have been used for years by churches and other groups to raise money, but the food being served always was secondary to the cause. At the same time, fund-raising goals also were modest.

But a handful of events have broken that mold, combining exquisite cuisine, fine wine and spirits, and art and entertainment to lure hundreds of patrons willing to shell out \$150 and up per ticket to help a cause they may not even be familiar with.

The Cranbrook Education Community in Bloomfield Hills takes credit for creating the concept in Michigan. Now in its 22nd year, organizers expect to

draw up to 1,200 people and raise about \$120,000 at this year's event, scheduled for 3 p.m. today on its historic campus.

Le Gala chairwoman Glenna Coleman of West Bloomfield said such success comes at a price for all involved.

"Planning Le Gala is an 11-month process with a committee of 50 people," said Coleman, serving in her third year as event chair. "It is a tremendous amount of work, and we rely heavily on the generosity of local restaurants in order to be successful."

Bill Roberts, co-owner of 220, Street-side Seafood and Beverly Hills Grill restaurants and current president of the Michigan Restaurant Association, said it is common for restaurants to spend up to \$1,500 offering tastes to more than 1,000 people at some of the larger events.

"We get between 10 and 20 requests a year to participate in some type of fund-raising event," he said. "It can get overwhelming, so restaurants look to participate in events that fit their own causes."

'Tremendous camaraderie'

Roberts said his industry is particularly generous when it comes to helping worthy, local causes. And what do restaurants expect in return for their generosity?

"Unless you are brand new and are

looking to build your identity, you aren't looking to generate a lot of new business by participating at the Garden Party," Roberts said. "But it is good for your existing customer base to see you out in the community being active and involved in helping worthy causes."

Roberts said such events also allow friendly competitors to spend a fun day together.

"There is tremendous camaraderie among the restaurant people in Wayne and Oakland County, and it's fun to hang out together and chew the fat about common issues and concerns," he said. "At the same time, there also is a certain amount of competition to present the tastiest dish or the nicest display."

In addition to food costs, Roberts said restaurants also have to sacrifice precious staff resources for the various events.

"We all are struggling to find and train enough help, so these events put even more pressure on you if it is held on a day your restaurant is open. When Matt Prentice took over the Share Our Strength fund-raiser for food banks this year, he had about 50 employees donate their own time to staff the event," he said.

"Matt has developed a real sense of public service into his corporate culture, and I tip my hat to him because

Started trend: Glenna Coleman chairs the 22nd annual Le Gala de Cuisine, held on the grounds of the Cranbrook Education Campus in Bloomfield Hills. Cranbrook was the first organization in the state to showcase fine food and wine as a fund-raiser.



STAFF PHOTO BY JIM JACOBSON

Party Lineup

The following restaurants are participating in The St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center's Garden Party, scheduled for Sunday, June 4, at the center's campus on 12 Mile Road in Farmington Hills. Ticket information is available by calling (248) 626-7527.

Alban's Bottle and Basket of Birmingham
The Beach Grille
Big Daddy's Parthenon
Breadwinner Bakery
The Capital Grille
Charley's Crab
E.G. Nick's
Andiamo
Beans & Cornbread
The Blue Goose
Cadillac Coffee Company
Carvers Steak and Chops
Diamond Jim Brady's Bistro
Epoch Events
Ernesto's
Five Lakes Grill
Gayle's Chocolates
The Golden Mushroom
Jalapeno Pete's
LeMetro
Michigan Star Clipper Dinner
Train
Excalibur Restaurant
Forte
Giovanni's
Great Harvest Bread Company of Northville
The Lark
Mac & Ray's Harbor Marina Resort
Midtown Cafe
Mon Jin Lau
Morton's of Chicago
Pike Street Restaurant
Ristorante di Modesta
Lily Seafood
Tom's Oyster Bar
Tribute
Morris, A Michigan Bistro
Musashi Japanese Cuisine, A Sushi Bar
Ristorante Cafe Cortina
Savino Sorbet
The Rattlesnake Club/Smart
Chocolate
Too Chee
The Whitney
Wood-Ruffs Supper Club

he deserves a tremendous amount of credit."

Matching business, values

While reasons for participating in food-and-wine extravaganzas vary, sometimes it is a perfect match of business and personal beliefs and values.

Judy Dunn is co-chair of this year's Garden Party, scheduled for 1 p.m. Sunday, June 4, at the center's campus on 12 Mile Road in Farmington Hills.

Dunn helped solicit restaurants for the first Garden Party in 1987, and was hooked on the charity when she toured the center shortly after the event.

Dunn's involvement escalated in 1990 when she purchased Decanter Imports, a local wine importer and distributor and a major contributor to The Garden Party.

With a ticket price of \$150, Dunn said it is critical for organizers to offer their guests a tremendous experience if they are to reach their \$300,000 goal

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WINERY

Montevina specializes in Cal-Itals

No recent wine column has brought more Vocalism questions than a recent one about Cal-Itals (Italian-origin wine grapes grown in California).

Because of this, we think you'd like to know more about Cal-Ital specialist Montevina Winery in Amador County. Today, Montevina has several claims to fame including:

- largest planting of Italian varietals outside of Italy
- largest production of premium barbara in California
- largest experimental block of 40 Italian grape varieties, including 70 different clonal selections.

Little Italy

Lusting for gold in the 1860s, many Italian immigrants headed to California's Sierra Nevada foothills. By 1866, money gashed and lifestyle demands for the best food and drink gold could buy reached a pinnacle. Some 9,000 grape vines were planted in Amador County in the heart of Gold Rush country. Two years later, 20,000 more vines had been planted.

By the mid-1880s, a full-fledged pioneer wine industry had been created in the redlands and granite soils of the Mother Lode Country. Back then, more

wineries operated there than in the rest of California.

Boom times ended when mines ran dry late in the 19th century. This downturn was followed by the first phylloxera outbreak devastating most vineyards. Wineries that survived had their backs broken by Prohibition.

Until 1968 foothill grape-growing remained virtually dormant.

That year, Bob Trinchero of Sutter Home Winery in Napa Valley, sampled some splendid homemade zinfandel from Amador County grapes. Trinchero began producing an Amador County zinfandel and set the inspiration

model.

Montevina Winery, today owned by the Trinchero family, was founded in 1970.

Montevina, Amador's flagship winery, continues to produce ripe, full-flavored, plump zinfandels along with classic Italian red varietals such as sangiovese and barbera. Its pinot grigio, a white variety, rivals the best from Italy. Wine gold comes from this region today and is the reason Montevina calls its top-of-the-line wines Terra d'Oro -- Land of Gold.

Italy's answer to merlot

"Amador's thin, rocky soils in a warm climate with cool nights, is the ideal place to grow barbera," Montevina's winemaker Jeff Meyers said. "The grapes develop well-colored skins and

Wine Picks

- Pick of the past: 1996 Archery Summit Arcus Estate Pinot Noir, \$65. You'd pay more for a French Burgundy with this quality!
- Try a new white varietal: 1996 Mitchellton Marsanne from Australia \$16. Marsanne is an up-and-coming white with origins in southern France. This Aussie style is excellent!
- Best value whites to pale with: 1999 Brancott Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (New Zealand), \$16; 1999 Chateau Souverain Sauvignon Blanc, \$12; 1999 St. Supery Sauvignon Blanc, \$15; 1998 Chateau St. Jean La Petite Etolie Fume Blanc, \$14.
- Fire up the grill for those red-meat meals: 1997 Dry Creek Vineyard Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, \$31; 1996 Gallo-Sonoma Fire Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, \$25; 1997 St. Supery Chateau Souverain Cabernet Sauvignon, \$23; and 1997 Precore Shiraz, \$15.
- Best buys: red at \$12 and under: 1999 Rosemount Shiraz, \$12; 1999 Rosemount Cabernet Sauvignon, \$11; 1997 Mitchell Cabernet Sauvignon/Sangiovese Cabernet Franc blend from Australia, \$10; 1997 Fetzer Valley Oaks Cabernet Sauvignon, \$10.



It's all in the grapes: Montevina's winemaker Jeff Meyers checks out the estate's vineyards.

that's where all the flavors originate.

Grown in the wrong place, barbera can be funky, thin and acidic.

"Barbera's future in Amador is only before us. Lush and appealing, it is styled right for Americans. I like to call it Italy's answer to merlot with a lot more flavor."

If you've not tried barbera, begin with the 1997 Montevina Barbera (\$12) and you'll discover that you can't buy a merlot with this much flavor at this price. Serve it with herb-roasted chicken, grilled lamb, Italian sausage with a touch of fennel or grilled portabella mushrooms as a vegetarian delight.

With a little more grip is 1997 Mon-

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