

Back of the house: Lawrence Klang, Natalie's restaurant

Pair foods like a pro with help from Chef Lawrence Klang

2009-03-03



Lawrence Klang is the Chef de Cuisine at Natalie's restaurant at the Camden Harbour Inn. He received his formal culinary training at Le Cordon Bleu L'Art Culinaire in London. Before Natalie's he worked in kitchens including those at London's Capital Hotel and Claridge's Hotel; Restaurant Jacques Maximin in Vence, France; Criolla's Restaurant in Grayton Beach, Florida; and Restaurant Saint Emillion in Fort Worth, Texas, in addition to the Fish out of Water.

Food should be nourishing and filling and comforting, but primarily it should make you feel good. It doesn't matter if you're eating at a five-star restaurant, a BBQ joint in Texas or fresh fish off the boat cooked in your kitchen — the best food is the stuff cooked with love, care and joy.

If you eat out a lot, perhaps you've noticed an increase in a trend in restaurants and at food events these days of creating "pairings" or tastings based on a particular food, beverage or even scent. Wine dinners have been around for a long time, and those are probably the most familiar type of pairing. Now restaurants are branching out into beer dinners, bourbon dinners, dinners based on a particular food or in celebration of a theme or holiday. The possibilities are endless and offer a new and different way to experience the joy of food.

We love to do these sorts of events at Natalie's; it creates a fun challenge for us, and an interesting, unusual and delicious experience for our guests. Last October we created a "perfume dinner" with Chandler Burr, an author and perfume critic for the New York Times. It was so popular we're bringing him back this fall. We designed courses of food that enhanced and complemented the scents he was introducing — and brought out the exquisite flavors in a way that they might not be experienced otherwise.

When thinking about pairing flavors at home for dinner guests, the best thing I can suggest is to go with your instinct and to not be afraid to do things that you think sound good. If people

are able to relax about the process and listen to their instincts, great things will happen organically. We all know inherently what sorts of things taste good together — thyme is perfect for turkey, strawberries and champagne, oysters with vodka, rich and robust red wines match nicely with red meat. Green asparagus and hollandaise, black truffles and potatoes — they have an affinity for one another. These are things we know are delicious together from having sampled so many of these familiar combinations. We have a memory taste recall that tells us they go together. (An easy hint: Match hearty to hearty, light to light.)

The richness and earthiness of food should guide you to like-minded beverages. Lighter, more mildly-flavored food goes better with a lighter white wine — a big red would overpower it. Rich, heavy food is the reverse — the taste of a light white would be lost under those food flavors.

Along these lines, my other suggestions are to pay attention to balance and, most importantly, keep it simple. The simpler the flavors in a dish, the more easily you'll be able to tell what will go nicely with it, and the more the flavors will complement each other. Simplicity will also allow you to have a good balance of flavors and to enjoy yourself more.

Another thing I like to recommend to home cooks is to tear out recipes from newspapers and magazines. When you read a recipe that sounds good to you, think about the spices, the combination of ingredients and what makes it sound good to you. Could those flavors be paired with a different cut of meat? Or perhaps fish? Keep a file at home so you can refer back to some flavor combinations even if you are not planning to follow that recipe.

And when your instincts are just not telling you what you need to know, I cannot express enough the value for a home cook to use the myriad of resources on the internet. Websites like Epicurious.com are invaluable not only for recipes, but great food ideas when you're stumped. When you're hosting a themed dinner or pot-luck, Epicurious has menu suggestions, pairing suggestions, even whole sections devoted to particular holidays or specific cuisines.

St. Patrick's Day pairings

I was initially challenged by the request for thoughtful pairings and inspired treats for this especially Americanized version of a holiday known here for its cheap eats. Then I decided to take my own advice and keep it simple — that's the true beauty of Irish food.

Definitely skip the green beer (that stuff gives you an even nastier hangover than cheap champagne) and corned beef and cabbage, and surprise your St. Patty's Day party friends with a really good bottle of Irish Whiskey (that's the real Irish drink of choice, after all — the word whiskey comes from a Gaelic term that translates as "water of life"). Pair it with a dry medium-sharp Irish cheddar (beautifully complements the smokiness of the whiskey) and make a homemade loaf of the traditionally simple Irish Soda Bread. It doesn't require kneading and authentic recipes call for just flour, baking soda, buttermilk and salt.

Or if you're looking for something a bit more gourmet, a lovely simple leek and potato soup with caviar or smoked salmon would be a great fit for the holiday. Take a sip of whiskey, a bite of cheese with the homemade bread — and enjoy!