

Flowers' wines blossom at PlumpJack

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VILLAGE – “The reality is God is the winemaker – and any winemaker who thinks he is hasn't been in the industry long enough.”

That's what Sam Sebastiani of the famous Sonoma County Sebastiani family told this reporter years ago for a *San Francisco Examiner* story.

Some would disagree and say Mother Nature is the true winemaker. After all, growing grapes is farming. With crops of any kind being so weather dependent, and the skin of grapes so fragile, – especially Pinot Noir – it's no wonder each vintage is special.

A sampling of one of Sonoma County's northern-most wineries was offered to guests of PlumpJack Cafe at Squaw Valley in August. Flowers Vineyard & Winery in Cazadero was the featured vintner during the sixth of 10 winemaker dinners.

The event is a steal at \$60 per person. It comes with four courses (vegetarian options available by calling ahead) and four glasses of wine.

The Sonoma Coast 2007 Chardonnay (\$65 by the bottle at PlumpJack) was paired with tartare of Angus tenderloin. The vegetarian offering was a minced portabella mushroom lime concoction that was super tangy and yummy. Both were served on a spoon. So good were the starters, a few more spoonfuls would have been welcome.

Unfortunately the wine was so-so. It came to the table a bit over-chilled so the true flavors did not come through until it

had been at room temperature a bit. Even then it fell a bit flat.

The other Chardonnay of the night, the Andreen-Gale Sonoma Coast 2006, was more delightful from the get-go. It is not sold by the bottle at PlumpJack, but goes for \$16 for a 6 ounce glass. It is not overly oak-y, despite being aged in French oak.

The second course – also designed to be enjoyed with the Chardonnays – was a sweet corn soup. Because it has cured lardo (pork) I didn't have it. But the presentation of having server Justin Bak pour the soup over the warm mushroom salad, summer truffle and house cured lardo was stunning in itself. It added a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the event.

I was served some odd egg concoction. It was good, but one of those things I don't need to have again. It was also the first time at a restaurant of this caliber where they know I'm a vegetarian and didn't ask if I'd eat eggs and cheese. Good thing I do.

Next up were the two Pinot Noirs and the entree seared ahi tuna for my dining partner; smoked tofu for me. Sue was in heaven; I was left scratching my head wondering how a chef would think this would be a great choice. It's no wonder non-vegetarians have a bad impression of tofu. Sue wrinkled her nose when she took a bite of the tofu.

But the wine – oh my – it was jammy in such a wonderful way that I wish I were now sipping a glass of the Sonoma Coast 2007 Pinot (\$70 bottle at PlumpJack). The fruit of the wine was full and vibrant, like a burst of berry in my mouth.

The final wine – the 2007 Flowers Perennial Pinot Noir Syrah Sonoma Coast (\$10 per 6 ounce glass) – is definitely special. Not only does it stand alone as a Pinot dominated meritage that would be good with an entree, it is a dessert wine that complements the food instead of overpowering it.

The espresso panna cotta (fresh cherries, chocolate soil, French macaroon) was my favorite course of the night. At home I like to lick my ice cream bowl; I had to use self-restraint not to lick the plate at PlumpJack.

A nice feature of the evening was the unobtrusive meanderings of Flowers' General Manager Tom Hinde, who made sure each table was enjoying themselves. He spoke of the difficulties of making wine, Pinot in particular. Hinde also touched on how the weather – all that fog rolling off the Pacific Ocean – bodes well for the vines.

Ask to sit in waiter Justin Bak's section. He has been at PlumpJack since 1993. The lifestyle allows him to work at night, ski-hike by day – a true local who knows his job well.

By the time the two-hour meal was over I was more than satisfied – not overly full, not feeling like I had too much to drink. Dinner was an event – one I recommend.

PlumpJack's winemaker series continues through Sept. 13. For information, call (530) 583.1578 or go to www.PlumpJackCafe.com.

Flowers' tasting room is open by appointment only – www.FlowersWinery.com or (707) 847.3661.

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