

Wine history lingers on palate at Tahoe pairing



A Chardonnay to commemorate
Mike Grgich's shocking bottle
from 40 years ago.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – The Judgment of Paris met the approval of Tahoe at the Food and Wine Festival President's Dinner hosted by Harveys.

The four-course dinner at the casino's 19th floor restaurant aptly named 19 Kitchen Bar featured special guest Violet Grgich providing wine.

If the name sounds familiar to those of you in wine circles, it should. Grgich is the daughter of Miljenko "Mike" Grgich, a

legend in Napa Valley for most specifically gaining an award for creating the best wine in the world during a 1976 blind tasting in Paris. The Chardonnay he crafted for Chateau Montelena stunned the world and placed the Napa Valley on the wine map forever.



Food and wine enthusiasts bask in the glow of a Lake Tahoe sunset Oct. 22 while tasting history. Photo/Kathryn Reed

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the infamous encounter. Think the movie "Bottleshock."

As diners were being seated Oct. 22, it took one man less than 15 minutes to tell the others at his table about the famous wine host. Later on in the evening, he impressed others with his declaration that Pinot is the hardest grape to grow.

Grgich's daughter, who runs sales and marketing for the family winery, was stationed up front to greet the VIP guests with a Grgich Hills Commemorative Chardonnay she had bottled for her father to mark his 90th birthday three years ago. It sells for \$93 a bottle. It is more reminiscent of what the winning 1973 Chardonnay tasted like.

Grgich explained how the Rutherford family winery founded in 1977 with Austin Hills of Hills Brothers Coffee started with

Chardonnay (since her father is known as the “King of Chardonnay”) and Riesling before evolving into Petit Syrah and Cabernet.



Violet Grgich gives a history lesson to diners.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

What’s her favorite varietal?

“It depends on the day and the weather,” she told Lake Tahoe News.

Grgich displayed a personable, almost modest demeanor – further admitting she was surprised wine enthusiasts buy from her.

“I had no (sales) experience, but I just put the wine in front of people, and they buy it,” she said.

Her belief in the product and its roots shine through.

Grgich told LTN she's "always aware" of living up to her father's widespread reputation for representing a famous winery name.



A king crab and butternut squash bisque starts the dining experience at Harveys. Photo/Kathryn Reed

She studied music at Indiana University, playing harpsichord.

"Why would you want to be in music? It makes no money," she recalled her father saying to her. The message to return to her roots must have stuck.

"Wine was one of those things that was a part of my life every day," she said.

The winery executive told the diners wine was such an integral part of life for her family that children were placed in the grape vats "to keep them in check."

The audience chuckled.

Grgich grew up accompanying her father, a Vintners Hall of

Fame inductee, into the vineyards and cellar at a young age. He told her stories while he was in Croatia of wanting to escape Communism and bad water. It was discovered that if one made wine to consume instead of drinking water, it tasted better and made “the work day nicer,” Grgich told the captive audience.

Upon arriving in the Napa Valley in 1958, Mike Grgich met up with some powerful businessmen – most notably Robert Mondavi. Grgich created Mondavi’s first Cabernet in 1969, three years before joining the winery that made him famous – Chateau Montelena. The winery ended up No. 1 of 221 wines across the globe.

As diners feasted on a 180-degree view of Lake Tahoe and Chef Jason Behrendt’s culinary creations for the night amid music from a harpist, Grgich spun more stories about her father and the wine used to pair with each course.

The dinner was billed as new world meets old world.

The 2013 Grgich Hills Chardonnay was paired with a butternut squash bisque, with a butter-poached Alaskan red King Crab, Granny Smith Apple and shaved fennel in the center.

The Chardonnay was a fine complement to bisque melded with crab.

“Duck Two Ways” marked the second course. For those not necessarily wild about liver, the fig-sour cherry compote enhanced the 2011 Zinfandel.



Grgich wines paired perfectly
with the chef's selections.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Grgich told the diners not to expect a bold Zin but reminded them this Zin was created in a European style – meant to be a lighter food complement.

“It’s not supposed to knock you off your feet. It just seduces you in a way,” she said.

The third course – the entrée – featured a venison loin, but according to a few diners, it may have been the accompanying parsnip puree that stole the spotlight. It tasted like eating vegetables straight out of the garden. The Brussel sprouts with bacon and wild mushroom slices also paired nicely with the 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon.

Thankfully, there was enough left in the glass to get a combination with the evening’s plate-licking dessert – a

chocolate and hazelnut decadence cube with hazelnut ice cream.