FINANCIAL POST

Friday, February 12, 2010

Wine & Chocolate: When grape meets bean

Margaret Swaine, Weekend Post

Handout / File Photo

Chocolate is the official foodstuff of Valentine's day. No romantic meal would be complete without a fine wine. But would you mix the two?

An enterprising collection of vintners and chocolatiers are happy to do so, and though not every match is a love connection, the pairing can be quite something if done right.

Every weekend this February visitors to the Niagara region can sample an enticing selection of chocolate and VQA wine pairings. Willow Cakes and Pastries in Niagara-on-the-Lake handmade 44,000 chocolates to go with the wines of the 22 local wineries participating in the Days of Wine and Chocolate. For example Pillitteri Estates has matched their 2005 Chambourcin Special Select Late Harvest with dark chocolate blackcurrant, Ravine Estate Winery paired a 2006 merlot with dark chocolate pecan and Coyote's Run chose to pit their 2007 Red Paw Vineyard Pinot Noir with dark chocolate almond clusters.

The pairings are not all dark chocolate with reds or sweeties though. A more daring match is 2007 Andrew Peller Signature Series Chardonnay Sur Lie with milk chocolate hazelnut and Maleta Winery's pairing of their Grape Brain Rosé with milk chocolate orange. Are these matches that bring love or bring regret? A thirty dollar touring pass entitles customers to one pairing with wine per winery on any of the four weekends so people can nosh and sip to their own conclusions.

I did my own experimenting with wine and chocolate pairing with Ann Czaja, master Chocolatier for Lindt & Sprüngli of Switzerland. She had me sample chocolate with three different styles of wine. Before we started however she stressed the chocolate has to be good quality for the match to work. She's biased of course, but with good reason. Lindt's formula for "conching" - turning gritty chocolate paste into smooth melt in your mouth bliss -is a well guarded secret.

Czaja's lesson on how to judge quality in chocolate reminded me of my own wine tasting lectures in that it covered all five senses. First you start with looking at the chocolate's appearance which should have a lustrous shine. Then touch it – cocoa butter melts at body temperature, so if it melts on your fingers it will do so luxuriously on your tongue. Listen for a "crack" noise when you break the bar. That's an indication of good texture. Smell it next to breathe in fragrances of perhaps fruit, caramel, spice or cocoa of course. Good quality chocolate will have intense aromas. Finally taste it by letting the

chocolate melt on your tongue. It should not stick to the palate or be grainy. The flavours should be rich, sensuous and satisfying. Look for notes of vanilla, fruit, liquorice, spices, even tobacco as well as cocoa in the taste. Good chocolate has many dimensions as fine wine.

We started our pairing with an oak-aged chardonnay matched with Lindt milk chocolate. I had no idea the dry white would married so well with a confection. They both brought out the tastes of butterscotch and caramel in each other with the wine's apple notes leaving the palate refreshed.

Next we sipped a merlot with a 70% dark chocolate. Again a good match with spice, cassis and berry flavours being highlighted. The final pairing was a Canadian cabernet franc icewine with the 90% chocolate. The sweet strawberry jam flavours of the icewine were uplifted by the chocolate and both benefited. The match reminded me of liqueur-filled dark chocolate that I used to get at Christmas for a treat.

Dr. Nick Proia, a pulmonologist from Ohio, took this whole wine and chocolate affair to the pinnacle when he developed Brix, a brand of chocolate made specifically to pair with wine. At the root of the three styles of bars is single origin Ghanaian chocolate, known for its red fruit tones. "Brix accents your wine much like the Riedel glass does," said Bruce Barber, a partner in the enterprise.

Brix Extra Dark (70%) is formulated to pair with the deepest red wines. Its very high cocoa content can stand up to considerable tannins found in such wines as Barolo and Bordeaux and well as the heavier, peppery zinfandels and syrah grape wines. Brix Dark Chocolate (60%) is the most versatile with a fairly high cocoa content yet mellow enough to enhance the fruit forward wines it was designed to accompany. Brix Milk Chocolate is made for the lighter reds and dessert wines. Winerytohome.com is offering home delivery in Ontario of these chocolates matched with a selection of wines. Outlets such as Chapters/Indigo carry the brand as do a growing number of wineries in North America.

Out west, British Columbia's Mission Hill winery has taken wine and chocolate a step further by teaming up with Purdy's to co-create Purdy's Icewine Truffle, handcrafted and infused with Mission Hill Vidal Icewine. They're available at Purdy's retail stores as well as on purdys.com. "Cultivated on our Naramata Ranch vineyards, the vidal icewine grapes burst with honey aromas and tropical notes on the palate, creating an ideal pairing with Purdy's rich, artisanal chocolates," said John Simes, chief winemaker at Mission Hill Family Estate. Gary Mitchell, Purdy's Chocolates head chocolatier, couldn't agree more, calling it "an extraordinary combination". Sounds like love.

All experts have one major piece of advice: Buy the best quality you can afford. You'll eat less and enjoy it more. "The more pleasure at the first bite, the less you are going to eat," said Dr. Jordan LeBel, an expert on the physiological effects of chocolate. Dr. LeBel, an associate professor at Concordia University in Montreal, discovered this when he did his PhD paper on people's response to chocolate. In other words, buy high quality chocolate and slow down and savour it like a fine wine. With a fine wine.