

DECOR & STYLE: CHEF DE VINO

by Steven Mayer, May 2006

Gary Miller thinks of wine as liquid food. The wine in the glass and the meal on the plate are equal partners, he says. And like a good marriage, each makes the other better. It's a wine philosophy that was built on years of study, experience, and Miller's passion for balanced, nuanced wines that reflect their vineyard origins.

Before Miller became a winemaker and the owner of Miller Wine Works in Napa Valley, he was a restaurant chef trained by the Culinary Institute of America. After he apprenticed at the Greenbrier Hotel in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia, Miller helped open the restaurant Spruce in Chicago, which led to a position at The Little Nell in Aspen.

As much as Miller loves cooking—and yes, he still does—California's wine country was calling his name.

Not one to play it safe, Miller made the move to California in the late 1990s, where he immersed himself in the world of winemaking at such wineries as La Jota, Martinelli, and Robert Biale Vineyards. Miller insists his winemaking skills are still in their infancy, but a taste of his wines indicates otherwise.

"First, I know about 1 percent of what I'd like to know about wine," he says. "I've long wanted to put my name to something special, to make something that people would see as worth searching out and sharing with friends."

If Miller stays on the path he's begun, his dream should become a reality.

My first taste of Miller's wines came in late January when I attended a wine dinner with an unusual concept: The guests bring their own wines to taste with dinner. There were plenty of Riedel glasses available, and a wide selection of beautiful wines being passed around.

I brought along the Miller Wine Works 2003 Grenache Sage Canyon Vineyard—all of Miller's wines are vineyard designated. Honestly, I didn't have high hopes. Grenache is a blending grape in France's Rhone Valley and is known as Garnacha in Spain. There are very few domestic Grenache wines available, and the few I've tasted have been less than satisfying. But the Miller Grenache changed my preconceived notions of this varietal. I wouldn't describe it as complex, but the wine's affinity with the food simply blew me away.

The lively acidity in the Grenache, combined with a surprisingly rich mid-palate, made it one of the best wine/food matches of the evening. I can't say enough about the acid/fruit balance in this wine. It kept me coming back for yet another sip, simply because it served to cleanse and revitalize the palate, even as it excited the senses.

I haven't tasted all of this winery's offerings, but the 2003 Pinot Noir from Hellenthal Vineyard on the Sonoma Coast was an adventure in a glass as it changed and opened up with time. Shy aromas eventually yielded fresh strawberry and raspberry scents that were made more interesting as faint hints of brown sugar and earthy molasses gave this wine an exotic edge. Lighter in color and body than many of California's fruit bombs, this Pinot's appeal comes not through sheer power, but through elegance.

Miller's 2003 Syrah from Sage Canyon Vineyard in Napa Valley is no wimp with 16.3 percent alcohol by volume. But the riper style doesn't foil this winemaker's attempts to make food-friendly wines. There's no hint of alcoholic heat or overripe plum or prune flavors, yet this delicious wine will easily hold up to grilled or marinated meats. It will likely benefit from some down time in the cellar.

Miller Wine Works is definitely one to watch. Production levels will remain small, Miller says, so he can stay close to the winemaking process. For wines that respond to food like harmony responds to melody, go to www.millerwineworks.com or call 707-254-9727.

