
DARLING OF THE DESSERT SET

BY DEBBIE ELDER AND KARL S. VON SENDEN, *co-hosts of Good Libations, a weekly internet radio show*

Award winning pastry chef, pastry art instructor, culinary consultant, author. With these credentials, one might expect to encounter a big personality with a corresponding ego. Instead it was our pleasure to host a demure, well-spoken, and lively guest in the person of Ms. Mary Cech (pronounced *check*) as a featured contributor to our radio program. The show's theme was "The Sweet Ending" and focused on pairing wine and food in a dessert setting.

Ms. Cech's latest cookbook is entitled *"The Wine Lover's Dessert Cookbook—Recipes and Pairings for the Perfect Glass of Wine"*. It provided a tailor-made backdrop for our investigation into the little explored arena of matching desserts and after-dinner libations. Although many of us may know which wines work well with our main courses, we are often on shaky ground when choosing a closer with a magnificent dessert. With Cech's pairing guide as a reference, even a beginner can match up the flavor characteristics of both wine and dessert.

Cech's involvement in baking started 28 years ago as she inherited the experience gained from her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, "great bakers all," according to Cech. Over the ensuing years, Cech worked as a pastry chef, instructor and writer. She was a two-time winner of the Top Ten Pastry Chefs in America award (once by *Chocolatier* and once by *Pastry Art & Design*) and was named Pastry Chef of the Year by Chefs in America.

But why did she decide to collaborate with culinary writer Jennie Schacht on a book about sweet wines and

desserts? Simply answered, Cech and her co-author discussed the fact that no book seemed to address the subject as extensively as they wanted to. Some three years later, a basic "world tour" of the pairings of wine and dessert resulted.

One pairing Cech advises serving is a "luscious Peach Tarte Tatin alongside an intensely flavored Ice wine to bring out the fruit's summery fragrance." Other recommendations are to "sip a Vintage Port as your fork sinks into a cloud of Chocolate Soufflé Roulade. A late harvest Sauvignon Blanc provides an unexpected foil for the salty-sweetness of Brown Sugar Glazed Bananas with Roasted Peanuts and Lime. And the delicate spices of Apricot Gingerbread Upside-Down Cake are subtly enhanced by an orange Muscat."

One might think that a stringent researching of all of these combinations would require a multitude of testing and tasting. Mary agrees. When asked how she avoided "falling to the center of the earth," her response was that she

"walked the dog...A LOT!"

Shortly following the radio program, we had the opportunity to attend one of Ms. Cech's Valley cooking classes at Barbara Fenzl's Les Gourmettes cooking school. While at the school, we witnessed a stunning Jekyll/Hyde-like transformation. Upon donning her chef's tunic, Cech morphed from a petite, well-mannered and somewhat soft-spoken blonde into a chef who readily commanded and demanded our attention as she commenced one of her culinary teaching exercises. All eyes were locked on Cech as



Crostata di Ricotta

she kneaded multiple mixtures of dough, rolled it out and lined her torte pans. All the while, she explained the arcane differences between cookie dough and pastry dough, continued a running commentary replete with quips and directives, and answered multiple questions on wines and pastries from the students.

In short order we learned to prepare four different dessert delicacies including: Apricot Gingerbread Upside-Down Cake; a Caramel Macadamia Tart; Brown Sugar and Cinnamon Crème Brûlée; and a Coffee Cream Tart in a

Cocoa-Espresso Crust. We retired to the dining room, where we enjoyed all of the desserts, each paired with complementary wines.

At the end of the evening, Karl so aptly summarized our experience, “As a sommelier, my palate is durable up to and including the tasting of some forty-plus wines. Miss Mary has gotten the best of me. Four tortes and four dessert wines later, I am in danger of ‘falling to the center of the earth’. I hope my dog is ready for some serious exercise!”

CROSTATA DI RICOTTA (HONEY RICOTTA TART)

Cech says that “the abundant earthy and dairy flavors in this tart call for medium-bodied wine with notes of honey and orange blossom. It pairs well with both Ice Wine and Vin Santo. Orange Muscat brings out the tart’s subtle orange flavor.”

We recommend that you add a local twist to the tart: use Arizona orange blossom honey and the zest from our fine local citrus. Pair the tart with an Orange Muscat such as Quady’s Essencia (\$13.99) available from local wine stores including AZ Wine Company, Sportsman’s Fine Wine and Spirits, and AJ’s Fine Foods .

Makes 10 servings

Pastry Crust

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
3 tablespoons sugar
1 large egg yolk
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup all-purpose flour
1/3 cup fine cornmeal

Ricotta Filling

15 ounces (1 3/4 cups) whole milk ricotta cheese
3 ounces (1/3 cup) cream cheese, at room temperature
1/2 cup heavy cream
1/4 cup sugar
2 large eggs
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon finely grated zest (from about 1/2 orange)
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

To make the crust: Process the butter, 3 tablespoons sugar, egg yolk, and salt in a food processor, scraping down the bowl with a spatula as needed. Add the flour and cornmeal

and pulse just until combined. Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and knead 2 to 3 times to bring the dough together into a ball. Press the dough into a flat disk, wrap in plastic film, and refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes or up to 3 days.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F and position a rack near the center. Briefly knead the dough on a floured surface, then roll it into a 12-inch round, keeping the work surface, dough, and rolling pin all well floured and moving the dough frequently to prevent it from sticking. Work quickly, handling the dough as little as possible to keep it cool.

Wrap the pastry loosely around the rolling pin and then unroll it over a 10-inch fluted tart pan with a removable bottom, draping the pastry over the pan to center it. Push the pastry firmly into the bottom and sides of the pan, using dough scraps to patch any tears. If you find this soft dough difficult to work with, either chill it again or press pieces of the dough into place in the pan. Roll the pin firmly over the top of the pan to trim the edge neatly. Bake the crust for 20 minutes; it will not be fully baked. Set the pan on a rack to cool. Leave the oven on.

While the dough bakes, make the filling: Pulse the ricotta, cream cheese, cream, sugar, eggs, egg yolk, honey, orange zest, and vanilla in a food processor until completely smooth.

Pour the filling into the partially baked crust and bake until the filling is set, with golden brown spots dotting the surface, 35 to 40 minutes. Transfer the pan to a rack to cool until it is room temperature. When it is cool, remove the sides of the pan and transfer the tart with the base to a serving platter. Cut the crostata into wedges with a sharp knife and serve at room temperature.

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MATCHING WINE WITH DESSERT

Mary Cech shares a few “rules of thumb” from her book’s *Pairing Guidelines** :

“Pair desserts with wines that are sweeter than the dessert. If you sample a sweet dessert and then sip a wine that is less sweet, the wine will suddenly taste flat or sour. You might enjoy lightly sweetened fresh fruit with a gently sweet Moscato d’Asti. Try sticky-sweet caramel with a super-sweet Beerenauslese or Trockenbeerenauslese (Riesling).

Match the weight of the wine to the richness of dessert. Pair lighter-bodied wines having little or no oak and no botrytis with fresh fruit desserts—a young late harvest Gewürtztraminer with poached apricots, for example, or a Brachetto d’Acqui with red fruits. Late harvest whites with a little more body, perhaps aged in oak, pair nicely with caramel and buttery flavors. The most full-bodied whites—Ice Wines and Botrytised wines—are great companions to rich dairy desserts like crème brûlée.

Carbonation makes wines versatile and refreshing. Sweet sparkling wines are restrained enough to avoid overwhelming lighter desserts, while providing a welcome palate cleanser for richer sweets. A sparkling Muscat is perfection with a delicate poached peach, while a sparkling

Vouvray can keep a dense cheesecake from becoming overwhelming.

Fortified wines, with their typically higher alcohol levels, stand up well to rich desserts with deep flavors of nuts, caramel, and chocolate. Sherry almost always pairs well with nuts. The tannin in Port and Port-style wines is a lovely match with chocolate.

Look to complement, marry, or gently contrast the dessert’s flavors with the wine. A lively wine with citrus notes, perhaps a late harvest Riesling, will enliven a dessert that calls out for a squeeze of lemon. The caramel flavors in Madeira make it a welcome companion to a tarte tatin.

Don’t make your wine and dessert fight for attention. If the wine is complex, show it off with a simpler dessert. To highlight a dessert with many elements or flavors, choose a more straightforward wine. Save your Chateau d’Yquem for sipping with only the very simplest sweets.”

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