

PAIRING

Pinot noir's earthy spices pair with duck breast dish

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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Our Wine of the Week, Freeman 2010 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$44), is a fine expression of this increasingly popular varietal in one of the best regions for growing it, western Sonoma County.

A blend of fruit from five small vineyards results in a complex wine with deeply concentrated flavors suggestive of Bing cherries, red raspberries and Santa Rosa plums, with fine threads of licorice root and a veritable cupboard of earthy spice, including allspice, cardamom, clove, star anise and cassia. There's sassafras root, too which, combined with the broad foundation of spice, might have you thinking of root beer.

The wine benefits from decanting, which encourages its aromas to emerge; you'll notice damp forest leaves and black raspberries warming in the sun. Acids are bright and the wine is juicy in the mouth.

While the wine is in its youth, where it will remain for another two years, at a minimum, tannins are rather firm and a tad drying around the edges of the palate, a quality of nearly every pinot noir with this much concentration. It is a classic New World pinot noir. If you love this style, you will love this wine.

When it comes to pairing the wine at the table, I think the very best match is local lamb grilled rare over an oak (not charcoal) fire. A bit of charring and the taste and aroma of the wood mingling with the sweet juiciness of the meat is an ideal match. Wild king salmon prepared similarly and lacquered with teriyaki sauce is also an excellent combination.

You will also enjoy this wine with roasted beets, duck with cherry sauce, chicken

thighs in a mild red curry and almost any preparation of wild mushrooms.

For today's recipe, I'm inspired by the delicious duck of Salmon Creek Ranch, which is readily available at several local farmers markets. Add beets, farro and blueberries and you have an array of flavors that engage every facet of this complex wine.

Seared Duck Breast with Roasted Beets, Farro & Sauteed Blueberries

Makes 2 to 3 servings

1 duck breast, preferably from Salmon Creek Ranch

— Kosher salt

2 large garlic cloves, from fresh (not cured) garlic

3 teaspoons Chinese Five Spice powder, commercial or homemade (see Note below)

1 pound beets, as small as possible, rinsed

— Olive oil

— Black pepper in a mill

½ cup semi-pearled farro

2 tablespoons butter

1 cup fresh blueberries

— Zest of 1 orange

1 tablespoon minced fresh Italian parsley

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Set the duck breast on a clean work surface, skin side down, and trim the skin so that none hangs over the meat. Turn the duck skin-side up and use a sharp knife to score the skin diagonally, creating a patchwork of 1-inch squares.

Season the duck all over with salt and set aside briefly.

Pound the garlic in a suribachi or grate it in a ridged bowl until it is reduced to a paste; stir in 2 teaspoons of the spice powder and rub the mixture all over the duck. Set on a plate, skin side down, cover with a sheet of wax paper and refrigerate.

Put the beets into a small ovenproof pan, drizzle with a little olive oil and turn the beets to coat them in the oil. Season with salt and pepper, set on the middle rack of the preheated oven and cook until tender when pierced with a bamboo skewer or fork. Cooking time will range from about 35 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the size of the beets. Remove from the oven, cool slightly and use your fingers to peel the beets. Cut into 3/8-inch dice, return to the pan, season with salt and pepper and keep warm.

While the beets cook, cook the farro. To do so, put it into a medium saucepan, cover with water by 2 inches, add 2 teaspoons of salt and bring to a boil over high heat. When the water boils, reduce the heat and simmer gently until tender but not mushy. Skim off foam that collects on the water.

To finish the dish, remove the duck from the refrigerator and set a heavy pan — cast-iron is ideal — over high heat. When the pan is quite hot, add the duck, skin side down, and cook for about 4 minutes, until the skin is crisp. Turn and cook 2 to 3 minutes more; transfer to a warm plate, cover and keep warm.

Working quickly, reduce the heat under the pan, add the butter and when it is melted, add the blueberries. Toss a time or two and cook for about 3 minutes, until heated through and just beginning to soften. Stir in the remaining teaspoon of spice powder and remove from the heat.

Toss the farro and beets together, season with salt and pepper and divide among individual plates.

Cut the duck into diagonal slices about 1/4-inch thick and drape over the farro and beets. Spoon sauteed blueberries over each portion, garnish with orange zest and parsley and serve immediately

Note: To make Chinese Five Spice powder, use an electric spice (or coffee) grinder to reduce a tablespoon of whole black peppercorns, a tablespoon of fennel seed, a teaspoon of whole cloves and 6 star anise to a fairly fine powder; add a tablespoon of cinnamon and grind until the mixture forms a uniform powder. Store remainder in a spice jar or other airtight container for up to 6 months.

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