

PAIR UP

with Maria Terry



December 2013 – Intimate Italian

The holidays are laden with feasts for families and gatherings for groups. Sometimes an intimate dinner for two is a welcome respite from the holiday cacophony. Here is a menu that celebrates the best that Northern Italy has to offer, with delicious wines from the region and recipes that are quick and easy to make on a smaller scale.

I found this great recipe for Crispy Prosciutto Cups with Pear and thought it would be a fun twist on the classic prosciutto and melon starter. Although the recipe makes 24 cups, it could easily be divided into thirds to make a better portion for two people. The perfect partner for these salty-sweet bites is Italian Prosecco, an off-dry sparkler from the Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia regions. The bubbles are a romantic way to start the evening and will cut through the fat of the meat and complement the sweetness of the pears. Even the lemon drizzled on the pears will resonate with the citrus flavors in the wine.

While the appetizer for this meal is light and delicate, Rosemary Lamb Chops with Red Wine Reduction is hearty. Serve it with Barolo, Barbaresco, Gattinara or Ghemme. All these wines are made from the Nebbiolo grape and come from the Piedmont region. Nebbiolo based wines offer earthy aromas of herbs and tar along with sweet fruit notes of cherry and fig. Any one of these wines would be harmonious with the slightly gamey flavor of the lamb. Alongside, serve some creamy polenta and your favorite roasted vegetable.

Conclude your Italian tête-à-tête with the wine and dessert pairing of Recioto and Sbrisolona, a Lombardian cake with a crumbly texture. Another blended wine, Recioto, is made primarily from Rondinella,

Corvina, and Molinara. It comes from the Veneto region, where only the best grapes are selected. They harvest only the highest, ripest grapes on the bunch, the part that gets the most sun. In Veronese, they call these grapes the "recia" ("ears") of the grapes. Once the grapes are dried, the small amount of juice liberated results in tiny quantities of Recioto produced each year. The wine has a beautiful, crushed velvet texture, a spicy bouquet, and hints of dried plums and chocolate on the palate.

So, go on. Pair Up!

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Crispy Prosciutto Cups with Pear

INGREDIENTS

3 oz. prosciutto, thinly sliced
1 ripe Bartlett pear, finely diced
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 375°F. Cut prosciutto into (24) 2" squares. Place one square (overlapping any tears) in each cup of a mini cupcake tin. Bake until fat turns golden, about 15 minutes. Using a fork, immediately transfer to a paper towel to drain; cool completely. In a small bowl, combine pear and lemon juice. Place 1/2 teaspoon mixture in each cup just before serving.

Yield: 24 pieces

Rosemary Lamb Chops with Red Wine Reduction

INGREDIENTS

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2 (8 oz.) lamb chops
3 tbsp. butter
Salt and pepper to taste
2 tbsp. rosemary
1 cup dry red wine

DIRECTIONS

Allow the lamb chops to come to room temperature and season with salt, pepper, and rosemary. Melt two tablespoons butter in a skillet over medium-high heat. Sear the chops on the skillet for about four minutes per side (medium-rare to medium). Remove the lamb and cover with foil.

For the sauce, deglaze the pan with the wine, bringing up the cooked bits that are left behind. Allow to reduce and thicken slightly. Add one tablespoon butter, whisk until fully combined and glossy. Remove from heat and serve with the lamb.

Yield: 2 servings

Sbrisolona

INGREDIENTS

1 3/4 sticks unsalted butter, room temperature, plus more for the pan
1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups blanched almonds, finely ground
3/4 cups sugar
1/4 tsp. salt
1 1/2 tsp. pure vanilla extract
1/4 tsp. lemon zest, grated
6-10 whole almonds, unpeeled

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Butter a 10-inch springform pan; set aside. In a large bowl,

whisk together flour, ground almonds, sugar, salt, vanilla and zest. Cut in the butter with a pastry blender until it is completely incorporated and there are no dry crumbs. Squeeze the mixture to form pea-size to 1-inch clumps.

Gently press three-quarters of the mixture into the prepared pan, and sprinkle evenly with remaining crumbs. Place whole almonds decoratively on top. Bake until cookie begins to turn golden, about 25 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 300°F, and continue to bake until golden brown and fairly dry, about 10 minutes more. Transfer pan to a wire rack to cool completely. Remove sides of pan to unmold.

Yield: (1) 10" cookie