

## drago and la stella pair for a stellar meal

14 mar 2013

 Printer Friendly

Sometimes a pairing really works. Such is the case with Celestino Drago, LA chef extraordinaire, and Sean Salem, Canadian vintner. They've been friends for 26 years, ever since Celestino catered Sean's wedding in Santa Monica. Their enjoyment of each other, and their shared commitment to creating amazing food and wine was beautifully expressed in a very special press dinner held at *Drago Centro*, in Downtown Los Angeles.

Wow, what a dinner. Greg graciously gave me his place, so I could exercise my newfound love of learning about wine. While he was downing a PB&J sandwich at home, I was digging a six course gastronomic extravaganza in Drago's private "vault." No one said life was fair.

A little background on *LaStella* Winery. First, the name. You may know that *la stella* means "the star" – but you probably don't know that Sean's daughter's name means "star" in Persian. Also, the winery's location is quite remote and without light pollution you can see the stars quite clearly. *LaStella* is situated at Osoyoos lake in the South Okanagan valley of British Columbia, just a couple of miles from the U.S. Workers have been known to cross the border for a burrito at lunchtime.

Known by some as "The Napa of the North," the region has an extreme continental climate: 100 degree days, 50 degree nights, and only 8 inches of rain. Great for stressing out the grapes! *LaStella's* carefully crafted small production wines are named after music, not grape varieties. Their lyrical names reinforce the team's "Tuscan lifestyle" approach (Sean, owner, Rasoul Salehi, GM and Severine Pinte, Winemaker & Viticulturist). You can increase the tempo as your meal progresses – begin with the *Leggiero* un-oaked Chardonnay and end with *The Maestro* Merlot.



# LA STELLA



Let's jump right in to that wonderful meal. We began with assorted hors d'oeuvres (or *stuzzichini*), including a mini lobster sandwich that was two bites of bliss (wine: 2011 *LaStella* Leggiero, crisp apple, lemon and melon with a nice long mineral finish). After we took our seats, we were served *Storione Affumicato*, exquisite bites of smoked sturgeon, caviar, mascarpone, fennel and chick peas, with the 2011 *LaStella* Vivace Pinot Grigio (bright citrus and pear).

The second course, *Fettuccine con Coda Alla Vaccinara* (fresh fettuccine, oxtail ragout, gorgonzola creme) pumped up the volume and was appropriately paired with a 2010 *LaStella* Fortissimo (equal parts Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon with about 8% each of Cabernet Franc and Sangiovese, some might call this blend Canada's answer to the Super Tuscan). Fun Fact: *LaStella* produced only 23 cases of Cab Franc, making it one of the most expensive wines in Canada.

During the third course, *Agnolloti, Funghi e Tartufo* (mushroom agnolloti, shaved truffles) we got to compare and contrast the 2010 Fortissimo with the 2009. By this point I was heartily enjoying the feast and the company, and wasn't taking particularly detailed notes. I do remember that both wines were quite dry, almost dusty, medium to full bodied with highlights of herbs and raspberry. Perhaps I did a little too much comparing and contrasting.

raspberry. Perhaps I did a little too much comparing and contrasting.

Course Four presented *Petto Di Piccione Arrosto* (squab breast, crispy garlic polenta, mushrooms, bone marrow) with the 2008 *LaStella* Allegreto "Pie Franco" Merlot – succulent, savory nuggets of squab enhanced by a true Merlot, rich dark berries, currants and plum with rather soft tannins. Last, but by no means least, the Maestro made an appearance (I don't mean Celestino, he was there the entire time). This 2007 Merlot paired perfectly with Drago's rack of lamb with sage sauce (Course Five) because sage brush is indigenous to the vineyard's territory, the sage exudes oil which is carried on the wind, affects the grapes and shows up in the wine.

Just when you thought you couldn't possibly eat another bite, the *Cassafa* (Sicilian panna cotta, marzipan, candied fruits) made an appearance. Pure silky indulgence. What, no dessert wine? Which brings up the take-away from the evening: Canada– it's not just ice wine anymore. **KEN**