

Sweet and complex, Marsala pairs well with dessert cheese



LINDA WYNER

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Tiramisu. Zabaglione. Chicken scaloppini. Risotto. What do they have in common? Sweet and memorable Marsala wine — the “Sicilian Sherry.”

Despite its checkered past and most recent relegation as strictly a kitchen wine, Marsala has a long and venerable history and deserves a place in a wine glass, as well.

Marsala is native to southwestern Sicily. It was well known to the ancient Romans as a strong *conciato* wine. The “*concia*” wine-making technique involves the addition of cooked

must (the grape pulp, skins and seeds left over after the crush) and then simmered to reduce the wine by a third. Sicilians began to age the wine in large oak casks, and the best selections were served directly from the casks after aging for decades.

Marsala might have remained a regional wine had it not been for a storm in 1773. English merchant John Woodhouse was blown ashore in a little seaport town where he refreshed himself with the local beverage.

Deciding to ship more than 100 gallons of Marsala back to England, Woodhouse opted to fortify the wine with about 2 percent brandy. He figured that the brandy would help stabilize the wine as it tossed about in casks during its voyage. In addition, sheries and ports (fortified wines) were very popular in England and elsewhere in Europe at the time. The English took an instant liking to Woodhouse’s Marsala.

Realizing the potential for huge profits, Woodhouse returned to Sicily and set up vineyards and wineries for mass production and commercialization of the wine. He also built up the port city of Marsala as



ZABAGLIONE

his own shipping hub. Other Englishmen bought up Sicilian land and began their own Marsala production, and these products found their way to such far-flung locales as America and Australia.

An Italian family finally entered the Marsala scene in the early 1800s, and over the years other Italian families acquired the English vineyards and production. However, production was so fragmented that the quality of the wine began seriously to deteriorate. In the 1980s, astute Sicilian politicians recognized the decline and passed laws regulating its formulation and production, returning Marsala to its former glory.

Marsala has several characteristics. It can be *Ambra* (amber), *Oro* (gold), or *Rubino* (ruby), all determined by the type of grape used to make the base wine. Aging and alcohol volume are also important elements. A “fine” Marsala is aged

a minimum of one year and has at least 17 percent alcohol content by volume. A Marsala Superiore is aged at least two years with 18 percent or more alcohol content by volume. Marsala Superiore Riserva and Soleras Marsala are aged up to 10 years, retaining the same 18 percent alcohol content. Finally, Marsala wines are characterized by sweetness (*secco*, *semisecco* and *dolci* — dry, semi-dry, and sweet), based on residual sugars generated by the production process.

Marsala was traditionally served as an aperitif between the primo (first) and secundo (second) courses of a meal. Today, it is more popularly served chilled with Parmesan, Gorgonzola or Roquefort cheeses or at room temperature as a dessert wine.

Now, Marsala is most commonly an ingredient in Italian restaurant kitchens. It is reduced to a syrupy consistency and blended with onions, shallots, mushrooms and herbs. Chicken Marsala is one of the most popular Italian dishes. Flour-coated pounded chicken breast pieces are sautéed in butter and olive oil and simmered with Marsala, mushrooms, and herbs. *Secco* or *semisecco* Marsala pairs well in shrimp dishes.

SHRIMP MARSALA OVER LINGUINI

- ½ onion, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- ¼ c dry Marsala wine
- 6 oz canned or freshly steamed clam meat
- 1 6-oz bottom clam juice
- 1 Tbsp flat leaf parsley, chopped
- 1½ lbs shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 1 lb. linguini, cooked and drained
- Heat olive oil in medium



skillet over medium-high heat. Add onion and cook until tender and translucent. Add Marsala and bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer for five minutes. Add clams and garlic and simmer for five minutes. Add shrimp, clam juice and parsley and cook until shrimp have curled, turned pink and are just cooked through.

ZABAGLIONE

- 2 egg yolks
- 2 Tbsp sugar
- 3 Tbsp sweet Marsala wine
- 1/3 c whipping cream, whipped
- Place a bowl over a saucepan with barely simmering water. Add yolks and sugar to the bowl and using an electric mixer (preferably with a whisk attach-

ment), whisk or beat until the mixture becomes pale and thick. It should triple in volume. Be patient. This could take up to 15 minutes.

Continue whisking/beating the mixture as you add the Marsala. Remove from the pan and place the bowl in another bowl of ice water. Continue to whisk/beat the mixture until it is cool. Fold in the whipped cream. Serves 2-4.

*** Caution: this recipe involves lightly cooked eggs, which can be a source of food-borne illness.*

Linda Wyner, a local attorney and foodie, owns *Pans on Fire*, a gourmet cookware store and cooking school in Pleasanton.

Direct your suggestions or questions to lwynere@claytonpioneer.com

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